

PERCIVAL GYNT
AND THE
**CONSPIRACY
OF DAYS**

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**ONCE UPON A TIME,
IN THE FUTURE**

BOOK ONE

in which our hero is lured into strange matters beyond his agency

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Auspicious

CHAPTER ONE

THE 8:05

That morning the train platform at Slidetown Station was more than usually overpacked with knaves and harlots, thugs and thieves, ne'er-do-wells, cut-purses, cads, scalawags, rakes, rascallions, ruffians and miscreants, brigands, bounders, backbiters, bottom-feeders, and so forth. Poor Percival Gynt was wedged in so tightly at the front of the platform that he scarcely had the room to open up his broadsheet edition of *The Daily Internet*.

A recorded message from the station master played across the loudspeakers to mark the hour. The pleasantly mechanical voice intoned, "The time is now 8:00 AM."

Crammed in to Percival's right slouched a hipster-wizard, wearing one of those wink-wink ironic pointy wizard hats that had been making their way back into style. When Percival's paper half-brushed against his arm, the wizard turned and sneered and looked like he was about to say something, then apparently thought better of it. Instead, the wizard averted his gaze down to his shoes and pulled his retro-cool stars and moons robe around himself all the tighter, and he muttered an "I am awesome" charm as quietly as he could to himself.

"The next train to arrive on Track 3 will be the 8:03 Express to Lunar Colony."

The heavily armored Grimsoul bounty hunter to Percival's left was oblivious to his fellow commuters' almost-exchange as he sucked down the last of the grape drink

from his rapid-reuse juice box. Grimsoul bounty hunters are feared the galaxy over for their vicious depravity, but they do enjoy sucking liquid through tiny, bendy straws.

“Next to arrive on Track 4, the 8:05 Express to Planet's Core.”

And Percival, squeezed in between these two characters, on a platform that was that day full of characters, was neither vicious nor feared nor hip nor pointy-hatted. Nor thankfully, did he need a special charm to render himself more awesome.

Percival was still a young man then, thin, with a hawkish nose and trusting eyes. He was dressed smartly, as always, in a 3-piece suit, gray with pink pinstripes, with a gray bowler hat pulled down tight over a thick pile of curls. A red handkerchief was folded and tucked neatly into his breast pocket. A long black umbrella hung from his left arm in case of rain.

“Remember: Unattended packages will be vaporized by Province Police.”

Percival held *The Internet* open as wide as he could in front of him, folding it over now and then to scroll through the articles. He smirked at the day's *Classic Peanuts* reprint. It was one of his favorites.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Percival turned his head. This was not the mechanical voice of the station manager.

Behind him then, pressed up tight against him in the crowd, was the loveliest young woman that Percival had ever been pressed up tightly against. She had glittering green eyes and long, wavy black hair and a demure, but optimistic smile. Beneath her lavender traveling cloak, her clothes were a mash of long abandoned fashions, all straps and scarves and synthetic fibers. There was a thoughtlessness to her attire that to Percival suggested a woman of true substance.

He did not notice the small stone in her necklace, which seemed to burn from inside with its own golden fire.

Percival arched an eyebrow and allowed a confused half-smile to creep across his face. He wasn't sure why such an obviously interesting person would be speaking to

him of all people. He'd been playing the role of mild-mannered accountant too long.

“Hullo,” he sputtered. Then, after a second to think, he added cannily, “Have I dropped something?”

The mysterious young woman in the lavender cloak pulled in closer to Percival, reaching one hand up around his neck and guiding his ear down to her so that she might whisper to him.

Her breath was warm against his cheek. She smelled to him of distant and long forgotten meadows.

And in a hushed tone she asked him, “Are you honest and clever and kind and forgiving, and does danger always seem to find you?”

“I...” Percival paused. As you might expect, he didn't have a proper answer prepared for such a question, and he was absolutely certain that the correct words, chosen at this precise moment in time, would mean the difference between a thrilling new adventure and a right slap in the face.

“I need to know,” she whispered with urgency. “I don't have much time.”

He looked into her eyes, and behind their beauty he could see fear. He could see someone who needed his help. “Y-Yes,” he answered, with a transparent lack of confidence. He took a moment to steel himself before repeating, “Yes. Yes, tell me what you need.”

She didn't answer. Instead she leaned into Percival and kissed him softly on the lips, which Percival speculated was a sort of answer on its own. And while he may have been momentarily surprised by her forwardness, Percival was not one to question a good turn. He slipped a hand through the locks of her hair and another around her waist, and he kissed her back.

If his eyes were open just then, Percival might have noticed that the golden light from the young woman's necklace intensified as he kissed her. But they were not, and he did not.

The hipster-wizard glanced at the pair of them and then across to the Grimsoul

bounty hunter, and he rolled his eyes. Caught by the wind, *The Internet* flapped away across the tracks.

The young woman, whose name Percival still did not know, jerked away from him suddenly. He opened his eyes to see her staring back at him with regret. She was holding his hat in her hands.

“Then I'm sorry,” came her response at last, as she backed away into the rabble crowd.

“Wait!” Percival shouted after her, attempting to push past the Grimsoul bounty hunter with no success.

She mouthed the words “I'm sorry” once more before he lost sight of her.

“But that's my favorite hat!” he called out, exasperated, now to no one in particular.

And then the crowd parted, not in front of him, but behind, as two Province Policemen emerged just a few paces from Percival in full riot response gear. They wore crimson armor and crimson face masks and green-glowing goggles and badges of tarnished gold, and they held their Mark 12 semi-automatic Smith & Wesson ion pulse cannons at the ready.

The officers primed their pulse cannons. One snarled at Percival. The other shouted, “Halt!”

But Percival needed no such direction. He stood fully halted at the platform edge, pointing half-heartedly in the direction that the young woman in the lavender cloak had disappeared with his hat.

“My mum gave me that hat,” he mumbled.

With weapons trained, the two officers conferred. “Surveillance confirms known associate,” one said. “Suspect must be neutralized,” said the other.

Percival did not like the sound of that one bit, so as the officers raised their pulse cannons to attack angle, he yanked the umbrella from his arm and opened it as a shield in front of him. The officers fired, but the concussive blasts dispersed against

the umbrella's triple reinforced micro-weave fabric.

Percival grinned. “And everyone said I was mad to buy an umbrella from an arms deal—”

The snarling officer fired again, and though the blasts still had no effect, Percival took a half-step back on instinct. This brought him to the very teetering edge of the platform, where Percival could feel his left foot slipping off.

And then a curious thing happened: As Percival slipped backwards off the platform edge, all the sounds of the station seemed to fade away. The two officers were clearly speaking to Percival as they advanced, probably offering to vaporize him quickly if he stopped resisting, but Percival could no longer hear what they were saying. Nor could he hear the taunts and jeers of the crowd, who disliked cops, but disliked scrawny men in suits who kissed pretty girls even more. Nor, thankfully, could he hear his own semi-pathetic, semi-girlish scream as he fell backwards to the tracks below.

In fact, the only words that Percival could hear were these, echoing like the voice of God through every loudspeaker across the station:

“Now arriving on Track 3, the—”

And just like that, Percival knew what to do.

The drop from the platform to the tracks below was less than three meters. The umbrella helped to slow his fall a bit, but Percival still considered himself extremely lucky as he landed on both feet. From overhead, a pair of pulse cannon blasts rained down, one just grazing Percival's right jacket sleeve. Percival turned and dived across to the far tracks, just narrowly dodging the incoming 8:03.

“—8:03 Express to Lunar Colony.”

Percival rolled over onto his back and cackled like a fool as passengers on the 8:03 pressed their faces to the glass to stare down at him in amazement. His glee was not long lived though, as the station master followed good news with bad:

“Now arriving two minutes early on Track 4—”

Percival could see the headlight of the 8:05 racing towards him at an alarming speed. He pulled himself up to his feet and fumbled through his pockets for his Apple iWatch.

“—the 8:05—”

Percival flipped open the cover of his iWatch and toggled through the options menu frantically: “Watch, phone, camera, music, TV, internet...”

“—Express to—”

He toggled faster: “...pocket light, mirror, magnifier, voice recorder, email, games...”

“—Planet's—”

“...calculator, navigator, meat thermometer,” then finally, “TIME STOP!”

He tapped the screen and the entire universe ground to a halt around him. The hulking 8:05 Express sat motionless a few feet ahead of him, its brilliant headlight nearly blinding at this distance. Up on the far platform, commuters stood still as a photograph.

And his iWatch screen display began to count backwards from 6.

The Apple iWatch Time Stop feature was originally built into the 19947 release. The thinking had been that it would be easier to take still pictures if the things you were taking pictures of were, in fact, still. And what better way to ensure a still subject than to pause all motion in the entire universe for as long as necessary to snap your picture?

Unsurprisingly, this feature turned out to be wildly impractical. First off, as it turns out, the very act of pausing the universe subtly rewrites several key cosmological constants necessary to keep reality in one piece. In other words, stop time enough times, and you may find that gravity's not there when you start up again.

And second, the Time Stop feature is a tremendous drain on battery life.

For both of these reasons, the iWatch Time Stop feature was limited to 6 second

bursts starting with the 19948 release, and discontinued all together in the year 19950.

Percival purchased his 19949 iWatch off eBay last fall. Coincidentally, that model was also the only one that came with a pocket light, and Percival was forever losing his loose change down between seat cushions and under his couch.

5.

With no interest in wasting time, Percival quickly pocketed his watch and focused his attention entirely on the matter of pulling himself up out of the track well before time restarted and the train could splatter him to messy pulp.

4.

It was just under three meters from the tracks back up to the platform. With a short run, a jump, and a reach, Percival was able to catch the hook of his umbrella on the platform edge.

3.

The umbrella held as he scrambled up onto the platform.

2.

Percival threw himself up onto the platform and collapsed, exhausted, hugging his umbrella tight to his chest. The paused commuters who loomed above him were in for a bit of a shock.

1.

With his umbrella as a cane, Percival pushed himself to his feet. And the world around him began to move again.

“—Core. Our apologies for the early arrival time.”

A Nun, a Sister of the All-Mother, cursed at him as he appeared seemingly from nowhere. “God hates teleporation!” she added as she wagged her finger in Percival's face.

Percival nodded politely as he backed onto the 8:05 train, destined for Planet's Core.

“Next stop: The Sorrow Point.”

Percival let out a sigh of relief as he squeezed a seat between two elderly superheroes. He took his iWatch back out and checked the battery power. “Almost empty,” he muttered, as he toggled through to the Email option.

He held the iWatch up to his lips, and he began to dictate a letter. “Dear Mum,” he began. “I seem to have gotten myself into a spot of trouble.”

Percival glanced up as the slide doors opened at the far end of the train car. Two Province Policemen emerged from the car adjoining. These two were bigger and meaner than the ones Percival ran from on the platform. One had a robotic third arm protruding from his sloppy gut. The other held a gun that made the Smith & Wesson ion pulse cannon look like a Smith & Wesson ion pulse BB gun.

Percival continued his dictation, more quickly now, “I may not be able to make it for Sunday dinner. I'm sorry for that, and I want you to know that...”

The officers were nearly to him now. They pushed aside a young lesbian couple from Lunar 3 and trained their weapons on Percival.

“...that I love you very much, and I hope to see you again soon.”

The officers stood over Percival, pulse cannons aimed at his head. They primed their weapons.

Percival faked a smile for them. “Warm regards, your son Percy.” He tapped the “Send” icon, and closed his eyes. “Go ahead then. I've had a good run.”

Percival waited patiently for the end to come.

No such luck.