

# QUINTUM LEAP



SLIDERS X QUANTUM LEAP CROSSOVER FIC  
BY ASHE P. KIRK

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*A Sliders / Quantum Leap Crossover Fan Novel*

by Ashe P. Kirk

[ashe.link](http://ashe.link)

*Dedicated to my fellow geekaroos who just want  
things to turn out okay for our blorbos.*

## CONTENT WARNINGS

**Sexual Content: Light** - This story is *exceptionally* tame for the most part when it comes to sex and romance, especially in terms of adult content. There are no described scenes of sex, just a little implied sex and, in some places, innuendo peppered into banter. Your humble writer is aro-ace, folks. I have no idea what I'm doing when it comes to love and stuff, so I tend to avoid it. I invite you to create headcanon ships if you wish.

**Violence: Moderate** - The violence in this story is light, and canon typical. There is an implied, unseen death in Part 3. There are a few scenes where Kromaggs are killed in Parts 5-7. There are also some scenes of torture, especially in Part 6, that may disturb some readers, and a depiction of death in Part 5 that may make some uncomfortable. I am not graphic in my descriptions, but if you have a vivid imagination, they may upset you. I would recommend being over 14 years of age while reading this work.

**Explicit Language: Light** - There is some profanity, but it's very limited. For example, the f-word is used three times in the entire story.

**General Warnings:** Contains some body horror, adult themes, wacky musical numbers, second-hand embarrassment, and completely bonkers situations. So par for the course for the source material, really.

## BLURB

Sam's got a wrong to put right in his niece Maggie's life, but it seems he leaped into the wrong Maggie. Furthermore, he seems to be trapped in a jail cell with three other people Ziggy says don't exist.

**Quinntum Leap** is A crossover between *Sliders* (1995) and *Quantum Leap* (1989), this series explores the implied family relationship of Maggie Beckett (*Sliders*) and Sam Beckett (*Quantum Leap*) with leaping and sliding hi-jinks.

The timeline begins a little after *Quantum Leap*'s ending (future year 2002) and after Season 4 of *Sliders* (past year 1999), and passes into Season 5 territory in Part 3, though some things have been altered in the timeline by then.

# NOTES

## COPYRIGHT & FAN WORKS

So, this is obviously a completely unofficial fan work, not to be confused with the actual source material. As I understand it, both properties (*Sliders* and *Quantum Leap*) are owned by **NBC Universal** in the United States.

All credits to the original creators: **Donald P. Bellisario** for *Quantum Leap*, and **Tracy Tormé** and **Robert K. Weiss** for *Sliders*.

## CANON / CONTINUITY ISSUES

*Quantum Leap* and *Sliders* both have some problems with establishing rules or backstory, and then throwing them out the window, and so I've done my best with it.

This story is going to have some Kromagg lore, and if you've seen all of *Sliders* you'll know that the show itself was all over the place with them. So if my interpretation doesn't match yours, I apologise. I had to make decisions about which contradictory parts of the timeline would work with my story and which wouldn't. I can't imagine many people care so much, since the series itself didn't even care about it, but this is just a heads up.

Additionally, a lot of *Quantum Leap* is open for interpretation, and as I understand it the novel series had a different take on the rules of leaping and such. I haven't read any of the novels and I wouldn't even know where to get one at this point (not that they are really consistent anyway, from what I've heard), so forgive me

if I contradict anything you believe to be true about the Quantum Leap universe.

## FOREWORD

So I just wrote a huge novel. A huge fan fic novel. A huge fan fic novel that would be even huger if I wrote it with more detailed descriptions. Lucky for you I didn't bother, lol.

This story is a crossover between *Quantum Leap* (1989) and *Sliders* (1995), with a toe-dipping of *Quantum Leap* (2022), which premiered about half way into my writing this. None of these are *necessarily* required to enjoy the story, but it would probably help you identify references, understand certain things that occur and such. Obviously, if you're a fan of both, then this should give you a big ol' helping of fanservice that will leave you fairly satisfied by the end, if you're the type who likes happy endings for everyone.

In this eBook you will find 7 main parts, a bridging chapter between parts 3 and 4 (Interquel), and an Epilogue.

Each chapter is pretty short, but there are a lot of them – 106, by my count. The lightest length you'll find in a chapter is about 1100 words, and the longest chapter is about 2500 words. On average, they're 1500 words a pop. The full word count of this story is in excess of 170,000 words, comparable in length to *Catch-22*. (I don't have an exact count yet because as of this writing, I'm part way into the Epilogue.)

I optimised this eBook for text-to-speech, because it's my favourite way to read. Occasionally it'll stumble over some of what I wrote, but for the most part it should be a smooth read. If you're



wondering why I write out things like “Doctor” and “Missus” rather than using abbreviations, this is why.

You’ll note that I write in British English (or rather, Australian English which is grammatically the same); the only Americanisations I tend to use are for things that are pronounced differently in America, such as “Mom.” Rest assured that if you think something spelled wrong, it’s most likely due to specific differences in English. Though if I genuinely did get something wrong, let me know. Mistakes drive me bananas.

Anyway, I’m rambling now.

Please enjoy this story. I spent 3 and a half months writing it, publishing a chapter on AO3 nearly every day. Sometimes two in a day. So you could say it’s been my whole life for the latter part of 2022. Pretty weird for something I started writing on a whim when I was sick in bed with a fever. Don’t think I’ve ever seen anything this thoroughly through to the end before.

What a shame it’s fan fiction, so I can’t sell it or solicit tips or anything lol. Never mind.

Enough chitchat, let’s get on with the story!

# **PART ONE: UNCLE SAM**

## **SUMMARY**

Sam's got a wrong to put right in his niece Maggie's life, but it seems he leaped into the wrong Maggie. Furthermore, he seems to be trapped in a jail cell with three other people Ziggy says don't exist.

Set between Season 4 and 5 of Sliders, and after the canon end of Quantum Leap, this is an exploration of the hinted idea that Maggie and Sam Beckett are in fact niece and uncle to one another, albeit from different universes.

## 1.1 · ELECTRIC BLUE

Maggie blinked, startled. She was in a room with a flat blue colour all around her that seemed to glow, and yet barely illuminated her. She was standing stationary, there in the middle of this blank space. This was definitely not where she had been a moment ago, while she was hurtling through a vortex on her way to see what the next Earth would hold in store. She certainly didn't remember leaving the wormhole. Was she stuck in between worlds?

*Did something happen while I was in there? A lightning strike, maybe?*

She remembered Quinn recounting to her a story of a time lightning struck the wormhole, long before she joined the team. Somehow he'd been displaced onto the 'astral plane.' Was she there now?

She looked down at herself. She wore a strange white jumpsuit that felt revealing somehow, despite it covering most of her body. Not what she'd been wearing when she entered. Had she lost consciousness and been taken somewhere?

"Hello?" She called out, her voice shaky and a pitch or two higher than she'd intended. "Anyone?"

"Oh, that's a relief."

Maggie spun around toward the older male voice, and spotted an open door, which she was sure hadn't been there before. In the doorway was a somewhat short-stature man with a flamboyant green suit and an unusually shaped, colourful device in his hand.

He was the kind of man that would have been handsome twenty years ago, but now looked like forty years of cigars and booze had caught up with him.

But, the strangest thing about this man, for Maggie, was that she recognised him.

“Ziggy was reporting some out-there readings; I thought we might not find someone here,” he said, seemingly more to himself than to her, while striding into the room. The door shut automatically behind him.

“Admiral Calavicci...?” She said tentatively, and became more sure that it was him as his jaw dropped and the colour drained from his face.

“How do you—?”

Maggie cringed. He didn’t recognise her. Whatever Earth she was on, maybe they never met.

She carefully formulated her reply.

“Uh, my uncle talks about you all the time. Sam Beckett. You know him, right?”

Al looked quite shaken at this.

“Your Uncle?! Ohhhh boy.”

He tapped the device in his hand a few times and it made some odd whirring noises.

“Dammit Ziggy! Tch, useless.” He whacked the device on its side, and composed himself, looking up at her.

“Looks like *I* have to ask you what your name is, since our billion dollar supercomputer seems to be a little *confused* about it.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow, before supplying her name: “Maggie Beckett.”

Al looked at her for a moment before biting his lip and turning around.

“Okay, so you *are* her, and yet this hunka junk—”

He waved the device in the air.

“—is telling me that Maggie Beckett is still in her own time. Useless pile o’ Lego bricks.”

He gave one more whack to the front of it with the heel of his hand.

Maggie had no idea what he was talking about, but she wasn’t going to just let this guy monologue at her.

She grabbed his arm and turned him back around.

“Admiral, listen to me. I need to get back to my friends. I don’t know what this place is but I can’t stay here, got it?”

Al grimaced as he met her eye.

“We’re... going to have to get back to you on that one,” he said with some trepidation.

He broke free of her now loosened grasp, and headed towards the door. He stopped just before he got to it, and added, “Oh, and yeah... it’s, uh, nice to see you again, Maggie.”

He pressed a button on the device, and the door slid open. He walked out of it.

“Welcome to the Waiting Room. Sorry.”

And the door shut, just as Maggie made a move to run for it.

She made a huff as she found herself, once again, alone here.

Sam opened his eyes. Was it over? It certainly *felt* over, once he came to a tumbling halt against this brick wall.

That was *definitely* not normal.

He'd seen someone leap before; blue electrical energy surrounding them as they disappeared from one place and moved to another. Sure, that was all well and good. But the blue electrical energy he'd just experienced was something else altogether.

*It was some kind of... tunnel?*

He pulled himself up to his feet, and turned away from the wall, only to find himself trapped. Three men were with him in what appeared to be a jail cell – one in a larger room that was devoid of any other people except the four of them. It reminded Sam of a small town police lockup, but there was normally someone around to guard it.

Then again, the group of them just seemed to fall in here out of nowhere, and there was nobody around to be guarded before that.

“Man. Can’t believe we skipped right to the jail cell this time,” said the oldest of the four; a black man with emotive eyes. He was standing at the bars, looking out at the empty room.

“Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars...” muttered one of the other two men, a man Sam guessed to be late twenties, white, brown hair. He had a pair of striking eyebrows set against blue eyes, perhaps as striking as Sam’s own, if he remembered his own face correctly.

The third man bore a close resemblance to the one beside him. A little taller, a little more gangling, but, Sam thought, they could

easily be brothers.

They all seemed to know each other, and didn't seem too surprised about what had just happened to them.

Sam had to find out more information. Or, at the very least, find a reflection to see whose face he was wearing this time.

He glanced around the cell, hunting for a reflective surface.

*No good.*

“Oh, that landing got me good,” said the older man. Sam looked at him to see he was inspecting a gash he'd evidently just discovered on his knee.

Sam instinctively rushed over to him, and started to assess the wound.

“Hmm, it's not serious, but it may leave a scar if left without sutures. We'll need to watch it for infection. Anyone got a rag, or somethin' I can use to apply pressure?”

The brother who hadn't yet spoken pulled off his jacket, and with a great pull, ripped it open. After a moment of tearing, he handed Sam a newly created rag.

“Here,” he simply said, smiling kindly. Sam took it and got to work on the wound.

“Thanks,” he replied, and continued to wish he had names for these faces.

He met eyes with the man he was treating and smiled. The man gave her a lopsided grin.

“Thanks, Doctor Beckett.”

This made Sam freeze in place.

“Wh-what?” he stuttered, completely off-guard.

The man raised his eyebrows. “Well, I never seen you treat a wound so professionally like this. You been readin’ first aid books in your downtime?”

This statement gave Sam three precious scraps of information.

First, he had *not* in fact leaped into himself. Second, this group of people seemed to be no stranger to situations like this, and being hurt. And finally, third: it seemed whoever this person was he’d leaped into, had the name Beckett. Now, if only he could find a mirror.

“Sam, we got a teensy little problem.”

The familiar voice of Al was both a relief and a source of anxiety. But with nowhere to speak with the hologram privately, Sam was in a tight spot.

He did his best to surreptitiously look up at Al, who was standing in the hall just outside the cell.

He quickly completed his work on the wound, and stood, leaning against the bars to listen to his friend.

Al looked at the three people sharing Sam’s cell.

“Who the hell are they?”

Sam furrowed his brow.

“Aren’t you meant to tell me?” he whispered through gritted teeth.

“Hmm?” The man who’d made the Monopoly reference was looking up from inspecting some kind of handheld device that reminded Sam of a remote control crossed with Al’s handlink.

“Nothing,” he replied, but didn’t take his eyes off the device. What was it?



“That’s what I’m trying to say, Sam,” Al continued, “Ziggy can’t understand what you’re doing here when all her records are telling us the person you leaped into isn’t standing in this cell right now. In fact, *nobody* is supposed to be here.”

“Oh boy,” said Sam, with an exasperated huff.

*I’m flying blind.*

Sam couldn’t make heads or tails of it, but he was certain it must be related to that blue tunnel *somehow*.

“Uh, guys,” said the man holding the device, “we got a teensy little problem.”

Sam turned to Al, and shared a bewildered look.

Upon turning back towards the cell, the man was holding the device up for the rest to see. The display on it was reading 00:00:00:00 and flashing.

“Did we miss the slide window?!” said the black man, alarmed.

“I don’t know, but it *should* start counting *up* if we do that, and it’s just stuck on zero like... a VCR without the time set. This is not good.”

Al walked through the bars and into the cell, and took a peek at the faces of each of Sam’s apparent cellmates.

“Listen, Sam, I’m gonna go back to the waiting room and interrogate Maggie. She must have some idea of what was going on here.”

At the name, Sam met Al’s eye with both recognition and shock. He mouthed: ‘Maggie Beckett?’

Al grimaced, and confirmed: “Maggie Beckett – you got it. Sit tight, Sam. We’ll get to the bottom of this, okay?”

The Imaging Chamber doorway opened, and Al disappeared into it, leaving Sam to figure out this situation alone for now.

“Hunka junk!”

Sam’s eyes flickered to the man holding the device, and he smacked it on the side in a way Sam was all too familiar with.

“If this stupid thing wasn’t coded in ancient hieroglyphs, I may have half a chance of figuring out what’s gone wrong.”

“Hieroglyphs?” enquired Sam.

“Yeah, ‘Egyptian World’ didn’t do things by halves.”

Sam found himself itching to reveal his identity and help them. He *knew* ancient Egyptian inside and out; or at least he did, before the ‘swiss cheesing’ of his memory. But his niece Maggie definitely did *not*.

He thought about his niece. Tom’s one and only daughter. Spoiled rotten. Grew up to be a cop. Sheriff of some small town, if he remembered correctly.

He glanced around at the jail: exactly the sort of quiet, small town jailhouse Maggie might work in or around.

In his head, he began formulating a case to present to Al when he came back. He would beg to be allowed to come clean. The fact that Ziggy didn’t anticipate their presence meant that these people were not meant to be here. They weren’t part of the original history either. Could they, too, be time travellers, who figured out some way to move about time without displacing people?

But then, it didn’t seem like any of these people fully understood the device they were using. Who built it?

*Come on, Al.*

## 1.2 • BARGAINING

Maggie paced. How could she think? Sleep? Stuck in this blue void?

Here's what she knew: on her Earth, Admiral Albert Calavicci was a friend and colleague of her uncle, Sam Beckett. She'd met them both in limited capacities, but not for a while now. This version of the Admiral hadn't initially recognised her, but after getting her name it seemed to click.

So, she figured, this world couldn't have been dramatically different to hers. Perhaps in this dimension, her uncle worked for the sliding program, and she wound up here as a prisoner after their incoming wormhole was traced.

Though it didn't explain why she had no memory of getting here. She didn't wake up, she was already standing when she found herself here. Something was fishy.

The sound of the door sliding open brought her to attention, and there he was again. Al the Admiral.

“Sir, I need to know that my friends are alright. Please.”

“Maggie, they're fine, I promise. But who *are* these friends of yours?”

Maggie looked, pleading, at him.

“I don't want to put them in danger.”

“Maggie,” Al said, “I need to know their names and where they came from. I promise you, this can only help.”

Maggie eyed him.

“You’re a reasonable guy, right?” She asked. “Why don’t we tell each other what we know? An open exchange of information?”

Al looked like he was having an internal struggle.

“Maggie, we run a highly classified, Top Secret facility here. I can’t divulge any sensitive information. Orders from the top.”

Maggie scowled.

“Well it’s a good thing I *have* Top Secret clearance, then. *Tell me.*”

Al tapped his hand device, and raised an eyebrow.

“Says here you’re the Sheriff of Madera County, California. Not exactly the kind of clearance you get in the top brass, sweetheart.”

Maggie’s jaw dropped.

“You’re kidding? I never joined the military?”

“You say that like you didn’t know,” said Al, giving her an odd look.

Maggie sighed, exasperated.

“Okay, listen. Al. Can I call you Al?”

“Sure, it’s my name.”

“Good. *Al*. Where I come from, I was involved in high level government research, exploring travel between parallel Earths.”

She watched Al’s mouth drift open as he hurriedly tapped on his device.

“Whatever records you have on Maggie Beckett from this Earth are irrelevant. I’m not her.”

She crossed her arms, and steeled her gaze.

“That’s all you get for free. You want info on my friends, you gotta give *me* something.”

Al shifted uncomfortably, seeming to search for his next words. Then, he finally let his shoulders sag.

“You know, you’re just as much of a pain as your uncle,” he said.

“Tell me where I am.”

“New Mexico.” He was starting to wither under her gaze.

“Gonna need more than that.”

“Then, you may be better off asking *when* you are,” Al said. “For you, it’s May second, 1999, right?”

Maggie squinted. “It’s hard to keep track of the date sometimes, but that sounds right.”

Al continued: “Well, the actual date today is November sixteenth, 2002. But your friends are still in 1999.”

Maggie wished she had somewhere to sit down.

“I time travelled?”

Al pointed to her. “Bingo.”

Maggie felt her head swimming.

“No, but, that means they must be long gone. I’m stuck here?”

She felt her throat constricting with panic. “Oh god, I’m gonna be sick.”

She leaned over, and felt blackness closing around the edges of her vision.

“*This* is why we don’t tend to give up this information to the people he switches with,” Al said, attempting to hold her up by the arm as she hyperventilated.

Maggie caught that word.

“Switches?” she said, looking up.

Al nodded. “Your uncle travels in time by... kinda swapping places with a person in history. We call it ‘leaping.’ He lives their life for a little while, helps ‘em out, and they wait in here for an equal length of time, until they leap back after he’s done what he needs to do.”

Maggie felt her heart start to slow down as she absorbed this. She could still make it back before the slide. Right? But there was a perhaps more pressing question she had right now.

“How can someone who isn’t me, be living my life?”

Al appeared to struggle for an explanation.

“Uh, well, everyone just sort of sees him as you. To them, he looks just like you. Might be acting a little funny, but people tend to brush it off.”

“Yeah? Well there have been a couple of times I’ve ‘acted a little funny’ and it’s never gone well for me.”

She hoped one of the boys would notice an impostor, at least *this* time around.

Al placed a hand under her chin, pointing her face to his. He was smiling, but it was bitter. Maggie didn’t like feeling this vulnerable.

“I told you what you wanted, Maggie. Now give me the names of your buddies.”

\* \* \*

“Hello!” Sam called out into the empty jail. He turned back to his apparent colleagues. “It just doesn’t make sense that nobody’s

here.”

The other three were sitting around the device, looking over it. Sam desperately wanted to look at it himself, but he just didn't want to risk revealing himself just yet. Not until he had more information.

“Well,” said the taller of the brothers, “Perhaps we're in a world where crime has become so rare they don't need their jails any longer.”

There it was again. A reference to a 'world,' as though this wasn't the only 'world' that they knew. Something was bubbling up deep in Sam's vague memories, but he just couldn't reach it.

The shorter brother chimed in: “Oh great, that could mean nobody's coming for us, and we're stuck here until we starve to death.”

The older man put his head in his hands.

“I can't go out like this, man!”

The tall brother moved to comfort him. “Well, that isn't written in stone.”

Gesturing to the knee wound, he added: “It is possible you could die from sepsis first.”

“Always a great comfort, ain't you Colin,” the older man remarked, shaking his head.

*Colin.*

Sam's ears perked up as he heard the Imaging Chamber door sliding open. He looked around and saw Al taking a nervous puff of his cigar.

He gave his hologram friend a pleading stare.

“Sam, the Maggie I got in the Waiting Room claims to be from a parallel Earth,” Al said, with a deep furrow in his brow, as he looked down at the handlink.

*That* caught Sam’s attention. He watched his friend closely, as he walked over to the older black man, pointing with his cigar.

“This guy’s name is Rembrandt Brown. Ziggy has him as a washed up Motown singer. But, if he’s from a parallel universe, then, who knows.”

He pointed towards the shorter brother.

“This guy’s Quinn Mallory. Seems to take after you in the brains department. Was on his way to a Masters in physics, and *poof!* – suddenly disappears, leaving behind some video tapes showing some kind of freaky looking portal he said he was going to jump into. Guess he really did it, huh? Travelled to another Earth?”

Sam was having trouble keeping a poker face. He brought his hand to his mouth and tried to mask his look of excitement. He felt that memory he’d been struggling for finally break free, and he grabbed onto it.

“Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky Bridge...” he muttered, and grinned, impressed by this young guy sitting next to an exposed toilet in a jail cell. It mustn’t have been easy to build something like that on his own.

Al pointed at the man Sam had just found out was named Colin.

“She told me this guy was named Colin Mallory, but Ziggy’s got nothin’. Meant to be Quinn’s younger brother, but he’s an only child as far as Ziggy knows.”

*Of course.*

These parallel worlds were each threads of timeline divergence. In some, Quinn might have a sibling, and in others, his parents



may have split up or decided not to have another child. Infinite possibilities.

Sam guessed he must have caused his fair share of divergences merely by leaping in, and Ziggy had a limited, zoomed-in view of this fractal of variations in events from which she calculated her odds and was able to record changes in history.

Al moved to his side now.

“As for the Maggie we got in the Waiting Room, she says where she comes from, she was in a military program working on this alternate world stuff.”

Sam met his eye, intrigued.

“That’s as much as she’s given up. She’s been prying information about us outta me in exchange.”

Sam turned away from his cellmates and leaned into the bars.

“I want to tell them, Al,” he muttered.

Al stepped through the bars to face Sam.

“What are you, nuts?”

He prepared to make his argument, but before he could say anything, the sound of a big metal door bursting open caused Sam, and everyone else, to turn towards it.

“What the hell are you people doing in here?!”

It was a woman’s voice. Sam craned his neck to see who it could be. And when she came into view, he nearly fell over in surprise.

It was Sheriff Maggie Beckett.

### 1.3 · NIECE TRY

Sam's first thought was that he had to hide. He'd leaped into some alternate Maggie, and here was the real one, about to come face to face with herself.

He crouched, making eye contact with Quinn, whose gaze was shifting between him and the Sheriff, looking more amused than startled or worried. Maybe even relieved.

"Maggie, chill. Your double could be our ticket out of this cage," said Rembrandt quietly.

Sam didn't know about that, but he knew for sure that there was nowhere he could hide. So he returned to his standing position, as Sheriff Maggie reached the cell.

She stopped dead as she spotted him.

*Here it comes...*

"Uncle Sam...?"

Sam fell against the cell bars, weak at the knees. She couldn't... surely?

"No, no, no," Al said, looking about the same level of shocked as Sam felt.

"Oh my god, what—" Sheriff Maggie walked up to him, her surprise appearing to devolve into anger.

"You've been missing *four years* and you show up like some kind of reverse Houdini, locked in a cell of my jail? Is this some kind of joke?"

“I’m sorry, who’s ‘Uncle Sam?’ Other than the guy on the recruitment poster?” said Rembrandt, face screwed up in confusion. The other two were equally stunned.

“Him.” Maggie pointed at Sam, who felt himself shrinking. “He’s my uncle. And you three are...?”

“Do something, Sam...” Al urged.

*Yeah, thanks Al. Always helpful advice.*

“Uhh, how ’bout you get us outta here and we can... talk?” Sam said to Maggie, before giving a red-faced grimace to the three cellmates.

“I have some explaining to do.”

\* \* \*

The Sheriff’s office was a spartan affair. It didn’t seem like Maggie cared much for this room. No photos on the desk. No knickknacks. Even the chairs were uncomfortable.

Sam wondered if she was doing okay.

His former cellmates were sitting silently, staring at Sam. Waiting for him to explain himself.

Maggie was seated at her desk, her face betraying her emotion over the discovery that Sam was alive. Though she wore a poker face, her eyes were glimmering with salty water.

Al was in the corner of the room, pacing.

“I don’t like this, Sam. It was one thing for you to tell those guys, but this Maggie is part of the original history.”

Sam looked at him directly.

“And what else am I supposed to do at this point, Al? The jig is up!” He spat.

As he knew would happen, the others in the room were looking from him, to the corner of the room they saw as empty, in confusion.

He turned to Maggie.

“You know my friend Al, right?”

She nodded. “The Admiral?”

“Yeah. Well, he’s standing right there.” He pointed to the corner. Al looked back at him with narrowed eyes.

“It’s not important why I can see him and you can’t, but... if you see me talkin’ to myself, that’s why.”

He turned to the dimension hoppers.

“And you guys. You see me as another Maggie, but I’m not. My name is Sam Beckett.” He let that sink in momentarily, before continuing.

“I promise your Maggie is safe, but she’s... with Al.”

Quinn straightened up. “On the astral plane?”

Sam tilted his head. “Astral-? No, she’s in the future.”

Rembrandt stood up, looking a little fed up.

“The future? Ohh, I think I need some air.”

He left the room, shaking his head.

“Oh my god, you really did it?” Sheriff Maggie said. “You time travelled? I knew about your theory, but the military was all hush-hush about the work you were doing with them.”

Sam met her eye proudly. “Yeah. I did it.”

“If I may...” Colin interjected. “Just *why* do you look like Maggie to us? And why does *she* not see you as Maggie?”

Sam thought for a moment.

“Well, my method of time travel involves switching places with someone, but the process kind of warps reality around me, projecting the image of the original person. On the other end, the person back in my time looks like me. Only, we don’t see that unless we look in a mirror.”

In his periphery, Sam noticed Quinn leaning in, transfixed.

“As for Maggie, well it must have something to do with the fact she’s the one I’m meant to look like, right? But I can’t say this kind of thing has ever happened before, so I can only speculate.”

Maggie rubbed her eyes.

“It does kinda sting my eyes to look at you. It’s like they don’t want to focus on you.”

Sam raised his eyebrows.

“Really? Huh.”

“Can I try something?” Quinn asked, standing from his chair. His voice was filled with a sort of excited curiosity. He raided Maggie’s pen holder and grabbed a Sharpie. He gestured for Sam to stand, and he obliged, not quite knowing where this was going.

“How tall would you say you are?”

“Uh, maybe a hair under six feet? Why?”

“Maggie’s way shorter,” he said, and pushed Sam against the wall before marking where the top of his head was. He then moved Sam away from the wall and stared at it for a moment, before gesturing to Maggie.

“Come on, stand here.”

Sam saw what he was doing now, and couldn't help but smile as Maggie stood well under the mark on the wall.

"Nobody's ever done this before," he remarked to Al, almost laughing.

"This is spinning me *out*," said Quinn, standing Maggie and Sam next to one another against the mark on the wall. He rubbed his eyes.

"Yikes. Whatever effect is going on here does *not* want me to look at this. I'm getting spots in my eyes."

He turned to Colin, who'd already come up behind him.

"You seeing this?"

Colin nodded, squinting.

"It's like the feeling you get looking at the sun."

He broke away from his gaze and blinked several times.

Sam noticed Al also being affected by whatever this was.

"You two should probably step away from the wall now," was all he could say as he rubbed his eyes.

Then, Ziggy made that moaning sound on his handlink that tended to denote an urgent message. Al looked down at it.

"About damn time, Ziggy." He looked up. "Sam, we finally got a read on who you're meant to help."

Sam crossed to him.

"It's gotta be her, right?" He said, gesturing to Maggie, who was looking at him inquisitively.

"Ninety-seven per cent. Looks like she's going to disappear in three days, Sam. Presumed dead."

Sam looked back at his niece, a knot forming in his stomach. Quinn was standing next to her, looking at him with a

mischievous smirk.

“Sam, I wanna see just how a six foot man fits into a size six woman’s shirt and jeans.”

Sam felt himself going red.

“Like I said, spacetime gets warped around me. The clothing of whoever I leap into just sort of conforms to my body. Why do you need to know?”

“Because nothing feels as good to me as figuring out something nobody’s figured out before.”

With this, Quinn flashed a wide grin. It was an infectious one, and Sam felt moved to reciprocate, even though he was deeply worried about his niece.

“You make a good point there. I know the feeling.”

The door of the office opened, and Rembrandt came in, holding a cup of water.

“So,” he said, pausing for a sip, “Can’t help but notice it’s night out there, and we have to find a place to stay.”

Maggie sat on her desk, arms crossed.

“Guess you could crash at my place tonight, if a couple of you don’t mind the couch.”

She raised a finger. “Just remember, I’m the law around here, so no funny business.”

Sam met her eye, and he could tell she was having trouble keeping a straight face. After all this, how could she?

## 1.4 • CONVERSATIONS WITH COMPUTERS

Maggie now sat on the floor of this room that AI had called the “Waiting Room.” Yes, it was certainly an accurate description: nothing to do but wait around.

She was getting hungry, and she had to pee.

She’d walked the perimeter of the room, and felt the walls, but they were smooth except for the occasional seam in the panels, that were too fine to get her fingers into.

They could at least have given her a seat.

“Hello, AI?” she called out into the blue abyss. “I need to use the bathroom.”

Then, as if her words had triggered something, one of the panels in the wall opened up to reveal a perfectly conventional bathroom.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me.”

She glanced around. “Can I have food?”

Another panel opened up, revealing something akin to a vending machine.

Maggie sighed with relief. Now she was getting somewhere.

“Can I have a seat...?” she tried. A panel in the floor opened, and an upholstered armchair rose out of it.

Maggie still wasn’t happy to be here, but at least now she saw herself being able to survive here.



“Th-thank you?” she said into the empty room.

“You’re welcome, Maggie,” came a feminine voice from above. Maggie’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Who am I talking to?”

“You appear to be talking to yourself.”

“Well obviously not, because you’re answering. Who are you?”

Maggie sat on the armchair, her body’s other needs temporarily forgotten.

“Me? Well, seeing as Admiral Calavicci already divulged my name to you earlier – *against* protocol – I suppose it will do no further harm to tell you that I am Ziggy.”

Maggie remembered Al talking absentmindedly about a Ziggy when she’d first seen him.

“The supercomputer?”

“That’s correct.”

Maggie thought for a moment.

“Have you been here the whole time, listening?”

“I’m integrated into the facility and monitor all aspects; including, but not limited to, this room.”

Maggie cringed. She hated to be watched. But, at least she had someone to talk to now.

“Can you tell me what’s happening with my friends?”

There was a pause, before the AI continued.

“Your friends are causing me a great deal of consternation, Maggie,” explained the voice. “They keep changing the course of events. Do you know how frustrating it is to have to rescan the historical record every 6.8 seconds because details keep changing? You, and your friends, do not belong here.”

“I know! And we don’t want to be here, either!”

Maggie groaned in frustration. She felt that instead of being kept in the dark, they would have much better luck helping each other.

“Then our goals appear to be aligned. But it seems that your presence caused an unforeseen event during Sam’s leap in. I calculate an 84.39 per cent probability that he traded places with the wrong Maggie Beckett.”

Maggie was silent for a moment. “Okay... and?”

“I’m waiting for an apology.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. Just what kind of sassy computer was this, anyway?

“Not until *I* get one for being plucked out of my life and brought here.”

“I’m afraid I cannot apologise for something I have no hand in.”

“Well that makes two of us!” Maggie snapped, and then realised the implications of the computer’s statement. “What do you mean you have no hand in it?”

“Sam’s travel through time was initiated by us, but the choice of who he leaps into is not made by me, or any personnel in this facility.”

“Then who?”

“I find myself unable to speculate on that, given the lack of necessary data. Sam seems to attribute it to a supernatural force, but such things are outside my parameters. Perhaps it’s the same natural process that chooses which seemingly random universe you slide into.”

Maggie felt her heart skip a beat.

*She just said 'slide.'*

“How do you know that word?”

But Ziggy stopped answering after that.

\* \* \*

“You’re about to meet my partner, Deputy Higgins,” said Sheriff Maggie as they left the Sheriff’s Headquarters.

As she reached her patrol car, she pressed her palm to a panel on the door, activating the AI contained within. A robotic voice – far inferior in sophistication to Ziggy, Sam noted – gave a greeting.

“Welcome Sheriff,” it stated flatly.

“Open all doors, Higgins,” she commanded. The bot played a chime, and all doors of the car sprung open.

To Sam, this was nothing out of the ordinary. Consumer grade voice command and AI had been around since the early nineties. But, he noticed some trepidation on the part of the other three as they all got in.

Sam got in the front with Maggie, while the three travellers got in the back, where they were greeted by the car’s voice reading them their Miranda Rights.

He shifted around to look at them.

“Ever seen a talkin’ car?” he asked them.

Quinn laughed. “We’ve seen lots of AI, but it rarely worked out in our best interest.”

Sam nodded with interest. “You must have a lot of stories, travelling the multiverse.”

Maggie began to drive, but she seemed enraptured by the conversation happening around her.

Rembrandt looked to Quinn. “You told him?”

Quinn looked back at him, rattled. “No, we didn’t.”

Sam gave a smug smile to Quinn. “It wasn’t hard to figure out, not after Al told me about this world’s version of you. Did you really manage to calculate the means to open a stable wormhole on your *own*?”

Quinn regarded him sheepishly.

“Well, it was kind of an accident. The first time, anyway.”

“An accident?” Sam said, incredulous. “You crossed the Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky Bridge by *accident*?!?”

“Quinn is fantastically smart, and equally lucky,” Colin added, in an attempt to be helpful.

“I was trying for an anti-gravity field,” Quinn explained.

Sam thought about this. In order to create a wormhole he would have had to create a dense gravitational field that then collapsed into itself. Though to have it controlled in a way that didn’t cause something catastrophic must have required some complex calculations to make a stabilisation bubble around the open vortex.

“I see...” he said. “Seems like you went in the wrong direction, amplifying the gravity to the point of creating a kind of sinkhole in spacetime. I suspect if you’d worked Lowenstein’s Constant into your calculations, you may have been onto something, but I’d need to look at them to know for sure.”

Quinn chuckled.

“Could have used you a few years ago,” he mused.

Sam gave a shrug.

“Maybe I’ll see you there some day.”

Sam noticed Rembrandt rubbing his temple.

“You okay?” He asked the man, who looked at him, straining.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s just really strange to see Maggie coming out with all this science talk. I’m getting a headache.”

“Sorry to make you uncomfortable,” Sam said. “Rembrandt, right?”

Rembrandt nodded, with a grim expression.

Sam’s eyes shifted to the strange remote control device, which Quinn was once again inspecting.

“You said that thing’s coded in hieroglyphs?”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah. It’s our timer. Normally, it counts down to the moment we can move on to the next Earth. It’s our only chance to slide out. Miss it, and we get stuck here for—”

“Twenty-nine point seven years...” Sam blurted out.

*Huh, how did I know that?*

“How did you know that?” Quinn seemed to vocalise Sam’s own thoughts.

Sam squinted, wracking his brain. “I’m not sure. Leaping messes with my memory. Could have heard that figure anywhere.”

He shook off the frustration of his inaccessible memories.

“Could even have come from Maggie. Sometimes a small part of their memories and personality stays with me.”

He refocused his attention on the ‘timer.’

“Look, I should be able to help you with that, assuming my memory of hieroglyphs doesn’t fail me. One of my doctorates is in ancient languages.”

“One of your doctorates?” Rembrandt said, gawking.

Sam shrunk in his seat, feeling bashful.

“One of... seven.”

Quinn’s mouth drew into an open-mouthed grin, with a laugh escaping.

“Huh. Lucky us.”

Sam felt the car come to a complete stop, and he turned around to see that they were now in Maggie’s driveway.

It was a modestly sized house; a typical, if run-down, American bungalow, blending in with the other unremarkable houses around it.

“Well, here it is. My new digs,” Maggie said with a sigh that told Sam she was not particularly proud of it.

“New?” It didn’t look new at all to Sam, so he assumed she must have meant in the sense she’d recently moved here.

“Since my split two months ago,” Maggie explained. “Had to find a cheap rental while I get back on my feet.”

“You broke up with Billy?” Sam wasn’t sure how he knew the guy’s name, or that he was a heavysset guy with a snake tattoo on his left bicep, but the memories just popped in like they were never gone.

“Yeah. Should have *years* ago.” She turned her face toward the dashboard. “Higgins, open all doors.”

“Authorized hand print confirmation required to open back doors.”

She rolled her eyes and placed her hand on the dash.

“Confirmation accepted.”

The chime sounded, and the doors swung open, allowing all the passengers exit from the vehicle.

Sam got out, and stretched. It really felt good to be able to share his secrets with people for once. And they all seemed to accept it. The multiverse travellers seemed quite experienced when it came to the unknown. And Quinn seemed to know just what questions to ask.

He'd be bummed when this leap was over.

*Three days.*

All he had to do was figure out how to stop his niece from vanishing, but he needed to sniff out a lead. For a sheriff to disappear, that would take a pretty brazen criminal. Or desperate. While he assumed a cop would have a pretty decent sized enemies list, the empty cells seemed to indicate that this town didn't experience much in the way of crime, at least not lately.

Al was probably finding all of this out right now.

But for now, he had a golden opportunity to complete his mission. He had allies, real flesh and blood allies, in whom he could confide. On the other hand, each of them was just as capable of altering the timeline as he was, and that might complicate matters.

Sam figured with all these variables, Ziggy might not be very helpful.

He watched Maggie unlock her door with her handprint, and followed her into the house.

## 1.5 • PASTA, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

As Sam and the others sat in Maggie's living room, recounting tales of their adventures in space and time, Maggie cooked a meal for the unexpected guests. Sam had offered to help, but she'd insisted he relax.

Sam felt envious of Quinn and his friends, who could always remember what they were doing the day before. His stories kept coming out vague and disjointed, when he encountered unexpected holes in his memory. As a guy who'd spent most of his life remembering everything he ever looked at, the gaps were all that more frustrating to him.

"Dinner's on," called Maggie, and the group got up. Sam noticed just how hungry he was. How long had they been in that cell? Five, six hours, maybe?

In the kitchen, the table was set out with five bowls of spaghetti. Just spaghetti. Naked, untopped pasta.

Everyone sat in front of a bowl. Maggie began to eat, before catching the eye of Rembrandt. She lowered her fork.

"Not to be ungrateful, Maggie," the singer said slowly, "but you got any... I don't know, sauce or seasoning of some kind for this?"

Maggie responded with a sheepish look. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting guests. I usually order some Chinese or just eat some chips."

She got up, and raided her pantry, which Sam could now see was near empty.



She grabbed a bottle of ketchup, and a salt shaker. She placed them on the table.

“This is all I have.”

Rembrandt cringed at the choice. He grabbed the ketchup bottle and squeezed some over the spaghetti.

Sam couldn't keep his mouth shut.

“You getting enough vitamins, Maggie? Sounds like you don't have a complete diet.”

Maggie stared into her bowl, poking at it with her fork. “I'm *fine*. No need to go all doctor on me.”

Rembrandt looked at him with a smirk. “Don't tell me you're a medical doctor too.”

Sam simply gave a shrug in reply and returned his gaze to Maggie. On entering Maggie's home, Sam had observed that it didn't feel very homely, and she was still living out of boxes. Like her office, her home just felt cold. And now he knew how she was eating; she didn't seem to be comfortable in her life. Perhaps depressed, perhaps something else was bothering her.

The sliding door sound of the Imaging Chamber caught his ear.

“Sam, suspect numero uno for the disappearance is Maggie's recent ex, William—”

“Colbert,” finished Sam. “Billy.”

The eyes at the table rose to look at him. He corrected himself.

“How's Billy taking the divorce?”

Maggie twirled her fork, looking uncomfortable.

“Not good. He knows to keep away from me, of course; you don't mess with the Sheriff. But he does border on harassment

from time to time. Still, it's better than when I was in the same house with him."

She looked pained, and Sam wondered what he did to her behind closed doors.

Al interrupted: "He's gotta be the culprit. Maybe he finally snaps and kills her, then has to cover up the crime."

*Yeah, maybe.*

"He's remained the prime suspect in the case for three years," Al continued, "but they got bupkis on him."

Sam had to figure out the best way to play this. Should he keep his cards close to his chest, risking less timeline flux and giving Ziggy a better opportunity to calculate the best course of action? Or should he just tell them all the truth, and hope that knowing about it could undo what was supposed to happen? There were significant advantages and disadvantages to either option.

Well, he had a couple of days. There was no harm in keeping it to himself for now and sleeping on the decision.

What he *could* do tonight, was take a look at the timer.

He glanced up at Al, then excused himself from the table.

"Where's your bathroom?" He asked Maggie.

"Down the hall, last door on the right."

"Thanks."

In his periphery, he sensed Al following him to the bathroom, and when he got in there, he finally turned to him.

"Al, do you think the Maggie I leaped into ever knew a Billy?"

"Maybe? She knew a me. Recognised me as soon as she saw me. Seems like her world could be similar enough."

He poked his head through the wall in the direction of the others, and then back. “Good to see you finally engaging in some secrecy, Sam.”

“I haven’t decided what I’m gonna do about this, that’s all. Don’t be surprised if I end up spilling the beans.”

“I gotta be honest, Sam: Ziggy’s threatening the silent treatment.”

“Humph,” he scoffed. “She *would* do that. Well, she hasn’t been much help this leap anyway, so she can sulk as much as she likes.”

Al made a sour face. “Now I know how a marriage counsellor feels. Not that *I’d* ever need to see one of them.”

Sam wondered, momentarily, why he’d feel the need to add that caveat. But the thought gave way to more important things.

“Al, listen: go back to Maggie, ask her if she has any insight into Billy. I need to know more about the guy. What he’s capable of.”

Al tapped on his handlink and the Imaging Chamber door opened behind him.

“Alright Sam. But she’s a pain in the butt to get any information out of, you know.”

“You should just tell her what’s going on here. She’ll find out when she leaps back anyway.”

“Yeah, well *you* try discussing forbidden topics while Ziggy’s lurking, waiting to give *you* an earful.”

He stepped into the doorway.

“Oh, to hell with Ziggy!” Sam snapped, before finding himself grinning sheepishly as he realised what he’d just said. He was thankful the computer couldn’t actually hear him here.

Al cringed at Sam as the door closed, and Sam realised that he'd already made up his mind about what to do next.

\* \* \*

Maggie was reclining on a bed as Al entered the Waiting Room. She looked up to see him gawking at all the creature comforts she'd managed to get Ziggy to spit out of the walls for her: The bathroom, the vending machine, the armchair, and the bed on which she lay now.

"Jeez, you really made yourself at home," he remarked, seemingly impressed. "Most people don't figure out the voice commands."

"You really should have all this stuff accessible from the get-go," she chided. "How many people have just stood in here for days, without any stimulation, thinking they'd been abducted by aliens, Al?"

Al gave her a cynical laugh. "We *did* used to have a table, but the reflection tended to freak people out."

Maggie looked toward the bathroom, where she had been able to access a mirror. "I admit, that is pretty strange. Good thing you prepared me for it. You probably should do that for everyone that comes here instead of clamming up; you probably traumatise people, you know."

"Alright, precious," Al said, narrowing his eyes and sounding like he'd had about enough of her telling him how to do his job. This only proved to make her feel good about having done it.

"So, what do you need to know this time?" Maggie asked, finally sitting up and planting her feet on the floor. He had only come in

here when he needed information so far, so it was a safe bet that he was back for more.

“What do you know about a guy named Billy Colbert?”

Maggie’s face crinkled up as she heard the name.

*My high school boyfriend?*

“That’s very left-field. Yeah, I knew a Billy Colbert, a long time ago, back in Fresno. What about him?”

“The, uh, version of you we have on this Earth married him and finally broke it off in ’99.”

Maggie found herself recoiling from the thought.

“God, poor her.” She thought back to her time dating him. Rationed out his affection toward her, while expecting her to give him every spare moment of her life. It was stifling.

“I broke up with him when I was seventeen, after I caught him making out with Harriet Smyth. Then one day he gave her a shiner, and he got expelled. Neither of us ever saw him again, think he got sent to a school upstate. Dodged a bullet there.”

“So he is a bad guy!”

“I sure wouldn’t trust him.”

She watched him type furiously into his little flashing gadget, and it reminded Maggie that there was a ticking clock.

“Okay, now you throw *me* a bone,” she coaxed. “Can you find out how much time is left on our timer?”

“You mean that TV remote that’s been flashing zero all day?”

Maggie blanched. “Flashing zero?!”

Al shrugged. “Sam’s probably going to help fix it. Don’t worry about it. Between him and this Quinn guy, they’ll work it out.”

Maggie laughed nervously. “Yeah, and as soon as I start talking about physics, he’s going to know it isn’t me.”

“Oh, uh... they all already know. Turns out the other you saw right through the aura and now they’re all trading stories.”

Maggie sighed in relief. That was one obstacle surmounted.

He added, wryly: “It’s all very heartwarming. And it’s *completely* messing up history. Ziggy’s never gonna let me forget about this one.”

Maggie smirked. “For a computer, she’s awfully vindictive. Wanted an apology out of me for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Wait, she actually spoke to you?”

Maggie nodded. “Yes, and she’s *not* very user-friendly.”

“I resent that remark,” interjected the AI from the speakers hidden somewhere in the ceiling.

“Oh, you’re back,” said Maggie, unable to hide her annoyance. “Great.”

“I never left.”

Al shook his head, and addressed the ceiling. “Look, I know we’re all on edge, but we’re going to help Maggie, and Sam’s gonna leap out, historical record or not, okay? We just need to keep her protected a few days. That’s all.”

He met Maggie’s eye, and it threw him off.

“Uh, I mean the other Maggie.”

“What’s going to happen to her?”

Al looked like he was about to answer, but was preempted by Ziggy.

“Al,” she called out in a sing-song manner. This was enough for him to shut his mouth, and head for the door.

Maggie groaned, and laid back down on the bed.

“I can’t change history, what’s the use in keeping *me* in the dark?” she muttered, only half hoping Ziggy would hear.

“Oh, did I hear that you want it dark?” Ziggy said, and Maggie could detect a malicious streak in her voice that indicated she’d heard what Maggie said perfectly well. “Very well, Maggie. Good night.”

And the ambient light in the room blinked out, leaving Maggie in pitch darkness. She scowled. *Maybe* it hadn’t been the best idea to antagonise the one keeping her in relative comfort. But, at least she might be able to get some shuteye.

“Good night, Ziggy,” she said bitterly.

## 1.6 · PRIME SUSPECT

At the kitchen table, the timer's components were spread out, as Sam and Quinn studied them. Sam noted that it was nearing eleven at night. He supposed they would have to wrap it up for the night soon.

The hieroglyphs seemed, to Sam, to be an unusual reconfiguration of the original ancient Egyptian writings, which he assumed were owing to the fact that the language must have evolved somewhat on this world Quinn had described to him, where western culture had absorbed Egyptian, rather than primarily Greco-Roman, elements. He could still understand it to a point, but it was going to be tricky.

He'd learned about the origins of this timer: made to escape from some kind of tomb. They'd acquired it when they let their own timer elapse, thinking Quinn was dead.

Sam thought back to Colin's comment about Quinn being lucky; it seemed true. How unlikely was it that they'd find such a thing? He wondered if God or Fate or Time or that guy in the diner named Al was taking care of them, too.

The sound of an impact in the doorway startled him out of his thoughts, and he looked up to see Maggie carrying a dusty computer chassis into the room.

"Here. Had to dig it out of my boxes. Hope it's good enough," she said as she placed it on the kitchen bench. "I'll go get the monitor."



“Thanks Maggie,” Quinn said, and immediately set to plugging it into the wall. Sam found himself wishing for Ziggy at this point, because an old Windows 95 computer like this would take years to process something that would take her seconds.

The thought of calling Project Quantum Leap floated into his mind. If he could prove who he was, they’d be willing to help. But then, how was he expected to get to New Mexico when he had a job to do here? Still, Ziggy’s processing power would come in handy right about now. He could encrypt the data and send it electronically to them, so she could crunch some numbers.

But first, he had to load that data onto this old computer.

“This old bucket of bolts is going to slow us down,” he said grimly. Quinn looked at him with an amused smirk.

“I’ve worked with much worse. The computers on this Earth seem pretty advanced compared to where I came from. For one, you’ve got more than 64 megs of RAM.”

Sam shuddered at the thought of such little memory, and he recalled Quinn’s origins.

*Oh, right, this guy built a machine that opened a path to other universes, using consumer grade electrical components, in his basement.*

Sam wondered what he could do with the resources that Sam had used to build Project Quantum Leap. Not that he could remember what half of those resources were. Still, Sam himself was pretty used to working on the fly without much at his disposal, nowadays.

The idea of contacting his compound wouldn’t leave him, and simmered away in the back of his mind.

He looked down at the circuit boards and other components, stroking his chin. This all seemed much more familiar to him than he would have expected, and he couldn't pinpoint why. But, he figured, it was better to recognise it than to have a complete memory lapse and not be able to help.

Maggie came in, struggling to carry the bulky 17-inch CRT monitor, and Sam rushed over to help her. He took it out of her arms, and was easily able to carry it the rest of the way, as Quinn watched with interest.

“Your arms go around it so much more easily than hers,” he remarked, still apparently trying to figure out how his eyes could see two of the same person having such a different experience of carrying the same object.

Sam leaned over to plug in the monitor to the wall, and moved to plug the VGA cable into the chassis.

“I need to get both your fingerprints,” Quinn continued, lost in his curiosity.

“Wouldn't you rather get this timer fixed?” Sam said, with some amusement. Not that he wasn't also interested in finding out more about his leaps, but some things did take priority over such investigations.

“Hey, we'll need breaks. I can do both.”

Sam simply shrugged.

Maggie smiled at the two scientists, a smile Sam thought was more token than genuine, before making her exit from the room.

Quinn crossed his arms, looking from the computer to the disassembled timer.

“I think we're going to need some more wires to get this thing set up right. I hope this town has a good electronics store.”

He looked around the kitchen at the appliances. “Or I can take apart some of these...”

“You should probably get Maggie’s permission before you start destroying her stuff.”

Sam had to admire his ingenuity, nonetheless.

Quinn flashed him a grin, but it quickly faded as Sam could tell there was something on Quinn’s mind.

“You said before that every time you, uh, ‘leap,’ there’s a reason behind it. You have to fix something that went wrong, or help someone, right?”

Sam nodded. He could see where this was going.

“So what are you here for? Is it to help us, or to help her?” Quinn gestured with his head towards where Maggie had last been seen.

Sam hesitated. It had never crossed his mind that he could be there to help them. But that was always a possibility.

He licked his lips before admitting: “All I know is that she’s going to disappear in a few days.”

Quinn took a moment to process this. “Well, with all four of us, we can have eyes on her all the time.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Sam agreed. “But we can’t just deter whoever’s going to take her, because they might try again when we’re gone. We’ll need to be covert so we can catch the guy red-handed.”

He glanced out the door to make sure Maggie wasn’t in earshot.

“I might need to take her place for a few days.”

Quinn nodded. “Know much about being a Sheriff?”

“A little. I’ve been one before,” he said, and then it hit him that it didn’t turn out well for Abigail’s father. “Of course... he did die in a fire right after I leaped out.”

Quinn looked at him with wide eyes. “Alright then...” he said, nervous. “Well, please don’t do that again.”

\* \* \*

Sam was half asleep in Maggie’s guest bedroom when he heard a loud banging on the front door. He leapt out of bed, adrenaline flowing.

“*Maggie!*” cried a man’s voice, muffled behind the door.

Sam hurried into the living room, where the door was. On the couch and floor, Quinn and Rembrandt were scrambling to their feet. Colin had already turned on the lamp by the couch, and was striding towards the door with a stony expression.

The voice behind the door continued: “Maggie, why won’t you talk to me!”

More pounding on the door.

Colin peered through the peephole, and looked back to the others.

“Is this Billy?” he asked.

Sam nodded, recognising the voice. “I think so. And he sounds drunk.”

Maggie appeared in the hall, finally roused from the commotion.

“Don’t let him in,” was all she said. Sam moved to her and took her arm.

“You should hide,” he told her. “I’ll handle it.”

She looked into his eyes for a moment, defiant, but then conceded, and moved into her bedroom, closing the door.

Sam crossed to the door, which was taking quite the beating.

“Billy, go home!” He called through the door. “Or I’ll be forced to arrest you for being drunk and disorderly.”

He looked back at the others, shrugging.

“Maggie, please! I just wanna talk! You owe me that!”

“I owe you nothing. Get out of here!”

A moment of silence passed, and then a huge thud came on the door. Sam thought it may have been a kick.

“Billy, if you leave right this second, I won’t charge you with attempted break-and-enter. But if you keep going, I will have no choice.”

“Screw you, Maggie! You can’t hide behind that badge forever!”

Through the peephole, Sam watched Billy stumble away, though not before kicking over Maggie’s mailbox.

“Destruction of property,” Sam mumbled.

*Well, that sure raises the odds of him being the culprit.*

Sam turned, and met Quinn’s eye. They shared a moment of grave understanding.

He crossed to the hall, and went into Maggie’s room, where he found her on the bed, hugging her knees.

He sat on the end of the bed.

“Does this happen often?”

Maggie sighed. “Only after he goes drinking with his buddies. I think they must egg him on.”

Sam sighed. He was still reluctant to tell her about her fate, but he could still try his plan.

“Maybe you should go stay at a motel for a few days. I’ll step in and pose as you.”

“What good would that do?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

“I just have a bad feeling about Billy. Maybe I can figure out some way to get him to leave you alone. I think that’s why I’m here.”

He took her hand.

“Those three guys out there,” he nodded toward the living room, “they really care about their Maggie. I think you could stay with Rembrandt and Colin. They can protect you. Meanwhile, I’ll play Sheriff and work with Quinn on the timer in my downtime.”

“I’m not a child any more, Uncle Sam,” she said, irritation lacing her words, “I’m a grown woman with police training. I don’t need to be protected.”

Sam cringed. He thought she might resist in this way.

“I know. I’m not going to deny you’re clearly a capable person.”

He shifted his position so that he was cross-legged on the end of the bed, facing her.

“Do you know where your name comes from? Why your Dad called you Maggie?”

Maggie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“Yeah, he never told me either, but I know,” he said with a sad smile.

“When your Dad was fighting in Nam, he met a photojournalist called Maggie Dawson. Out on a mission, she was killed, while your Dad was saved.”

He drew a sharp breath as the memories came back to him.

“I know about it because I was there. Her death was... well, it was because of me.”

“But you never went to Vietnam,” Maggie said, struggling to understand.

He put a hand on her knee.

“I was there alright, though nobody knew it was me. And I saved my brother’s – your Dad’s – life. At the cost of hers.”

She looked at him, pale as a sheet.

“You’re here today because she died. And I could never forgive myself if I had a chance to save you and failed.”

Maggie took this information in quietly.

Finally, she made eye contact with him, and spoke plainly.

“What do you know about the future, Sam? About me?”

Sam sighed. He should have known she’d figure it out, just as Quinn had.

“You’re going to go missing.”

Maggie barely had a reaction.

“I see,” was all she said in reply.

## 1.7 • PHONING IT IN

The morning sun was just peeking into the kitchen window as Sam dialled the interstate number on Maggie's wall phone.

It rang for half a second before connecting. Sam smiled as he heard Ziggy's voice on the line.

"State your access authorisation, please," she said.

"Uh, Department of Defence Umbra clearance number 004-002-02-016. But that may have been reset due to potential compromisation, a couple of days ago – if I remember correctly – in which case, the new number will be 038-002-33-283."

He smiled. "It's me, Ziggy. Sam."

"Please wait..." Ziggy's voice said.

A moment went by, and then, a new voice: "Hello? Who is this?"

"Gooshie? I haven't heard your voice in so long."

"You don't sound like... the undisclosed individual whose number you cited." Gooshie was straining not to divulge information.

"I know, I know. But it's really me, buddy. I'm in a leap right now. Only, I'm a future version of myself calling you."

"Uh... wow, okay. Where are you right now? Ziggy says this call is coming from California."

"I've leaped into my niece, Maggie, in Madera County. That's whose voice you're hearing right now." He didn't bother explaining the unnecessary detail that it was a different Maggie.



“If I’m thinking of the correct date, I think the present me should have leaped out of that guy who saw the UFO a couple days ago – and that’s why the clearance number had to be reset, because I gave it up under the truth serum those spooks gave me. I don’t know whether the reset’s been done by this point in the timeline, though.”

“Oh boy,” Gooshie said. “It’s not a good idea for you to be contacting us, Doctor Beckett... as delightful as it is that you have.”

“I know, I know. I could change the future. But believe me, Gooshie, this is no ordinary leap. Listen, can you put Ziggy on for me? I have an important job for her.”

“Uh, well, here’s the thing, Sam...”

Sam’s palm shot to his forehead as he recalled what happened next in his timeline back in ’99.

“Oh, she’s all out of sorts because of Alia, isn’t she? Damn, bad timing.”

“Yeah, we’re in crisis mode right now,” confirmed Gooshie.

He punched the counter, but a realisation dawned on him as he rubbed his knuckles.

“Listen, sometime today or tomorrow I’m gonna SFTP some data over. Ziggy’ll be able to decode the encryption on it just fine. Just tell her it’s a side project. But here’s the fun part: she has a few years to do it. Just have Al pass on the data when you sync up with me in November 2002, okay?”

“Okay, Sam. I’ll tell her to expect it.”

“Thank you, Gooshie.”

Sam hesitated in ending the call. “Listen... tell everyone...”

“I know, Sam. I will.”

“See you round, pal.”

He was just hanging up the phone when Quinn wandered in, rubbing his eyes.

“Who were you talking to?”

“I was callin’ home. My hybrid supercomputer should be able to crunch a few numbers on a scale of magnitude faster than this old thing,” he said, knocking on the case of the PC.

“Supercomputer?” Quinn sounded intrigued.

“We call her Ziggy. She’s my pride and joy, when she’s not driving me crazy.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about a person.”

“I’m sure she’d be insulted by the comparison,” Sam replied, with a laugh.

Quinn crossed the room, looking at him with mischief. Sam had an inkling of what was going on in his head.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a tape measure.

“Oh god, what now?” Sam moaned, as Quinn swung the tape over him and started measuring his waist.

“Sorry man, it’s for science,” he said, as Sam shifted uncomfortably.

Quinn laughed as he read the measurement.

“Twenty-five inches. A little low for a 6 foot man, right?”

Sam felt his face burning as Quinn giggled.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. Like to see *you* pull off these jeans.”

“I wish I could see your real appearance,” Quinn mused. “I wonder if I could build some sort of reality lens so I could see through the spacetime distortion.”

“Another time, maybe,” said Sam, gesturing towards the timer pieces. “We have something more important to do.”

Quinn’s excitement waned, and he nodded solemnly. “Yeah, you’re right. Who knows if we’ll even make the window at this rate, but the sooner we finish, the more likely it is we will.”

He turned to Sam. “But aren’t you gonna be doing the Sheriff thing?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I’ll have to. The others can take Maggie to a motel to keep watch on her, and I’ll help you with this when I can. While I’m out on patrol, you work on getting it rigged up to the computer, okay?”

Quinn gave a mock salute.

“Sure thing.”

\* \* \*

Sam placed his palm on the car panel, and Higgins sprung to life.

“Higgins, open driver’s side door,” he said. The car chimed, as it had done yesterday, and the door popped open. He got in, and was starting the car when Al popped into the passenger seat, looking at him with a piercing stare. Sam regarded him nervously.

“You made a phone call to the facility on the third of May, 1999, sounding just like your niece.” he said, to which Sam gave him a ghost of a shrug.

“Do you realise how weird it is to have my own history changed in the middle of you altering it like that, Sam? I have two

memories now, one of you never having called, and one of you calling.”

“Sorry, Al. The former one should fade after I leap out, right?”

“As of right now, Ziggy both *does* and *doesn't* have the data you said you were gonna send her, which she says means you haven't sent it yet, but you will sometime tonight, with a 98.2 per cent probability.”

He took a long, troubled puff on his cigar.

“Only Ziggy could hold those two opposing truths and not blow a circuit.”

“Guess we should've called her *Schrödinger*,” he said with a chuckle, but Al merely met his joke with an exasperated shake of his head.

“That was the name of Quinn Mallory's cat,” he finally said.

*Of course it was.*

“Civilian jaywalking at eleven o'clock, Sheriff,” Higgins stated. Sam looked over to see some guy walking on the side of the road, causing no real issue.

“Okay Higgins. Ignore, please?”

“Handprint authorisation required to disregard observed crime in progress.”

Sam rolled his eyes, and provided the handprint, making incredulous eye contact with Al.

“Authorisation accepted. Incident report recorded in log.”

“Jeez, what a killjoy,” Al remarked.

“This is really what Maggie has to put up with every day?” Sam shook his head in disbelief. “No wonder she's miserable.”

He looked at his friend. “I feel like I’m not *just* here to stop her from disappearing, you know? What if she needs a change in her life? You’ve seen the way she lives; she’s not eating right, she’s living out of moving boxes after two months, she takes no pride in her work. What does Ziggy think of that?”

“Sam, Ziggy’s barely calculating anything right now. She keeps saying she’s blinded to it ’cause of all this hokum with the parallel Earths and you being in the wrong Maggie.”

“Well, maybe talk to our guest in the Waiting Room again. How would she feel if she were in this situation?”

Al looked at him with a sigh. “Do I have to?”

“*Al*,” Sam pleaded.

“Alright already,” Al sulked.

“And get Verbena to help, alright?”

Al nodded, and pressed a button on the handlink, causing him to vanish from the car.

And so, he was alone again with Higgins.

## 1.8 • MAKING DO

Maggie wiped the sweat from her brow as she completed her twenty-eighth lap of the Waiting Room. With nothing better to do, she'd figured she might as well get in some cardio. Even if the jumpsuit she was stuck wearing didn't have any support - she'd been making do with one arm wrapped around her chest as she ran.

“Water, please.”

A drinking fountain slid out from the wall next to where the vending machine was, and she hurried to it to hydrate herself.

While she drank, her ears picked up the now familiar sound of the door sliding open. She turned to see Al entering, accompanied by another woman unfamiliar to Maggie.

“Back for more?” She asked him, straightening her back, and crossing her arms, then moving her gaze to the unknown woman. “Who's she?”

“Maggie, this is Doctor Beeks, our staff psychiatrist.”

The doctor nodded towards her, and extended a hand. Maggie shook it, suspicious.

“What are you doing here? Think I need some counselling or something?”

She narrowed her eyes, but saw nothing untoward in this doctor, who was looking at her with seemingly genuine kindness.

“Not unless you want some,” she said, smiling faintly. “A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Beckett.”

“Maggie’s fine. So why *are* you here?” She looked at Al with a cynical raised eyebrow. “Need to press me for more info again?”

Al looked sheepish, and she knew she was right.

“We’re looking for some insight into the mental state and needs of...” The doctor trailed off.

“Your counterpart,” Al finished.

Maggie threw her hands in the air. “How should I know? I’ve lived a very different life to her. Something I’ve surely made abundantly clear by now.”

“Well, you’re the closest thing we’ve got to understanding her,” said Doctor Beeks.

Maggie thought carefully. While it was true that her doubles sometimes thought like her, she’d seen enough of them to know how large the discrepancy could be. Still, she figured, she’d just need to put herself in the shoes of a version of her that stayed with Billy and somehow managed to not enter into the military. What might have happened with her father that would have made him less of a tyrant?

Finally, she replied. “Sure, I’m willing to help... for the right price. What can you offer me?”

Al and the doctor looked at each other for a moment. Then, Al took a deep, shaky breath, and Maggie just knew he was going to come out with something good.

“I can show you your friends. Not for very long, because the power cost is astronomical, and frankly we don’t need that kind of electric bill. You’ll be able to see and hear them, but they won’t see or hear you. Sam will, if he’s there.”

*Yes, finally, a deal worth making.*

Maggie grinned. “Deal.”

She moved to the armchair, and sat cross-legged on it.

“Okay, fill me in on everything you know about the other me, and I’ll see what I can do.”

\* \* \*

It was after dark when Sam got back to Maggie’s house. Being this town’s Sheriff was certainly one of the duller gigs of his leaping career. Nothing but intervening in petty disagreements, speeding tickets, and stacks of paperwork - and nobody to talk to but a computer with no personality.

He was glad to be back to work with Quinn, who’d now jury-rigged the circuit boards of the device to a serial port in the computer and was busily scrolling through lines of hieroglyphs.

“Took me three hours to code up a driver to recognise this thing,” he said as Sam entered the kitchen.

Sam observed his work with admiration.

“You did great,” he said, patting the kid on the back.

Quinn stepped away from the display.

“Well, it’s your turn to shine now, because I have no idea what any of this says.”

Sam pulled up a stool, and let his eyes drift over the hieroglyphs.

“Okay, this is good. I’ll set up a simple Rosetta Stone lookup table based on what I understand of each symbol, then send it off to Ziggy who can use that to translate it all into a code that we should both be able to work with. She’ll probably take it upon herself to improve the code as well, knowing her.”



“I really appreciate this,” he said.

An hour later, Sam was absorbed in the code, writing notes on a notepad, when he felt eyes on him from behind. He paused, and turned around to see Quinn pointing some kind of machine at him. It was a hastily constructed contraption, but Sam could see it was some form of scanning device, not unlike an EMF meter or Geiger counter, he thought. In one hand, a meter, and in the other, connected by a wire, was some kind of wand that he was waving around. There was an electrical hum coming from it.

“What is that?” he asked, squinting.

“It’s a spacetime distortion detector I threw together today. I’m trying to get it tuned in to the reality warp around you. You keep doing what you’re doing. When it starts making a clicking noise it should be working. At least, I *think* so.”

“You did that in a few hours?!” Sam stared at him in disbelief. If it had taken him three hours just to set up the driver, he couldn’t have had much time left over to do this.

“Well, I’m pretty used to working to tight deadlines,” he said, downplaying this incredible feat.

“Jeez, and there I was filling out parking tickets, while you were doing all this,” he lamented.

“Life of a Sheriff isn’t very glamorous, huh?”

Sam laughed. “I’m sure it’s great... if you like to power trip over people just minding their business.”

“There’s something I’ve been a victim of on more than one occasion,” Quinn said, still playing with the dials on his device. “It’s amazing how many times I’ve been arrested without knowing I’d done anything wrong, or even for trying to help someone.”

The machine started clicking, and Quinn gave a victorious laugh.

“Bingo!”

He drew the wand closer to Sam, and the clicking noise became louder and more frequent. He drew it away, and it subsided. He smiled triumphantly.

Sam stood, and gave Quinn an approving pat on the arm. “Don’t suppose you’d consider staying here and workin’ at the Project?”

Quinn seemed to mull it over for a hot second, then shook his head. “I’m looking for my parents. Won’t do me any good to stop here.”

Sam nodded in understanding. He’d do the same.

“If you want, I can draw up schematics for this machine and you can send it to your supercomputer. Might come in handy for you some day.”

“I’d like that.”

Sam turned back to the computer to continue his translation work, but no sooner than he had, did he hear the Imaging Chamber door. Sighing, he turned back around to see Al.

“You talk to Maggie?” he asked his friend, and he felt Quinn’s attention shift to him.

“Oh, is that your hologram buddy?” asked Quinn.

“I never said he was a hologram...”

“Well, what else is he gonna be?” Quinn’s eyes danced. “A ghost? Fairy? You already said he was in the future, so I just figured maybe he was a holographic projection tuned into your brain waves or something.”

“Lucky guess,” Sam said with a grin.

He looked back at Al, who he was startled to see holding the hand of Maggie, decked out in the white Waiting Room jumpsuit. She was looking at Quinn with an emotional expression.

“Hey Quinn,” she said to him, but he couldn’t see, nor hear, it. She looked in Sam’s direction. “Hey there, Uncle.”

“You’re gonna have to relay the message,” said Al. Sam nodded.

“Quinn,” Sam said, grabbing the arm of the man, “Al’s got Maggie with him. She just said ‘hey.’”

Quinn’s eyes widened. “Where?”

Sam pointed to the corner of the room where the two stood, and Quinn looked towards that spot.

“Hey, Maggie. Hope they’re treating you okay in the future.”

“Well, it’s comfortable enough, as far as prisons go,” Maggie said

“She says it’s comfortable, but she views it as a prison,” relayed Sam.

“Where are the others?” She asked.

“I can answer that one,” said Al. “They’re off in a motel with the other Maggie. I’ll show you them tomorrow.”

“Okay, then. Quinn, I want you to know that if you have to slide without me, that’s okay. I’ll make do alone.”

“Maggie, I couldn’t let that happen,” Sam replied directly.

“What did she say?” Quinn asked.

“She’s telling you to go without her if I don’t leap out before your timer hits zero.”

Quinn shook his head. “Not a chance. I don’t know about the others, but I’m not going to just abandon you. I’ll build a new sliding machine if I have to. Don’t worry about it.”

Sam watched Maggie's expression melt into relieved gratitude. He smiled; these two really cared for one another.

Al glanced at the handlink. "Okay, Ziggy's telling me I have twenty seconds until I need to let go of your hand or we get an outage. Any final words?"

"Just... tell him I'm sorry for arguing with him so much about the densitrometry circuit."

Al nodded, and let go of her hand, causing her to disappear from Sam's sight.

"She says sorry for arguing with you about the densitrometry circuit," he parroted, and smirked at the comment.

Quinn stood quiet for a moment, smiling. "She's right, though. It needs some work."

"Well then, guess you're lucky you have me," Sam said, before spinning back around on his stool to complete his work.

## 1.9 • FACEPLANT

The very moment Sam uploaded the timer data to Project Quantum Leap, Al burst into the Imaging Chamber, carrying a hefty stack of dot matrix printer paper.

“Well, Sam, congratulations, you have twelve thousand lines of code to transcribe, and I have to sit here holding it for you, so you better be quick about it,” Al deadpanned.

He took a hold of the first page, and let the stack drop, allowing the pile of perforated pages to concertina from his hand to the floor.

“Ziggy said she made some improvements for efficiency and cut the line count down twenty per cent. So at least there’s three thou you can skip.”

Sam flushed, and turned to Quinn who was soldering something at the kitchen table.

“I got the code.”

Quinn looked back. “Great! Let’s see it.”

Sam scratched his head, embarrassed.

“Well, it only exists in the future, so I have to copy it out line by line from Al’s hard copy.”

Quinn blanched. “How long do you think that’s gonna take?”

“Maybe eight, ten hours? Assuming I don’t get a cramp in my hands.”

“Oh boy,” Quinn said.

*You said it.*

“It’s alright, I didn’t need to sleep tonight,” Sam said with a wry smile.

“You definitely owe me one,” Al said. “I had a hot date planned with Beth, you know.”

“Sorry,” Sam said, beginning to type. Fortunately, his fingers were plenty nimble from a lifetime of piano playing followed by years of contributing to Ziggy’s programming. His fingers danced across the keys, and within a minute had almost completed the first page.

Over his shoulder, Quinn watched the code being written on the screen with interest.

“I’ll spot you for errors,” he said.

“Thanks.”

After a few more minutes watching the code appear, Quinn let out a low whistle.

“Either your computer added in new functions, or I knew way less about that timer than I thought.”

He pointed to a subroutine on the screen.

“That’s some kind of safety protocol I’ve never seen before.”

Sam looked at it for a moment. Then he resumed copying the code as he spoke:

“Oh yeah, you definitely want that. Prevents you from becoming un-anchored in spacetime. That could have some disastrous effects, if there’s an overload of energy in your wormhole. Of course, there tend to be other effects that can occur, but un-anchoring is by far the most dangerous. That was one of our most important developments when we were designing our system. Have you really been... ‘sliding’... without this?”

“I didn’t know that could happen...”

“Better safe than sorry, huh?”

In the reflection of the monitor, Sam watched Quinn nod, hanging over the shoulder of Maggie.

“Well, thank Ziggy for that.”

\* \* \*

Rembrandt puffed as he finally reached the top of the stairs. He headed to the door of the motel room, arms loaded up with bags of takeout. Sheriff Maggie had encouraged him to try the Chinese place where she usually got her dinners, and he had to admit the food smelled amazing.

The wound on his knee from the slide in was stinging, and he hoped that meant it was healing rather than becoming infected. He figured he would need to go see ‘Doctor Beckett’ again to make sure.

He hoped Colin and Maggie were a little less bored now than when he’d left them; they had been looking pretty damn understimulated, watching some old western movie on the crappy television. Colin had been pointing out the inaccuracies, while Maggie seemed to be driven up the wall by his commentary.

He fumbled for the key in his pocket, but as he reached the door, he observed that it was ajar. This made his heart skip a beat.

Alarmed, he pushed the door open and cried out as he saw the scene in front of him. Takeout boxes tumbled to the floor.

Sprawled on the bed lay a prone Colin, blood matted in his hair.

“Colin!” cried Remy, rushing to him. He turned Colin over and checked for a pulse. “Colin, wake up, man!”

Colin groaned, and reached to the back of his head. “It hurts...”

“Colin, where’s Maggie?!”

“I... I don’t know,” he said, appearing to have trouble focusing his eyes.

“Did you see who hit you?”

Colin carefully sat up, then hunched over, head between his knees.

“No... the, the last thing I remember I was coming out of the... um, bathroom. I heard her scream.”

With that, he vomited all over his feet.

“Oh man, you need a doctor.”

He grabbed a hold of the phone by the bed and moved to dial 911, but then spotted the slip of paper with Maggie’s home number, and decided that might be a better option. He could get a doctor *and* report back to Quinn at the same time.

As he finished dialling, he straightened, and watched his friend struggling to keep his equilibrium.

“Hello?” Quinn’s voice was a relief to Remy.

“Q-ball, we need both of you. Maggie’s gone, and Colin’s hurt.”

“Oh no... we’ll be right there, Remy.”

And as quickly as that, the phone call was over.

Remy returned to Colin’s side, carefully avoiding the bile on the floor, and held onto him.

“Hey, you gotta stay awake, okay?”



Colin's response was a groggy moan. Rembrandt wiped nervous sweat from his forehead, and inspected the back of Colin's head, but it was difficult to see through his hair. Besides, a head injury was much more than what could be seen on the outside.

He felt Colin starting to slump over, and he gripped onto the man as best he could. "Stay with me, man. Help's coming."

"Did Billy know...?" Colin mumbled.

"That we were here?"

Rembrandt sighed. "I don't know. We've been real careful, but there's always a chance he saw her when we were bringing her here, or maybe he knows someone who works here that saw her."

Through the open door, Rembrandt heard a car come to a screeching halt in the parking lot, then came the familiar chime of Higgins opening the squad car doors. Remy stayed on the bed, holding Colin up, as Sam and Quinn hurried up the stairs.

Finally, they reached the door. Rembrandt looked away from Sam, with the knowledge that he looked like Maggie, but wasn't her, a little too much for him at this moment.

"Oh man, what happened?!" Quinn said as he stepped over the stray noodles and vomit on the floor.

"We don't know. I found him like this when I came back from the restaurant," Rembrandt explained, though he felt that it wasn't at all helpful.

Sam had approached Colin, and was checking his eye reactions.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" He asked, holding two fingers in front of his eyes.

Colin, eyes dull, seemed to look through the fingers. "Uhh... four?"

“Damn,” he said, and peered around to the wound.

“Rembrandt, find me a clean cloth and dampen it for me. Quinn, I think I saw an ice chest out there, see if you can get some.”

Quinn dashed back out of the room, and Rembrandt hurried to the bathroom, where he grabbed a washcloth, and ran it under the tap for a moment.

He passed it to Sam, who started using it to clean the wound.

“The bleeding seems to have stopped, but there is definitely internal damage, concussion at least. Stack some pillows at the head of the bed. I’m gonna get him to lie down on his side. When I get the ice we can apply some to help with the swelling. But unfortunately, we *are* going to need an ambulance. So once you’ve got the bed done, can you call 911?”

“Sure. And I think I saw a first aid kit in the closet,” Rembrandt offered as he started arranging pillows.

“Okay, great. That’ll help.”

“I thought people with head injuries shouldn’t fall asleep?” Remy wondered, looking at the pillows.

Sam shook his head. “Only if nobody’s around to help. Passing out alone won’t cause him to deteriorate, it’s the lack of medical care and monitoring of his vital signs that would make it a problem.”

Quinn walked back in the room with a bag of ice.

“Good job, Quinn. Grab a towel or washcloth and wrap up a handful of cubes.”

Quinn obliged, heading into the bathroom.

Rembrandt had completed his work on the bed, and moved to the phone to call an ambulance.

It really spun him out that this stranger who looked like Maggie was so ice cool in a crisis. If anyone had to swap bodies with her, he was glad it was this guy who seemed to be good at just about everything.

He gave the details to the 911 operator, and assured the dispatcher that Colin was getting first aid from someone who knew what they were doing.

Colin was now lying on the bed, with Quinn holding the makeshift ice pack to just above the wound, avoiding the actual laceration in case of pain.

“Hold on, bro,” he murmured.

Sam was pulling the first aid kit out, and rifling through it. He pulled out some gauze and disinfectant swabs, and crossed to treat Colin, who seemed to have lost consciousness.

Remy took this opportunity to step outside and take a breather. He felt terrible; he’d been entrusted with guarding Maggie, making sure nothing happened. And, at that, he couldn’t have failed harder.

He slammed a fist onto the railing, and realised that some of Colin’s blood was still on his hands. He looked at it with guilt, and went back into the motel room to wash up.

## 1.10 • FOLLOWING LEADS

Sam paced in the hospital waiting room, mind racing. He was confident Colin would be alright now, but Maggie on the other hand, he had no clue.

His only lead was Billy, but how could he, looking just like Maggie, simply show up and accuse him of kidnapping her?

He felt powerless; how could he so much as file a missing person's report on *himself*?

The sound of Al's entry broke him out of his thoughts, and he met the eye of his friend, eyes pleading. He couldn't talk to him right now, in front of all these people in the room, so he headed for the door, hoping the night outside was devoid of onlookers.

"Sam," Al began, following him, "Beeks finally gave me her report on Maggie's psychological profile."

Sam exited the doors and retreated around a corner.

"It's too late, Al. She's already been taken. I thought you said that wasn't due to happen yet."

"No, listen, Sam. Using the limited data she's got, Ziggy calculates that Billy's only got a 24.8 per cent chance of being the culprit." Al looked back at Sam with the kind of grave expression he only reserved for very serious moments.

"What?" Sam said, incredulous. "But he almost busted down her door. Who else could it be?"

"Well," he said, grimacing, and whacking the side of the handlink, "Based on Verbena's report, which is based on the other

Maggie’s insight, there’s a 72.6 per cent chance that Maggie went missing... on purpose.”

Sam felt the blood draining from his cheeks.

“I knew she wasn’t doing well, but...”

“The good news is, the Maggie in the Waiting Room thinks your Maggie plans to start a new life somewhere. Ziggy gives it a 93.2 per cent chance that if she *did* run away, she’s still alive in our time.”

Sam rubbed his chin. This was... certainly a curve ball.

“And because I’m here still looking like Maggie,” Sam deduced, “that’s why the historical records are saying she doesn’t disappear for a couple more days.”

“You got it. The last time Maggie was seen alive, according to our records, is Saturday morning. That’s the morning after tomorrow.”

“And that also means Quinn and the others are due to leave some time shortly after that.” He ran his fingers through his hair with a groan. “I have to get back to the code transcription, so the timer’s ready for the slide.”

*Dammit.*

“Look on the bright side,” said Al, “you have some friends who can pick up the slack for you, right?”

Sam nodded. Colin was out of commission, he’d need rest. Quinn didn’t have to watch him for typos, though it would make things faster. Rembrandt would be available to help. Slowly, a plan started to form in his mind.

“Okay, I’ll have to talk to them.”

It was well after midnight when the four of them arrived back from the hospital. Colin had been released, once Sam had convinced the doctors he could provide adequate care at home. He'd have to wake him every few hours just to check his symptoms, but he'd already planned on staying up all night to do the code, so that wasn't a problem. He was going to be a wreck later, but it couldn't wait.

Sam started brewing coffee, while Colin was walked unsteadily to the couch by his two companions.

Sam could overhear some of their conversation as he scooped the ground coffee into the filter, and filled the tank of the machine.

"If he's here to make sure Maggie doesn't run away, then we need to find her fast, before she makes it out of town," Quinn said.

"That's if she hasn't split already," Rembrandt replied. "And what if he's not here for that at all, and it was to help with the timer?"

"Oh right, he'd end up right here with his niece just to let her disappear? Doubt it."

"Big guy upstairs works in mysterious ways, you know. All of this has helped us get our timer fixed, right? Even the Maggie part, since we're at her house, usin' her computer for it."

This seemed to silence Quinn.

It also made Sam wonder if Rembrandt was right. Maybe forcing Maggie to stay against her wishes was the wrong thing.

And what would stop her going as soon as he leaped away? He'd need to convince her to stay, but he could see she hated being here. What could he possibly say to her?

On the other hand, the 72.6 per cent figure Ziggy had given was not nearly high enough to give up on finding her.

He activated the coffee machine, and headed to the living room.

Colin was sitting up, apparently feeling a little better, though he had a dazed expression that suggested he might not be much for conversation at this time.

"I need one or both of you to go pay Billy a visit," Sam said, gaze shifting between Quinn and Rembrandt. "He's the only other lead we've got right now. I'd do it, but it would be a bit strange to be asking him about the whereabouts of... myself."

Rembrandt nodded. "Sure thing, I'll go."

Quinn placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'll go with you. Two against one is better odds."

Sam smiled at them. "Thanks, fellas."

He looked toward the front door. "I'll go get Higgins to give up his address. Hopefully there's a security override so you can take the car..."

He exited the house and made a beeline for the squad car.

He placed his hand on it, and got Higgins to let him in. As he slid into the seat, he nearly had a heart attack when he found Al in the passenger seat waiting for him.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Don't *do* that when I'm on edge about potential kidnappers."

"Sorry, yeesh," he said. "Look, Ziggy's looked into the Higgins program; I've got some shortcuts for you."

“Oh, good. Tell her I’m sorry for doubting her usefulness earlier.”

She’d definitely earned her keep by now, even if her predictions were on the fritz.

“Place your hand on the scanner and hold it there for ten seconds,” he instructed, reading from the handlink. Sam did so.

A chime rang out in the car.

“Okay, that means admin mode’s been activated. Tell it to add two new operators, and go get Sam Junior and One Hit Wonder over there.”

Sam raised an amused eyebrow at these new nicknames.

“Higgins, add two new operators.”

“New User mode. Please place hand on activation panel.”

“Quinn! Rembrandt!”

The two came out of the house, and he beckoned them over, as he rose out of the car seat.

Sam gestured to the seat. “One of you sit there and place your hand on the panel.”

They exchanged a glance, and Rembrandt took the initiative.

He put his palm on the panel, and Higgins chimed again.

“New handprint recorded. Name?”

Rembrandt gave a nervous look at Sam, who nodded expectantly.

“Uh, Rembrandt Brown.”

“Rembrandt Brown, social security number 987-65-4323.”

Higgins barked. “Confirm identity?”



“Uhhh yes?” he said, and Sam couldn’t tell whether or not that was a lie.

“Authorization recorded. Welcome, Rembrandt. Second user, please place hand on activation panel.”

Rembrandt jumped out of the car, and Quinn replaced him, putting his hand on the panel.

“New handprint recorded. Name?”

“Quinn Mallory...”

“Quinn Mallory, social security number 000-45-6844. Reported missing in 1995. Confirm identity?”

Quinn went white, and Sam quickly jostled him out of the car.

“Uh, cancel, cancel.”

“User canceled. Approve user: ‘Rembrandt Brown?’”

“Yes.”

“Handprint confirmation required.”

Sam placed his hand on the panel again. Finally, a new chime sounded.

“User confirmed.”

Sam sighed.

“Okay, well, Rembrandt, the car’s all yours,” he said with a grimace.

Quinn was shifting on his feet. “I hope that didn’t report anything to the authorities about my whereabouts.”

“Don’t worry kid,” Al said, as if Quinn could hear, “it was counted as a mistake and stricken from the record.”

“It’s fine,” explained Sam.

He stepped away from the car, allowing the two friends to get in.

“Good luck,” he told them, as Rembrandt commanded Higgins to open the passenger side. Quinn gave a resolute nod to Sam before climbing in.

He watched the car pull away, revealing Al standing where the passenger seat had been a moment ago. He was holding the stack of papers.

“Back to work,” he said grimly.

## 1.11 • UNEXPECTED VISITORS

“Higgins,” Rembrandt said hesitantly, “can I get the address of Billy Colbert please...”

He glanced at Quinn, who was looking back with pursed lips.

“Name not found in current county,” Higgins stated, emotionless. “Search elsewhere?”

“No, no. Uh... can I get the address of *William* Colbert?”

“William Jefferson Colbert resides at: Four. Hundred. Nine. West Sixth Street. Confirm GPS Navigation.”

“Uh, yes.”

And so, Higgins directed them to the house. Remy was a bit stressed with how slow Higgins was to tell him when to turn, but the streets were quiet enough for it not to be an issue, since it was the early hours of a Friday morning.

Finally, they pulled up, and climbed out of the squad car into the crisp night air.

“How do you think he’ll take us showing up at one in the morning?” Quinn said, scratching his head.

Remy shook his head. “Don’t know, but if he’s got Maggie we can’t wait til the sun’s up.”

Quinn gave him a pensive look. “Yeah. But, you don’t think he *does* have her, do you?”

Rembrandt folded his arms. “There’s barely a chance he knew we were stayin’ at the motel, you know? And it was awful

convenient that Colin didn't see who hit him."

"You think Maggie would be capable of hitting Colin in the head like that?"

Remy could tell he wasn't talking about her physical capability. But this Maggie didn't know Colin from a bar of soap, and the Maggie they knew had changed a lot since their first encounter when she'd held them at gunpoint.

"The Maggie we first met? Sure."

Quinn looked thoughtful. "Hmm. I guess you're right."

The pair headed for the door. It was a nicer house than Maggie's, and Remy figured it must have been the home Billy and Maggie were living in as a married couple.

*He got the better house, but he still won't leave her alone. Slimeball.*

He glanced around as Quinn pressed the doorbell button, followed by a couple of knocks.

Moments passed. Rembrandt was about to try knocking harder, when a noise behind the door stopped him.

The door swung open, and Billy looked at them through confused, groggy eyes. It seemed clear he'd just awoken from sleep.

"Who the hell are you?" he grumbled.

Remy exchanged a glance with Quinn.

"We're here on behalf of Maggie," Remy said, suddenly unsure of what they were even supposed to say right now.

"Oh god, I did something stupid when I was drunk, didn't I?" Billy said, palm on his forehead. He looked from one man to the

other. “It musta been bad, but bad enough for her to sick some goons on me in the middle of the night?”

“We’re not goons...” Quinn said, indignant.

“Look man, we need to ask you some questions,” Rembrandt said finally, and gestured towards the squad car in the hopes of making the two of them seem less random.

“You’re cops?” Billy said, eyeing their plain clothes.

“I’m Detective Mallory, and this is my colleague Detective Brown,” Quinn said, improvising, and making nervous eye contact with Rembrandt.

“We, uh, didn’t have time to put on suits,” Remy said, feeling his cheeks burn.

“You know the longer you wait to find a missing person, the lower the chances of finding them alive,” Quinn said.

“Whoa, whoa,” Billy said, holding up his hands. “Who’s missing?”

“Maggie’s missing,” Rembrandt said, trying his best to sound threatening. “And you were tryin’ to bust her door in just last night.”

Billy was sweating now. “Man, I don’t even remember doing that. I was wasted. I swear I haven’t seen her since.”

“What else don’t you remember, I wonder?” Quinn said, raising his eyebrows.

“Look, I swear. If something happened to Maggie, I’d wanna catch whoever did it too. I’ll even let you in my house to search without a warrant. I didn’t do squat. You’ll find nothing but empty whiskey bottles.”

Remy and Quinn exchanged a glance, and pushed past Billy to conduct this consensual search.

“I’m serious,” Billy said, “I wouldn’t do something like this, swear to God. I still love that bitch.”

“Yeah, sure sounds like you care a lot,” said Remy flatly, rolling his eyes, and turning on the ceiling lights of the living room as Quinn started inspecting.

\* \* \*

Sam didn’t know how long he’d been typing at this point, but he knew his hands were aching like they used to get when he’d been practising his piano for hours as a kid.

Al was looking completely bored, and half asleep. He was sitting on a chair he’d hauled into the Imaging Chamber, and he had the finished pages slung over his shoulder. It was hard to tell how far Sam was into the transcription; the pile on the floor was certainly smaller than it had been at the start, but it was still thick. He didn’t want to think about how much longer this would take. Quinn would need to help him check it for mistakes, which would mean going through every line over again. At least his photographic memory would make it easy for him to spot discrepancies, he figured. Then again, there were so many lines that were near identical, and he was getting quite fatigued.

He rubbed his eyes for a moment, before continuing his work.

Behind him, he heard feet shuffling. A quick glance told him Colin was up and about.

“Hi there,” he said, pausing his typing, and turning to meet Colin’s eye. “How are you feeling now?”

“Better,” he said with a tilt of his head that suggested he was still assessing. He fingered the bandage around his head. “This

thing is tight.”

Sam stood. “Want me to loosen it for you?”

Colin nodded, and Sam gestured for him to sit on one of the stools beside him. He did so, facing towards Al, who was yawning.

“What are you lookin’ at, kid?” Al said with a glare, as if Colin could see him.

Then, Sam jumped as Colin answered: “N-nothing...”

Al and Sam looked at each other, startled, then to Colin.

“You can see me?” Al stiffened, suddenly looking quite vulnerable. The paper rustled as he shifted in his seat.

Sam stood, moving to Colin’s side, and watched Colin squinting at Al.

“A little...” Colin said, and rubbed his eyes. “You’re like a... a ghost. Are you Al?”

“Yeah, that’s him,” Sam said, marvelling.

Colin reached out to Al, and passed his hand through him. “So I’m not seeing things, you’re really there?”

“He is,” Sam confirmed, and stroked his chin. “Usually he can only be seen by animals, very young children, and people with some mental disorders that have rewired their brains.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve seen an apparition like this,” Colin said thoughtfully, and looked up at Sam. “Does that mean *I* have a mental disorder?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist. But you *do* have a concussion...”

Al urgently tapped on his handlink. After a couple of chirps from Ziggy, he looked up at Sam.

“Ziggy says the head trauma may have caused his neurons to temporarily rearrange. Either that or, it knocked something loose that was already there.”

Sam remembered what he was doing, and moved to loosen the bandage.

As he did, Colin grunted.

“Oh, did I hurt you?”

“No... it’s just, he’s gone. When you loosened it... he went away.”

Sam met Al’s eye with surprise. He tightened the bandage again.

“Ouch. Yeah, I see him again. Tighten it more.”

Sam pulled the bandage as tight as he could, and Colin winced.

“Oh, it’s like the more painful it is, the better I can see him,” he said. “Uh... can you just put it back to how it was before?”

Sam obliged. “Are you sure you don’t want it loosened more? If it hurts, I—”

“No, I still want to see him. It didn’t hurt so much.”

Sam nodded. “Well, I guess you two can have a chat while I work.”

Al thought for a moment. “Hey, how ’bout I get Maggie in here? I promised her I’d let her see you anyway.”

Colin grinned. “You can do that?”

“You bet your skinny butt I can,” he said, and tapped on the handlink.

He talked into it: “Gooshie, would you escort our guest in here for me?”



\* \* \*

Maggie was fast asleep when a short man with rancid breath tapped on her shoulder. Alarmed, she scrambled into a defensive position.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the man said with an apprehensive stutter. “Admiral Calavicci asked me to come get you... so you can see your friend.”

Maggie lowered her guard at this.

“Right now?”

The man nodded, his eyes apologetic. “He says you’ll see when you get there. I don’t know anything about it, but please... come.”

Maggie nodded. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Uh, call me Gooshie. I’m just the programmer.”

He pressed a button on a wrist device, and the door opened.

“Programmer? Don’t tell me you made Ziggy.”

“I had a part in it, yes,” he said, looking proud of himself. This made Maggie rethink the snarky comment she had lined up.

“Well, she sure is... something,” was all she could bring herself to say.

“Yes, she sure is,” Gooshie said wistfully, as he escorted her towards the Imaging Chamber.

As she walked through the corridors, she passed a few strangers who were all staring at her. Some were watching her to see if she made a break for it, but others were looking at her with interest.

It struck her that she had no clue what time of day it was.

“What time is it?”

“Bout eight at night,” Gooshie said.

“Jeez, doesn’t anyone here have lives outside this place?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “But the time of day where Sam is could be any time, so a lot of us just kind of spend most of our time here, in case we’re needed.”

Maggie was reminded of Quinn, who’d admitted fairly recently to feeling restless during vacation time. Maggie just nodded in response to Gooshie’s explanation; she wasn’t in a position to judge, since her boredom in the Waiting Room was making her absolutely stir-crazy.

The Imaging Chamber door slid open with a mechanical whoosh, and Maggie stepped inside. Al was sitting in the white abyss, on a chair, seemingly buried in computer paper. It made her giggle to see the strange sight, and he turned around with a raised eyebrow. She could see he was quite tired.

“Good, you’re here,” he said, and held out his hand. She excitedly grabbed it, and watched the scene flicker into view. The same kitchen she’d visited before, with Sam tapping at a keyboard, and Colin, a bandage on his head... making eye contact with her.

“Maggie!” He said, with a big smile. Maggie glanced down at Al.

“I thought you said they couldn’t see me?”

“Seems I can after this knock to the cranium,” Colin said, pointing at the back of his head. His gaze shifted back and forth between her and Al, and he made a pointing motion. “I can see you a lot more clearly than him...”

“Really?” Sam said, though he was still engaged in his typing. Maggie wondered how he could have a split attention like that.

Al tapped at his handheld device, and Maggie watched as it flickered with colourful lights and made a whirring sound.

Al spoke slowly as he parsed the words: “Ziggy says the... matching quantum energy attached to you two means that Maggie will naturally be more... too...”

He knocked on the top of the gadget. “*Tuned* in to your brain waves. I don’t get it, but that’s why she’s the supercomputer and I’m the handsome mug with a cigar.”

“It’s great to see you, Colin,” Maggie said. “Just wish I could give you a hug.”

“Probably wouldn’t be the best for my headache,” Colin said, giving her a pained smile, “but the feeling’s mutual.”

Al’s device gave a chirp, and he sighed. “Gonna have to let go, Ziggy says the power drain’s too high.”

Maggie groaned. “This is *such* a tease!”

Al let her hand drop, and the world faded from view. She crossed her arms.

She noticed Al was listening intently to something, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“What?! That’s impossible!” he said, incredulous.

“What is it?” asked Maggie. Al looked up at her, eyes wide.

“He says he still sees you.”

## 1.12 • TIMER FOR BED

By the time Quinn and Rembrandt returned to Maggie's house, everyone was completely exhausted. Sunrise was upon them, and the two would-be detectives had turned up nothing.

Sam was still typing furiously through the cramping in his tendons. He was so close. Just a handful of pages. He had to wake up Al every few minutes to get him to hitch up the next batch of pages. Each time, Sam would apologise while Al groaned and grumbled.

The only one who'd had a good sleep was Colin. Despite being able to see Maggie even without her touching Al, he'd eventually had to watch her leave the Imaging Chamber, at which point he turned in for the night. Maggie hadn't been able to see him back, so it was a disjointed conversation.

Sam was intrigued by this turn of events, but he didn't have much of an opportunity to puzzle it out, given the task at hand.

There just wasn't enough time. Soon enough he'd need to sleep, and that would leave him with well under a day to sort all of this out. If Maggie really did run away, and it was certainly looking that way, who was to even say where she was now? She could have been in Mexico by now.

Sam felt his fingers slowing down, and he was catching some mistakes due to his fatigue. He hoped he was noticing all of them.

He stood, stretching. He cracked his knuckles and gave his body a shake.

*Come on, just a little longer.*

He rubbed his eyes, feeling a yawn overtake him. He slapped himself in the cheek, in a pitiful attempt to raise his adrenaline, then sat back down.

Quinn came into the kitchen and made a beeline for the coffee maker, which was still warming a pot Sam had brewed earlier.

“What are we up to?” Quinn asked, stifling a yawn of his own.

“Really close, but it’ll still need to be checked over for typos.” His voice was hoarse and he didn’t have the energy to make it sound very friendly.

Quinn sidled up to him, carrying his freshly poured mug.

“Any other surprises I should know about in there?” He asked, squinting at the screen.

Sam thought for a moment. “Well, the densitometry algorithms have been improved; no water, no toxic atmospheres, no crash landings into brick walls inside jail cells like this time around. And I’m getting down to the most recent data.”

He pointed at some lines. “These are coordinates for recent wormhole locations. Ziggy’s provided a more sophisticated database for them.”

He pointed at one that had caught his eye. “This one with the extra formula after it, what is that?”

“That’s an equation to avoid the Slide Cage my father set up; it’s kind of a trap set up to protect their world. I’d thought these coordinates were to my parents’ home world, but it turned out not to be.”

Quinn pointed to a number in the code. “I was told to change this to a nine, instead of the original seven. I think if I change it back, I should be able to get to the right world.”

“Well, let’s do it,” Sam said, and changed the figure, before scrolling back to his most recent line, and glancing at the page hanging from Al’s sleeping shoulder. “Looks like we’re getting to the timestamp for the next slide window...”

Sam looked at it. “Okay, so number of seconds from the base 0 time recorded about forty-five pages up...”

His head flooded with calculations. “Yeah, that’s gonna be Saturday at 10:14am. Right in line with Al’s last recorded sighting of Maggie... or me, as it were.”

Quinn looked pensive. “So it’s got the window time, but the display was flashing zero?”

“Whether Ziggy calculated the window time, or the timer already had that figure, I’m not sure...” Sam said, mind racing. “Either way, it doesn’t explain why it malfunctioned in the first place.”

He looked up at Quinn. “In my line of work, things tend to happen for reasons outside my control. Maybe your timer went funny because of my presence, or maybe...”

“Whatever’s been giving you these cosmic assignments did it? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” Quinn was sceptical. “Are you saying you *did* show up here to help us with something?”

Sam gave a non-committal shrug. “You said it, not me.” He changed the subject. “Anyway, once we check this over and load it back onto the timer, we’ll see what happens. My prediction is, it should be working more efficiently than ever, with improved safety functions.”

He began typing again, and a moment later felt Quinn’s hand on his shoulder.

“I really appreciate this,” he said warmly. “We never have slides where we get this kind of help. There are always ulterior motives.”

“My only ulterior motive is wanting to get out of Maggie before you all gotta leave.”

“Well in that case, I *do* hope you were here to help us.”

Sam gave a sad smile back. “Honestly, I think maybe I was. But that doesn’t mean I’m not also here for *my* Maggie. If I don’t leap out when we’re done here, that’ll be the obvious loose end.”

He turned to Al, and saw that there was just two pages left on the floor.

“Al!” he said, waking up the sleeping Observer. “Al, we’re at the end! Pull up the last pages and we’ll be done in ten minutes.”

Al gave a relieved moan. “Sam, that is music to my ears,” he said, and revealed the pages.

\* \* \*

It was midday when Quinn and Sam finally finished reviewing the code, and were satisfied it was error-free.

Quinn refused to go to bed until the timer was ready to go, however, and Sam was just as determined, so the two continued even as they felt dead on their feet.

As the code slowly loaded onto the timer, the two had a moment to relax.

“Is Al still here?” Quinn enquired.

Sam laughed. “Nope. He got out of here the moment I was finished needing the hard copy. I’m sure he’s now sleeping soundly in his bed at home.”

“It’s fascinating the way your leaps run on a parallel timeline to your future time.”

Sam chuckled. The ever-curious kid couldn’t stop trying to puzzle out the intricacies of his leaps.

“It’s simple quantum space-time entanglement. It works based on the aging of my body and my experience of time, which occurs foremost in my present, but takes place on a relative time scale when I’ve leaped into the past.”

He yawned. “I’d show you the math, but I don’t think I’m up for it right now.”

The computer gave a chime to indicate the transfer was complete.

Quinn jumped up, and started picking up pieces of the timer to re-assemble. Sam moved to the computer and exited out of the application. He stretched and rubbed his pained fingers and wrists, then noticed Colin entering the kitchen, seeming to be quite chipper.

“Good—” he began, then checked the wall clock, “—afternoon. How are we doing?”

“Almost there, bro,” Quinn said, his eyes tired, but lit up all the same. “And what about you? Are you doing okay?”

Colin rubbed the back of his head. “It doesn’t hurt so much now.”

Sam wondered if that meant his sixth sense would be fading. Well, that was perhaps for the best.

Quinn delicately put the pieces together, pausing to rub his eyes a few times.

It wasn’t often that Sam was able to use multiple doctorates during his leaps, but it seemed he got lucky this time.



*Well, maybe not luck.*

It seemed as though this was exactly what God or Fate or Time or whoever had put him here for, knowing that Quinn would need him to assist. It couldn't be a coincidence that one of the "sliders" in this tight-knit group was an alternate version of his own niece, nor that one of them was a physics genius.

But still, there was his niece, off somewhere trying to find a new start for herself, and there were still no leads on where she might be.

Sam found himself wobbling on his feet, and he clutched the kitchen bench to keep steady.

He felt like his mind was chasing its own tail, running over the same ground again and again and not getting anywhere. It must have been the exhaustion.

"Moment of truth," said Quinn, as he finished screwing on the back of the timer. He pressed a button on the side, and the timer sprang to life.

On the display, a merciful *00:21:49:09* showed, and it was counting down as it should have been.

"You did it!" Colin said, triumphant, and patted both men on the backs.

"I'm not so sure we did anything that should have changed the display, but I'm glad it's working now," Quinn said, his brow furrowed, as he inspected the timer.

"It's one of life's mysteries," Sam said, wishing he had a better explanation. The thing he hated most about dealing with an unknowable force was the 'unknowable' part.

The three headed into the living room to tell Rembrandt the good news. The singer was rolling over on the couch, and his

sleepy eyes caught sight of Quinn holding the timer.

“Holy smokes, it’s working?”

“This side of twenty-two hours, we slide,” said Quinn, sounding relieved.

“And... what about Maggie? She coming with?” His eyes were set on Sam, who looked back with uncertainty.

“I’m sorry, I don’t control the leaps. All I can do is work to do what I think is my purpose, then I go. Which means if I don’t leap soon, then I’m still here for a reason.”

He yawned.

“But what I have to do now is go to bed. Good night.”

Quinn nodded in agreement, then turned to his friends.

“Maybe you guys could go ask around town, see if anyone’s seen or spoken to Maggie since we last saw her.”

Colin and Rembrandt nodded.

Quinn went into the guest room to sleep, while Sam went to Maggie’s bedroom. And he was asleep before he hit the pillow.

## 1.13 • SHE'S BACK

Sam awakened to the feeling of suffocation. His eyes shot open to a room bathed in a brilliant orange; the late afternoon sun was pouring in the window. But that was the least of his concerns right now. Something was covering his mouth.

His eyes scanned the room, and stopped as he saw Maggie, clad in her Sheriff's uniform. It wasn't his reflection... it was her. She'd come back!

He wanted to say something, but something was in his mouth, between his teeth. Some kind of a cloth. But why?

He moved to lift his hands to his mouth, only to find them secured in handcuffs behind his back.

*Oh boy.*

"Hey, uncle," whispered Maggie. She looked determined, but her voice was shaky and full of remorse. "I'm sorry about this, I really am. But I need you to come with me."

He sat up, and shook his head.

"Mm-mm," he said, and made a move to get up. But that plan was scrapped as soon as he saw Maggie holding her gun on him.

"You don't have a choice."

She nodded towards the window, which was fully open.

"Out there, quietly."

Sam pleaded with his eyes.

"You want me to do to you what I did with Colin?"

Sam felt his eyes widen, and he shook his head.

“Then go.”

He stood, and moved to the window. With his hands behind his back, all he could do was slither out of there like some kind of slug. He made a banging noise as his legs hit the upper window frame.

“I said *quietly*,” she hissed at him. He couldn’t answer, so he just looked back at her, hoping his apology would be clear in his expression.

She followed him out of the window much more gracefully, and pulled him up by the cuff chain. He looked at her through narrow, betrayed, eyes.

“Come with me, shut up, and stick to the shadows,” she murmured into his ear.

“Mm-hmm,” he said, not knowing what else to do. If anyone saw them walking together, he was quite sure they’d be a little alarmed about Maggie holding her doppelgänger hostage. He didn’t know how anyone would explain that one.

He just wished he wasn’t gagged, so he could talk to her. He needed to know what was going through her head. What did she want with him?

If only he wasn’t still tired, he might be able to puzzle this out.

As the sun went down, Sam’s hopes of making it out of this one faded with the daylight.

\* \* \*

Quinn stretched as he looked at the clock at his bedside. It was 10 at night. He'd slept a good long time, then. He felt much better, though waking up in the dark was off-putting for his body clock.

Besides feeling a little off-kilter from the disorganised sleep – a feeling that brought him back to his college days – he otherwise felt in good spirits, knowing what he'd accomplished yesterday. There was just this final matter of Sam.

He hobbled to the door of the guest room, and as he approached it, he heard spirited conversation.

He wandered into the living room, seeing Colin and Rembrandt talking with Sam.

“Hey, Q-ball!” Remy said, as he caught his eye, “Maggie’s back!”

“She is?” Quinn looked around the room for the second Maggie, and lowered one eyebrow in confusion when it was clear that only one was here.

“Sam leaped out,” said Colin, a big grin plastered over his face.

“R-really?!” Quinn wasn’t sure how to process this. Their Maggie had really returned? But that meant Sam was gone for good. Nonetheless, this was great!

He walked over to the couch, where Maggie sat.

“It’s really you?”

She stood up and gave him a hug. “Yeah, it really is.”

Quinn didn’t know why he still felt uneasy about this, but he broke away from the embrace and went into the kitchen to grab his new toy.

He picked up the spacetime distortion detector and flipped the switch, before returning to the living room and moving the wand over Maggie.

No clicking sound.

The unease that was snaked around his stomach slowly released. Maggie... really *was* back? He felt his mouth drifting open. A relieved laugh escaped him.

“Thank god,” he said, and resumed the hug he’d cut short. “What was the future like?”

“I don’t really remember anything,” she said, her eyes squinting as she tried to think.

“Oh right, Sam said something about memories being like swiss cheese...”

“Yeah,” said Maggie, “That’s exactly right. I remember something vague about my uncle, and time travel, but that’s it.”

“How long is that meant to last?” Colin asked, looking at Quinn.

“I... I didn’t think to ask,” Quinn said, wishing he’d pressed for more information. He wondered what else Maggie had forgotten.

“I’m sure it’ll come back with time,” Maggie said, brushing off the concerns. “Anyway, how long ’til we get out of here?”

“We’ve got about twelve hours now,” replied Quinn, finding himself finally able to start relaxing.

Maggie sighed, and sat back down on the couch. “Alright. I guess that’s enough time for a good sleep.”

“I don’t get it, though,” Quinn mused, “Is the other Maggie just... gone now? Where’d she go? And why?”

Maggie shrugged, nonchalant. “She probably hated this dump and desperately wanted to get out of this boring old town. It’s what *I’d* do.”

She brought a knee up to her chin. “She’s a big girl; it’s her choice, right?”

“If she wanted to disappear that bad, she coulda just asked.”  
Rembrandt said thoughtfully. “We could have taken her with us.”

Maggie looked at him wide-eyed for a moment, before adjusting her gaze into a cynical smirk. “You think you can deal with two of me?”

At this, Rembrandt laughed. “Maybe not.”

Quinn pressed his lips together, thinking about two of the same person sharing a vortex.

“Have we ever had doubles together in the vortex before? I wonder if it’s safe.”

He thought a moment. He could see potential issues arising if the vortex was destabilised or experienced an energy surge. Not predictable, given what data he had. If only Sam was still here to ask.

\* \* \*

Sam could feel a spider crawling on his foot. It tickled, but his tense anxiety was eclipsing his urge to laugh from the sensation.

He jerked his leg, and the spider fell from him.

He was in pitch darkness, so he had no idea what other creepy crawlies might be here in this tool shed.

He could feel a stinging sensation on his shin; he’d grazed it at some point while being manhandled into the shed. He hoped that it wasn’t bleeding much, or that it wasn’t dirty, but there was no way to tell at the current light levels.

He didn’t know where Maggie had taken him - it was a part of town he hadn’t been to. It was in the backyard of a house he

didn't know. He did see the number on the house, though: 409.

He couldn't call for help, as he was still gagged. The handcuffs were secured around a brace on the wall. His mouth was dry and he was very thirsty.

Maggie's plan had become clear to him as he had been sitting here in the dark. She was going to take the other Maggie's place, and she was going to leave this life behind forever. It was so obvious, now that he really thought about it. What better way to drop off the face of the Earth?

But what of Sam? There was nothing in the historical record about him being found; at least, not last he'd heard from Ziggy.

As if on cue, he heard the Imaging Chamber door's familiar noise.

"Sam, Ziggy's freakin' out, and... Sam? Where are you, I can't see a thing!"

Sam banged a hand against the tin wall.

"Mm-mmm!" he grunted.

"Sam? Oh jeez, what happened?!"

Sam could just make out Al's silhouette in the extremely low ambient light, with the flashing handlink being the only thing standing out in the darkness. Unfortunately, being a hologram, it was not casting any light into Sam's prison.

"Mmm *mmm* mm..." Sam moaned, in an irritated way. He couldn't speak words, but he could at least put across his feelings in some small way.

"Okay, okay, no need for such filthy language, Sam," Al joked, seemingly in an attempt to relax him. Sam rolled his eyes.

"Look, Ziggy says that guy Billy is now found to have Maggie's blood in his back shed, which is enough to get him arrested and



put on trial for her disappearance. I can't tell you the results of that trial, 'cause it's still ongoing in our time."

Al stepped through the wall for a moment, and then returned.

"This is the shed, Sam!"

"Nn mm *Mmm-mmm*," Sam said furiously, which was meant to be: *'it was Maggie.'*

"I dunno what you're tryin' to tell me. We gotta get that gag out of your mouth."

"Mm-hm!"

"And somehow we gotta alert someone to where you are."

"Mm-*hmm!*" Sam nodded.

*Go back to the house, Al. Try and get Colin's attention.*

That's what he wanted to say, if he'd been able.

"Gnn-*nnn!*" That was the closest to *'Colin'* he was going to get with this thing in his mouth.

"Sit tight, Sam. I'm gonna go look at what's happening at Maggie's place. Ziggy! Centre me at the house!"

He pushed a button on the handlink, and blinked away, leaving Sam back in stifling darkness.

He started pounding on the walls of the shed, hoping desperately that someone would hear.

"*Mmm!*" he cried at the top of his lungs. "Mm-mm-mm *mm!*"

*Come on, someone hear me. Please.*

But nobody came.

## 1.14 • HEADACHE OF HOPE

“Get this stupid infomercial off,” Maggie barked at Colin, who was nursing the TV remote.

Colin glanced at her, scratching under his head bandage. “But look at the way those knives are gliding through the tomatoes!”

It wasn’t that he needed a set of chef’s knives, but he was impressed with their engineering all the same. He could watch this fellow slice vegetables all night long.

Maggie put her face in her hands. “*Surely* there’s something better on.”

“At one in the morning?” Quinn challenged, eyebrows raised.

All four of them were up late due to their messed up sleep the day before. Colin was the most rested, of course, and he felt great. Even his head wasn’t pounding any longer.

Colin smoothly threw the remote to Maggie. “Why don’t *you* find something, then.”

She picked it up with a crinkle of her nose, and started flipping through the channels.

After a minute, she settled on an old *Star Trek* original series rerun.

“At least Captain Kirk isn’t trying to sell us anything,” she said, setting down the remote.

“Only the hope of a better tomorrow,” Rembrandt said wistfully, beside her.

Colin leaned back against the head of the couch, and bumped a little harder against the headrest than he'd intended.

*Ow, I shouldn't have done that.*

As the throbbing waves moved over his head, with each wave came a split second of... something. A voice?

He squinted, and looked around. Nothing.

Trying not to raise attention to himself, he brought his hand behind his head and applied a little pressure to his wound, and listened.

“Hey!”

Okay, that was definitely a voice. A gruff, male voice, not unlike...

He pressed harder, and a surge of pain flooded the back of his head. Colin winced, but kept up the pressure.

“Can you hear me? Sam's in trouble!”

He turned around, and as the pain subsided he caught the vague impression of Al, wearing a bright red shirt and fedora, and then it faded from view. Colin felt his heart catch in his chest. He'd thought Al was long gone.

Alarmed, he rose from his seat. The others looked up at him curiously.

“Uhh, I'm just gonna go to the bathroom,” he lied, and hurried down the hall.

Closing the bathroom door, he breathed for a moment.

*Okay.*

Last time he had seen Al, it had not been a hallucination, and he had a way to verify that fact. But now there was no Sam to tell him he wasn't just seeing and hearing things.

Colin moved to the mirror, and undid the bandage, only to wrap it back around his head as tightly as he could.

It was highly unpleasant, but, as if summoned, Al's ghostly shape passed through the wall and into the bathroom. Colin looked at him, anxious.

"What are you still doing here?" He spoke low and seriously.

"The Maggie you have in there isn't the one you think." Al's voice was soft and distorted, but he could make out the words. "Sam's still here, and he's in trouble!"

Colin felt his face drain of colour. "What? So the Maggie in there is..."

"*She's* the one who clocked you on the dome!" Al mimed swinging a baseball bat, and Colin blinked as he imagined the invisible weapon striking his head.

Colin drew a sharp breath. "Where is Sam now?"

Al moved to respond, but suddenly, Colin couldn't hear his voice.

"Wait..." he said, and pushed into his wound with his fingers. It hurt, but Al's audibility did not return. And, in fact, Al's figure faded out to nothing.

"Al... ugh," Colin said, "I can't see or hear you any longer. If you answered me, it didn't get through."

Colin paced, frustrated that his brain would choose right this moment to return to health.

If only there was a way to verify Al was really here. He stopped.

*Of course...*

"Al, if you're still here, don't move. I'm going to try something."

He left the bathroom, and wandered back into the living room as casually as he could muster.

Walking behind the couch, where Maggie and Rembrandt sat together, he passed to an armchair where Quinn was sitting.

Hoping Maggie wasn't sensing his nervous energy, he tapped his brother on the shoulder, and beckoned him toward the kitchen, eyes wide and jaw set.

Quinn met his eye, and immediately picked up on Colin's silent signals. He got up quietly and followed his brother into the kitchen.

As he entered, Colin spun around with a finger to his lips.

"What is it?" Quinn whispered.

"Grab that detector you built and meet me in the bathroom. But *do not* let Maggie see what you're doing. Don't trust her."

Quinn, trusting his brother, was entirely willing to follow this plan, and nodded, grabbing the machine from the table.

"Give it a sec before you go after me, so it's not as suspicious."

He turned and left the kitchen, and headed toward the bathroom once more, sneaking behind Maggie and hoping she wasn't going to spot him. She didn't, thankfully, and he awaited his brother in the bathroom once more.

"Al," he whispered, "stay with me... I'm getting Quinn on board to help."

Then, he heard Maggie out in the living room.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" She asked what Colin assumed to be Quinn.

"Oh, you know. Think I'll go round the house and see if there's any residual distortion from the leap."

Maggie didn't say anything more, so Colin hoped she was satisfied with that response.

And then Quinn joined him in the bathroom.

"What's this about, man?" He whispered.

"Did Sam tell you what happened to me earlier?"

Quinn looked at him blankly. A wave of surprise spread over Colin. He would have thought that was worth mentioning. Then again, Sam and Quinn had had other things on their mind.

"Okay, well, never mind that, just turn that thing on, okay?"

Quinn looked at him, puzzled, and then did as he asked, switching on the spacetime distortion detector.

Immediately it started clicking slowly, and Colin grabbed the wand and waved it where he'd last seen Al. Click-click-click-click. He brought it away, and the noise subsided. He couldn't afford Maggie hearing.

"Al is there," Colin explained.

Quinn was looking at him silently, stunned. His eyebrows were so high he thought they'd disappear under his hair.

"Okay, you've got my attention, bro. What's goin' on?"

"I think Maggie isn't... our Maggie. It's the double. And she's done something with Sam."

Quinn paced the small room. "For Sam's hologram, which is linked to his brain waves, to still be present here, then he must still be here. And the Maggie out there isn't reacting to the detector, because..."

He locked eyes with Colin. "Shoot. You're right."

"My concussion somehow caused me to be able to see and hear Al, but as I'm recovering, that ability has faded. I got enough from

him to know that Sam's in trouble somewhere, but I don't know where."

He made two fists in frustration.

"Hit me again. Same spot."

Quinn looked at Colin with incredulity. "I'm not doing that."

"It's the only way."

He turned around and ripped off the bandage. "Do it."

He closed his eyes and braced for impact. But all he felt was Quinn's hand on his shoulder.

"*Bro*. I'm *not* putting you back in hospital. There must be some other way, Colin. We just need to think."

Colin turned back around, sighing.

"Okay, okay. I'd better get out of here before Maggie starts asking questions."

\* \* \*

Maggie stood in the shower, eyes shut, letting the spray pound down on her. The water running over her was so hot that it almost scalded her. She'd turned up the heat like this on purpose... at least being pelted by skin-meltingly hot water was some stimulation, unlike the mind-numbing nothing she experienced most of the time in this place. She was just *so bored*. She was tired of all this blue. She felt like that guy from that song.

"Maggie, pardon the interruption, but I need your attention at your earliest convenience." The booming woman's voice came at her from all sides.

Maggie's eyes popped open at Ziggy's comment, and she suddenly felt very naked.

She slid the tempered glass door aside and grabbed a towel with one hand, while turning off the shower with the other. Did computers care about naked people? Did Ziggy see her, or Sam's, naked body?

Why was this bothering her so much? Surely Ziggy was unfazed by some human nudity. She was a machine, not a person. A snarky, petty machine, but a machine all the same.

"H-hey there Ziggy," she said to the computer in the walls, "is it 'annoy the prisoner' time already?"

Wrapping the towel around her body, she stepped out of the shower recess.

"I've been observing something of a predicament on Doctor Beckett's leap. I calculate with 79.91 per cent certainty that, with your help, the problem will be rectified."

Maggie started rubbing her hair with another towel. "What's in it for me?"

"With your help, there's a 62.3 per cent probability that Sam will leap out and you'll be returned to your friends before their timer reaches zero. This probability ticks down by 0.13 per cent for each second you wait to accept my request. It's now 61.91 per cent."

Maggie was stunned into immobility for just a moment, and then grabbed her jumpsuit, quickly putting it on.

"What do you need from me?"



## 1.15 • HOLLOW GRAM

As the sun rose and the morning people started stirring, Quinn and Colin were sitting, haggard, in the living room. They hadn't slept, instead opting to try and puzzle out where Sam could be. And time was running short.

Maggie was asleep in her bedroom, and Rembrandt, oblivious to all the problems, was sleeping soundly in the guest room. The brothers had deliberately claimed the couch and floor this time, so they could stick together and try and figure it out.

But, nope. Colin was very close to being ready to get beaten in the head again. Who knew what kind of danger Sam was in; and by extension, Maggie?

He yawned and stood from the couch, beginning to pace.

Quinn was holding the timer. It had three hours and twenty minutes remaining.

"We need to *do* something," Colin muttered.

Quinn looked at him with sad eyes. "This might be a small town, but it's not so small that we can find someone who's deliberately been hidden."

"Come on, let's stop beating around the bush. Just hit me."

"I don't think you realise how serious head injuries are, man."

Colin set his jaw. This was his choice.

"I'm willing to take the risk. *Please*. If you don't, I'll do it myself."

“Colin...”

He moved to the wall, facing away from it, and leaned over, gearing up to smack the back of his head as he straightened.

“Stop, Colin.”

He braced himself, eyes on the floor under him. A deep breath in.

Then he saw a pair of ghostly feet come into view.

*Huh?*

He looked up.

“M-Maggie?!”

There she was, a semi-transparent hologram, one hand holding the vaguest outline of Al, as if *she* was giving *him* the ability to be seen rather than the previous time he’d seen them together.

Behind them, Quinn rose from the couch.

“What is it?”

Colin reached out his hand, and Maggie reached hers out in return, face full of relief. The two hands passed through each other.

She was talking. He couldn’t hear a thing.

“Maggie, I can see you but... whatever you’re saying, I can’t hear it.”

Maggie seemed to moan in frustration, before putting her palm to her forehead.

“You see Maggie there?” Quinn said. Colin nodded.

Quinn grabbed his detector, and flipped it on. As he drew the wand near where Maggie and Al stood, it started clicking like mad.

Maggie was looking towards Al's shadowy shape, as if listening, then she nodded. She pointed towards the front door, and gestured for them to go.

Colin nodded. "I think she wants to lead us to Sam."

This statement was confirmed by Maggie nodding vigorously.

Quinn strapped the detector to his body, and pocketed the timer.

"Can't let the Sheriff get her hands on this. Okay, let's go."

As they left the house, the hologram blinked away from the living room, and into the road. She pointed to the left, and the brothers followed her directions.

\* \* \*

Sam was in pain. He wasn't in a comfortable position at all. The way he was cuffed to the wall made it impossible for him to maintain any kind of position without something starting to lose circulation. At present, it was his left arm. He shook it, trying to get the blood moving.

He'd been shaking creatures off him all night – he was pretty sure there was a scorpion or two in this shed – though, now that the sun seemed to have risen, they were starting to leave him alone. Now he just had to worry about the shed turning into an oven under the hot desert sun, and roasting him like a side of beef.

He hadn't heard from Al in a while. Last he'd seen of him, he'd said that he and Ziggy had a plan to get Colin's attention. But he hadn't been back since. He felt a little abandoned, but there was

no way Al was just going to let him languish here alone. There must have been a good reason he hadn't shown yet.

Then, he heard it: the faintest sound of talking, muffled, somewhere outside.

He went back to pounding on the wall of the shed, doing his best to mimic morse code.

*Knock-knock-knock. Thump, thump, thump. Knock-knock-knock.*

The voices came closer, and Sam began to make out the words.

"I swear! She isn't here! I don't *know* what that noise was, okay!"

*That was definitely Billy. Talking to who?*

"Relax, would you?"

*Quinn.*

He slammed his fists on the shed.

"He's definitely in there!"

*Colin.*

"I mean... *she*."

Beside him, Al suddenly appeared, smiling widely. "It was touch-and-go, but we did it, Sam."

The shed door swung open, bathing Sam in bright morning light. He squinted, and waved awkwardly at the three figures that his eyes hadn't yet adjusted to seeing through the blinding glare.

"Maggie?!" Billy was beside himself. "I swear, I don't know how she got here. I had nothing to do with it, you gotta believe me!"

"Let's take out the gag and let her confirm that for us," Quinn said, bending down to help Sam. As he wrestled with the gag, he

whispered in his ear: “Looks like that concussion saved your life, huh?”

Sam let out a deep breath, as the cloth finally was pulled from between his teeth.

“Oh boy.”

Colin was working on the handcuffs, trying to pick the lock with something he’d pulled out of a Swiss army knife.

“Are you alright?” Quinn asked him.

Sam nodded. “A little dehydrated, but I’ll be okay.”

He really did need water. His voice was hoarse and his mouth felt like all the moisture had vacated, probably absorbed by the gag.

“Maggie, tell them I didn’t do this...”

“Calm down, Billy. We know it wasn’t you,” Colin piped up.

“Y-you do?”

“Yes,” Quinn confirmed, seeming to be putting on an act for Billy. “We have... a suspect that we’re pursuing. Someone who apparently tried to frame you.”

Billy seemed to relax now.

Sam looked him in the eye. “Don’t get me wrong, Billy. You need to keep your nose clean. But you’re not going down for this.”

As the handcuffs finally slid off, he rubbed his raw wrists, and stood, coming eye to eye with Billy.

“Now, if you want to be helpful... go get me a glass of water. Or maybe several.”

He nodded, and ran up the dusty yard, to his house.

Having gotten rid of him, Sam turned to the brothers, and Al.

“Thanks, guys. I was about to be baked.”

He glanced up towards the sky, where the sun was starting to really beat down.

“It was a close one,” Colin said, “Although I could see Maggie, eventually she faded to nothing, and we had to use Quinn’s detector to bring us the rest of the way.”

“The kid’s damned resourceful,” Al added, and then turned to an unseen person. “Alright, you need to go back to the Waiting Room. Sam could leap any time and you need to be in there when he does.”

He kept his eyes on the invisible Maggie for a moment.

“Yeah, I’ll tell him. See you round, kiddo.”

Sam heard the Imaging Chamber door open and close.

Al trained his eyes on Sam. “She says she’s glad she could help you, and she’s sorry for bickering with Ziggy.”

Sam chuckled at this. “Who hasn’t?”

“We need to get back to Remy,” Quinn said, meeting Sam’s eye. “He’s alone with the other Maggie right now. And only we have a half hour on the timer...”

Sam felt his teeth clench. They’d better go now.

Billy had emerged with a large bottle filled with water, and Sam grabbed it as he hobbled as best he could to the street.

“We had to come here on foot because of how we were tracking you,” Quinn said, “but we should be able to get a taxi from here.”

Sam pulled the bottle from his lips. “Billy, go call us a cab, would you?”

Billy, still flustered, nodded and headed back into the house.

Colin and Quinn supported Sam as they reached the kerb in front of the house.

“You’re definitely heavier than Maggie,” Quinn said, but it didn’t have the curious wonder of the previous times he’d made this kind of observation. Sam suspected he was a little too worn out at this point.

Just as they sat down on the kerb to wait for the taxi, a vehicle pulled up in front of them, and Sam’s heart skipped a beat.

Maggie flung the door of her squad car open, and pointed her gun towards them. She was sweaty and her face was desperate.

“Higgins, open back door, driver’s side.”

The door swung open with a chime. Sam could make out, in the front passenger’s seat, the figure of Rembrandt, who appeared to be handcuffed into his seat. He looked at Quinn and Colin with wild eyes.

“Get the hell in,” Maggie commanded. “I won’t ask twice.”

## 1.16 • THIS IS GOODBYE

“What are you going to do now?” Rembrandt asked his captor.

Maggie’s face was betraying her desperation. Rembrandt felt some pity for the lady, but it was far overshadowed by her increasingly unhinged actions.

The timer was on the dashboard; Maggie had confiscated it as Quinn had entered the car. If only he wasn’t cuffed, he could reach it. So tantalisingly close.

“You’re taking me with you, or I’m going alone,” she stated matter-of-factly. “I don’t care which, but I’m leaving.”

“Is it really that bad here, Maggie?” Sam said, looking at her with the level of pity that Rembrandt couldn’t muster. “So bad that you’d do all this just to escape?”

Maggie drove on in silence for a moment.

“Yeah. It’s that bad.” She glanced at her uncle in the rear-view mirror, and Rembrandt saw her wince as she saw the reflection that suggested she was looking at her double. “Did you know Dad hasn’t spoken to me since I was twenty-four?”

“I... no, I didn’t know that.”

“Never forgave me for refusing to enlist,” she continued. “And then every day since, my life has just proved him right. I should have joined the air force, ended up an adventurer like these guys’s Maggie. Instead I got stuck with an abusive husband and a job I hate.”

She wiped sweat off her forehead.



“Then my uncle, the *famous super-genius quantum physicist*, disappears, and then reappears the very week I’m planning to run away, along with a bunch of people who have the perfect method to get me out of here. What was I supposed to think? I took it as a sign.”

“But then we were assigned to watch you day and night and make sure you stayed put,” Rembrandt interjected. Maggie’s eyes darted to him, before returning to the road.

“Yeah.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I should have just asked you what you wanted instead of assuming I was here to keep you living this life.”

Rembrandt glanced at the timer. Fifteen minutes.

“You know Billy’s going to be blamed for your disappearance, right?” Quinn said, impatient.

“Good.”

“Maggie, you know that isn’t right,” Sam said, his voice wavering. “He may be a lot of terrible things, but he’s not a murderer. Let him take the rap for the things he actually *did*.”

“And who’s going to be around to testify against him?”

Sam went quiet.

Rembrandt shifted in his seat to face Maggie better.

“Did you know that our Maggie doesn’t have a Dad, or an uncle, or even her own Earth anymore? Her whole life was destroyed. Husband murdered. Nearly everyone she ever knew, irradiated to death by a pulsar.”

Maggie didn’t respond, but seemed to be paling.

“She has a tough outer skin, but underneath she’s vulnerable and it affects her way more than she lets on. But she wouldn’t let the wrong person take the fall.”

“Are you sure?” Maggie asked, eyebrow raised.

“Don’t get me wrong, she holds a grudge like nobody’s business. She’s reached the limits of her empathy on more than one occasion. So she fell back on us to help with that. And since she’s been dependin’ on us, she’s really unlocked a part of herself that she had closed off before.”

Maggie scowled. “Well, lucky her, having friends who care about her.”

“Is that all you need?” Sam asked. “Because *I* care about you, Maggie. So much.”

Maggie was blinking back tears now. “Then why did you leave?”

Sam gazed at her for a minute, before finally looking down at his feet.

“Maggie, before I started leaping, you didn’t exist.”

This made Maggie, and everyone else, silent. Remy could only guess what that actually meant, but it seemed Maggie understood.

Several minutes passed, and Maggie finally pulled into her driveway.

“You... remember me not... existing?” she finally said.

“Not really,” admitted Sam, “I just remember saving your Dad’s life. And knowing that he wouldn’t have survived if I hadn’t been there.”

“And while I was growing up, and you came to visit... do you remember that?”

“A lot of it’s come back to me since I’ve been here. Remember I used to sing to you, when you were a kid?”

Maggie nodded. “*Que será, será*, right?”

Sam smiled. “That’s it.”

Maggie smiled bitterly. “Humph. Whatever will be, will be.”

She picked up the timer. One minute was remaining until the slide window.

“Let’s test that theory.”

Rembrandt looked to the back seat, glancing between Quinn and Colin.

Sam became frantic. “I haven’t leaped yet. Al...”

Rembrandt watched him make eye contact with the invisible guy in the future. He was getting more and more terrified.

He looked to the faces of his fellow prisoners.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. His eyes were welling up.

For that matter, so were Rembrandt’s.

“Tell Maggie I’m gonna come back, okay? We’re going to find her again.” Sam said to the hologram.

Maggie pointed the timer ahead, and activated the wormhole, which opened just beyond the hood of the car. Then she slammed her foot on the accelerator.

The last thing any of them saw as they entered was a blinding flash of blue light.

\* \* \*

The car landed smoothly on a paved urban street, and Maggie slammed the brakes.

“What... what did I do?” she said, hardly able to understand what just happened. She was so sure just a moment ago that this was what she wanted, but now... something was making her heart pound and her stomach do back flips, and it wasn’t the bumpy ride.

She peered into the rear view mirror, and at her uncle in the back seat. Then, with a feeling of faintness, she realised that instead of seeing her double in the mirror, she was seeing Sam’s own reflection.

She turned, and saw that Quinn and Colin were both staring at Sam, mouths open.

“Uncle Sam... I don’t think you’re me any more.”

Sam leaned forward, positioning himself to see his own reflection in the mirror. With a shallow breath, he murmured: “Oh boy...”

Maggie spun back around and pressed her hand to the handprint panel. Her heart would not stop racing.

“Higgins, open all doors... and handcuffs.”

With a chime, the doors sprung open, and Rembrandt found himself free of the cuffs that restricted his hands. Maggie didn’t know why she’d just done this. She supposed she was... free now, right? There was no further need for her friends.

*Friends?*

As everyone got out of the car, Maggie remained, just staring forward, white-knuckling the steering wheel.

Rembrandt leaned into the car before he left, and snatched the timer from her lap. She didn’t even try to retain control of it.

Somehow, she felt relieved that he had it now.

“I think we’re in San Fran, so if you need our help, we’ll be at the Dominion Hotel. If not... have a nice life, I guess.”

His voice was cold. Colder than it had been when he’d been holding out hope of his Maggie returning.

*But...*

Sam had appeared by her side, just by the door.

“Maggie...”

She looked up at him, terrified.

“I feel... weird...”

She turned and watched Quinn, Rembrandt, and Colin walking away. A panic gripped her, watching them go.

*Don’t leave me behind...*

She jumped out of the car, and ran full pelt towards them, leaving Sam to run after her.

“Wait!”

The sliders turned to see her pursuit, and looked at her, each one of them regarding her with a level of contempt.

“Please... let me come with you...”

Why was she grovelling at their feet? She was free, wasn’t she? And yet...

Quinn exchanged glances with the other two, then crossed his arms. “Why should we help you after all you’ve done?”

For some reason, this hit her even harder than Remy’s harsh words, and the feeling of absolute heartache surprised her. But what came out of her mouth next surprised her even more.

“Because I don’t want to be left behind like Wade...”

*Who?*

She stopped and looked, bewildered, at the sidewalk beneath her.

“I... don’t know why I said that...”

She glanced back up at Quinn, who was glaring at her with an apprehensive furrowed brow. Her gaze drifted to Rembrandt and Colin, who were both just as astonished.

She sensed Sam approaching from behind. She stepped back into him and leaned on him, her legs feeling weak.

“Are you okay?” asked Sam. She shook her head.

“My head hurts and my heart is beating a mile a minute...”

Quinn’s frosty demeanour melted away, and he pulled her arm over his shoulder.

“Come on...”

He helped her to a seat at a nearby bus stop. She collapsed into it, feeling her head swimming.

“What’s happening to me?”

Quinn looked her up and down, studying, then grabbed the wand of the device he still had strapped to his body.

“I have a theory... and I hope I’m wrong.”

He switched on the detector, and moved the wand towards her. The clicking was like a jackhammer, and Maggie felt the urge to jump away from it.

“Well that’s discouraging...” Quinn said under his breath, and made eye contact with Sam, who was equally alarmed.

“*What?* What is it?” Maggie demanded.

Quinn, a deep sadness in his eyes, sat down beside her and held her hand.

“The only way you could have known about Wade is if... some part of you is the Maggie we know.”

“She... *may* be occupying the same body as you,” Sam added, with an expression that matched Quinn’s in pity.

“Oh...” was all Maggie could say.

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## **END OF PART 1**

# PART TWO: WHAT ONCE WENT WRONG

## SUMMARY

After his leap gets cross-wired with a slide, Sam is entirely cut off from Al and Ziggy, but he also seems to be himself again.

It appears they have not just landed on an Earth not Sam's own, but they've travelled back in time to 1978. And to top everything off, Maggie has a whole host of problems to face, caused by the messed up slide.

The physics geniuses might not be able to work this one out alone - is there anyone here in the past that can help?



## 2.1 · A LITTLE CACA

As the squad car careened into the open wormhole, Quinn could have sworn he could feel the body beside him emanating a crackling electric charge. He tried to look over at Sam, who was wearing the face of his close companion and one-time wife, Maggie, but his vision filled with blue. A blue that seemed to fill up the car entirely, drowning out everything.

This was *not* normal.

And then with a mighty bounce, the car landed on an asphalt road, and drove onward onto a decidedly vintage-looking street.

In the driver's seat, Sheriff Maggie Beckett – niece of Doctor Sam Beckett, the time traveller – gasped, and slammed her foot on the brake. The car screeched to a stop, and Maggie's expression was that of someone who just awoke from a nightmare.

“What... what did I do?” she muttered to herself, before glancing into the rear view mirror to Quinn's right. Quinn followed her gaze, and there beside him was no longer the image of his companion, but of a total stranger.

He was tall, brown hair, a streak of grey at the front. Flat, strong eyebrows casting his green eyes in shadow, and a prominent Roman nose.

*Is this Sam's real face?*

“Uncle Sam...” Maggie said shakily, squinting into the mirror, “I don't think you're me any more.”

Sam's attention was drawn to the mirror, and he leaned forward to see his reflection.

"Oh boy..." he said as he studied his face.

Quinn's eyes darted to Maggie, who was commanding the car to open the doors, along with Rembrandt's handcuffs.

*Guess she got what she wanted, and now she's done with us. Well, good riddance.*

Quinn slid out of the back seat, and stood, stretching his arms. He caught Rembrandt's eye, who had stood, but was leaning back into the car to retrieve the timer.

Strangely, she gave it up without protest.

"Let's go," he told Rembrandt and Colin, and the three of them started walking away.

Quinn noted that given his knowledge of his home town, they were almost certainly in San Francisco, but the area seemed very dated. Maggie's high tech squad car stuck out like a sore thumb among the 70s style cars parked on the side of the road.

It wasn't that he hadn't seen this sort of thing before in his travels, but knowing that he was with a time traveller, it made him anxious to see what the date was today. Just in case.

He heard footsteps pounding behind him.

"Wait!"

The trio all looked back to see Maggie sprinting towards them, with Sam struggling to catch up. She puffed as she reached them.

"Please... let me come with you..."

Quinn could see a kind of fear in her eyes that she hadn't had up to this point. Maybe her choice to leave her whole life and world behind was finally sinking in. He stiffened, and folded his arms.

“Why should we help you after all you’ve done?”

For a second, he could have sworn he was looking into *his* Maggie’s eyes. They were glistening with tears, and her face was flushed.

And then, she said: “Because I don’t want to be left behind like Wade...”

At that, Quinn felt the rest of the world fall away, and he became certain that this wasn’t just the woman who’d given Colin head trauma and kidnapped a man. He watched her break eye contact in confusion, and look at her feet.

“I... don’t know why I said that...”

*I think I do...*

Oh, but he hoped it wasn’t true.

The models he’d been playing with in his head ever since Remy had floated the idea of taking both Maggies in the wormhole. If something had destabilised the vortex enough, it was entirely possible that close proximity could cause some horrible fusion of some sort, as the duplicate atoms attempted to reconstitute into one being, sharing the same space.

If something like ‘leaping’ had occurred within the vortex, for example. He wasn’t so sure of Sam’s time theories, but...

Sam reached Maggie from behind, and she let herself fall onto him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, to which she shook her head in response.

“My head hurts and my heart is beating a mile a minute...”

Quinn didn’t know if this was an effect of what had happened or just a reaction she was having to potentially having a second mind

coexisting within her, but his heart was breaking, and he couldn't keep up his tough guy facade any longer.

"Come on..." he said, pulling her arm over his shoulder. He spotted a bus stop, and brought her to the seat, where she flopped.

"What's happening to me?" she said, and Quinn could hear the panic in her voice.

"I have a theory..." he said with an anxious waver, "and I hope I'm wrong."

The little spacetime distortion meter he'd built was still strapped onto his body, which was a blessing. He grabbed the wand attachment, and switched on the device, before waving it over Maggie.

The clicks were doing double-time compared to what they sounded like when he waved it over Sam or Al.

"Well that's discouraging..."

Quinn looked towards Sam, who was looking back with knowing eyes – it was clear that they both suspected something like this.

His worst suspicions were unfortunately proving to be a likely explanation. He was dealing with something really volatile. He desperately hoped it could be undone.

"*What?* What is it?" Maggie was looking up at him with wild eyes.

Quinn breathed out heavily as he sat down beside her. He frowned. Time to break the news, but could he do it without giving her even worse panic?

"The only way you could have known about Wade is if... some part of you is the Maggie we know."

Sam stepped forward, taking her hand.

“She... *may* be occupying the same body as you.”

Maggie looked down at her hand, being cradled by her uncle’s gentle grip.

“Oh...”

“I’m sorry, but *what’s* goin’ on, Q-ball?” Rembrandt interjected, looking frantic. He locked eyes with Sam. “Did you just say she’s *both* Maggies?”

Sam nodded grimly.

“We’ll need to go over the science, but if I’m here as myself, and she’s saying things only the *other* Maggie knows, then obviously something’s gone...” He cringed. “A little caca?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Quinn added.

“I must have started leaping long enough to draw Maggie back, but since I was already in the vortex going the wrong direction, it must have prevented me from leaving, while Maggie was sucked in with us.”

“And with the other Maggie in there, she was naturally drawn to her matching atomic structure...” Quinn said, and pinched the bridge of his nose. This was *such* a bad day. “And now they’re both trying to occupy the same space at once.”

Colin finally spoke up. “Uh, isn’t atomic fusion kind of bad? In the context of a person, I mean.”

Quinn looked at his brother. “Yes. Yes it is.”

“Am I gonna die?” Maggie said, finally looking up from her hands.

“We’re not going to let that happen,” replied Sam, with a level of resolve Quinn wished he had.

“Not to add insult to injury,” Rembrandt said, standing at a *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper vending machine further down the street, “but I don’t think this is 1999.”

He fed a couple of dimes into the machine, and pulled out a paper. He held it up for the rest to see.

**City Hall Murders**  
**MOSCONE, MILK SLAIN**  
**-- DAN WHITE IS HELD**

“The George Moscone and Harvey Milk assassination,” Sam said softly. “It must be ’78.”

Sam was, perhaps, the least gripped by terror of all of them.

“How the devil did we go back in time?” Rembrandt said, voice shaking. He pointed at Sam. “You’re the time traveller, right? How’d this happen?!”

Sam shook his head. “God, I wish I could just ask Ziggy right about now,” he said, frustrated. “She’d have all the answers.”

Quinn bit his lip. “Your hologram can’t reach you here?”

“I’d say the chances of that are astronomical, unless...”

“Unless?”

“Well, Ziggy *does* have all your timer data. Maybe she and the others could manage to track us with it, even pinpoint a timeline to target. But it’s a long shot, and it could take them days or weeks.”

Rembrandt had returned from his trip to the news dispenser, and Quinn raided his pocket for the timer.

“Well, looks like we may *have* weeks. Two to be exact.”

He held up the timer to Sam, revealing to him that it was counting down from 14 days, 8 hours, 21 minutes and 48 seconds.

Sam looked at him, tense.

“So, I’m not perceived as someone else, we have two weeks in a strange place, and I have no idea if I’m here to help anybody, besides the obvious predicament.” He scratched the back of his head. “Where do we go?”

“Welcome to the sliding experience, I guess,” Quinn said sagely. “Let’s get Maggie to the Dominion – it’s the hotel round here we always stay at. We’ll figure out what to do from there.”

## 2.2 • MARKETABLE SKILLS

“So, uh... what do you guys do for money? And clothing?”

Sam paced the hotel suite, looking down at the clothes he wore - a set of floral pajamas from Sheriff Maggie’s closet, that were several sizes too small and threatening to split at a number of seams, especially the shoulders, where they were so tight he had little freedom of movement in his arms. Not to mention the smears of dirt and blood from his experience being abducted.

He’d been stared at all the way here, even after borrowing Quinn’s jacket.

Quinn gave him a once-over, and couldn’t help but laugh. Then he scratched his head as he chose his answer to Sam’s question.

“Well, when we can’t find work, we tend to go to less legal means.”

“Less legal?” Sam pressed his lips together.

“Oh, you know, we do a little digging around to see if our doubles have bank accounts... but, in 1978, Colin and I were little kids, so...”

“I’m sure this world’s Cryin’ Man could spare some scratch,” Rembrandt’s eyes were shining with nostalgia for his glory days.

“Wait, wait. I don’t want to be taking other peoples’ money,” Sam said, indignant. “What if we’re caught? Besides, we already spent enough time locked in a jail cell.”

“It ain’t technically theft if we’re the same person, right?” Rembrandt added.



Sam looked him up and down. “You’ve aged twenty years, don’t you think someone’s gonna notice?”

Quinn laughed. “You’re quite the goody two-shoes, you know that?”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, so I hear. I just have a strong moral compass is all.”

“So we find work,” Quinn said, shrugging. “Shouldn’t be so hard in the seventies to find cash work, right?”

“Not for a soul singer who can do a perfect impression of a chart topper,” Rembrandt said smugly.

“You know, we don’t know how things are different in this world,” Colin said, coming out of the bathroom. “For all we know, you might never have been popular.”

“Yeah, and pigs might fly,” Rembrandt said, brushing off the insult with a grin. “Let’s face it, you guys would never make it through slides without my entertainer money.”

He looked at Sam, eyes narrowed. “You might have seven doctorates, but you got any musical talent, Doc?”

Sam felt his cheeks burning. “I’m kind of a doctor of music, too.”

Rembrandt stared at him for a moment, mouth agape.

“This guy...” he said, looking at the others. “Does anyone else feel inadequate right about now?”

In response, Colin nodded heartily while Quinn shrugged, with a small cringe.

*Ugh, they think I’m some kind of Superman,* thought Sam. Little did they know how often things went pear-shaped on his leaps due to gaps in his knowledge.

Sam threw up his hands defensively.

“Look, maybe we can busk together or something,” he said.

“What do you play, Doc?”

“Classical piano, guitar, a little singing... *maybe* more. Honestly with the way my memory is, the best way to find out if I play something is to put it in my hands and see if I start making music or ear-splitting noise.”

“Okay, well, we ain’t got instruments here, but we can try some *a capella*. Don’t suppose you know ‘*Cry Like A Man?*’”

“Wait, that’s one of *your* songs? Sure, I know it just fine.”

Rembrandt smiled broadly at this, as if it was rare for anyone to recognise the song. He recalled Al calling him ‘One Hit Wonder.’

*It must be tough to make table scraps singing on the street after being a star.*

A noise from one of the beds pulled him from the conversation. Maggie, who’d been sleeping feverishly for the past couple of hours, was stirring.

He moved to her bedside, and sat on the edge of the adjacent bed.

“Hey, you feeling okay?”

“How long was I asleep?” She squinted, regaining her focus.

“Not long enough for me to change into better clothes,” he said with a self-conscious grin. She smiled sadly at him.

“My head still hurts, but my heart’s not beating out of my chest so much.”

“That’s good.”

Maggie looked at the other three, letting her eyes track from one to the other.

“It feels so strange. It’s like I don’t have any clear memories of knowing you all, but I trust you as if I did. I don’t know which part of my mind is which version of myself...”

Her gaze moved to Colin.

“I’m... sorry for the...” she gestured to her head.

“It’s alright.” Colin’s face had no hard feelings; he just seemed sad. “In the end, that head injury allowed me to—”

Maggie interrupted: “—See me and Al...” She crinkled her nose. “This is just too weird.”

“Do you remember anything about the future?” Quinn asked.

“Not much. A lot of... blue?” She tilted her head.

“That’ll be the Waiting Room, I think,” Sam guessed.

“Oh god, yeah,” Maggie said, recalling. “There was a *lot* of that. Waiting, I mean. I was bored out of my mind.”

“So we’ve definitely established that our Maggie is part of you,” Colin said, stroking his chin.

“I don’t like it.” Maggie brought her knees up to her chin, and hugged her legs. “Which... one of me is even talking right now?”

Sam leaned forward and grabbed her hand.

“We just need to figure out the math and we can come up with a way to undo this. Just hang in there, okay?”

Maggie nodded, though she didn’t look convinced, and she certainly didn’t look him in the eye.

“Alright,” Quinn said, standing. “Colin and I will go get us all some... uh, period appropriate clothes, and look for work while we’re at it.”

“I appreciate that,” Sam said warmly, and looked towards Rembrandt. “Shall we rehearse?”

The San Francisco of the late seventies was highly nostalgic to Quinn. Cable cars rattled along the hilly roads, while loud car engines sputtered. The smell of tobacco, mingled with exhaust fumes, drifted through the air. The faint tune of ‘*MacArthur Park*’ by Donna Summer could be heard, coming from someone’s radio, or perhaps record player. The cars were all shades of brown, orange, olive green, and the occasional sky blue. The people on the street wore flared jeans, sharp lapels, platform shoes, and sideburns to rival Colin’s.

“This sure brings back memories,” Quinn said, walking alongside his brother, who was much more out of his element.

“It smells funny,” Colin said, screwing up his nose.

“Yeah, you get used to it. Though the lead levels in the air and soil are actually pretty toxic.”

This prompted Colin to raise his shirt over his nose.

Quinn chuckled. “Don’t worry. I grew up in this environment, didn’t I? Just avoid eating paint chips.”

The pair came upon a department store. Quinn rummaged in his pockets, and pulled out some cash.

“Okay, I have twelve bucks. I don’t know exactly how much things cost in the 70s but I hope that will be enough for a few items of clothing.”

Colin scrounged an extra four dollar bills from his pockets, and a few quarters. Quinn headed for the door of the store, then felt Colin’s eyes on him. He turned.

“What?”

Colin's hands were in his pockets, and his shoulders taut. He rocked on his feet.

"Quinn, have you considered that... your parents are here?"

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "Well, sure, probably. But we don't know what kind of Earth we landed on. They're almost certainly not *my* folks."

"I'd kind of like to meet them anyway," Colin said, mouth askew.

Quinn nodded. He guessed Colin wanted to see how Quinn had grown up, find out what he missed out on. It wasn't that he didn't want to see his Mom and Dad, of course. It was just that, how would he approach them? What would he say? Could he tell the truth? Dare he warn his Dad about the accident in about 6 years time, and would it make a difference? But then, the thought of seeing his father alive was a pretty difficult opportunity to pass up.

"Sure, we can see them, I guess."

"Let's go tomorrow," Colin suggested.

"If we have money for a cab by then, sure."

His mind also wandered to the Professor. What was he doing with himself in 1978? Had he come to the States yet? Just when *did* he get his teaching position at the university here? More importantly, could he potentially assist them?

But, for now, they had a wardrobe to fill.

## 2.3 · SWEET SCREAMS

Maggie stood, alone, in a blue room with no doors she could see. This room held a certain familiarity, and yet felt alien all the same.

She felt a little scared, but moreover, she felt bored. This space was so empty, so devoid of any stimulation that she thought she might lose her mind. Just this piercing, endless blue.

Then, a noise. A door suddenly opened in the wall, with a silhouette lit from behind.

The figure stepped in, and Maggie's heart jumped to her throat as she saw another version of herself, holding a colourful, flashing device in her hand.

"You need to get out of here," said the figure, her voice full of vitriol. She was scowling.

"I can't..." Maggie replied, gesturing around the room. "I'm trapped."

"I didn't invite you," the double said. "Are you some kind of reverse Houdini?"

Now Maggie was in a jail cell. Steel bars separated her and the double.

The double tapped on her device, and spoke with a new voice: *Ziggy's* voice. "There's a ninety-three per cent chance you are going to die if you stay here."

"So how do I leave?"

The double was no longer holding the colourful blinking device, but a timer. She passed it to Maggie through the bars.

Maggie looked down at the display. It was at zero.

Panicking, she pressed the button to activate the vortex. Nothing happened.

“No...”

She looked up at her double, but she was no longer there.

“Hey Mags,” came a voice from behind, followed by strong arms closing around her body. Maggie looked over her shoulder to see Billy, looking at her flirtatiously. “Have you been avoiding me? Is that any way to treat your husband?”

“Get off me,” Maggie said, panic rising in her chest.

Billy grabbed her wrists forcefully, and pulled on them, sending her off-balance. She fell to the ground, and hit her head on a metal surface that had not been there a second ago.

Glancing up in panic, she was startled to realise that Billy was gone, and the pressure she felt on her wrists was her own handcuffs, attached to the wall of Billy’s shed.

The world fell into darkness as she started to feel a spider crawling on her exposed leg.

“I thought *I* was your husband,” said a voice.

“Stephen?”

The sound of his wheelchair approached her, though she couldn’t see a thing. She felt anxiety about his presence, though she wasn’t sure why.

“Who was that man?”

“Billy... I dated him in high school.”

“And you married him?”

“Yeah, but I divorced him.”

“I thought you married *me*,” came yet another voice. It was Quinn.

“I... did... I think?” Maggie said, feeling altogether panicked about this situation.

How many people was she married to? Why did she only recall one divorce? And if she had three husbands, why did she feel so alone?

“Can someone get me out of these handcuffs?”

She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“You need to ask Higgins,” Uncle Sam’s voice whispered into her ear.

“Who?”

She strained to recall who or what a ‘Higgins’ could be.

“It’s the computer, you idiot,” she heard her own voice barking.

*I thought the computer was called Ziggy...*

Maggie was so confused. She didn’t know what she knew.

“Maggie?”

She closed her eyes.

*Shut up...*

“Maggie, are you okay?”

*Just leave me alone.*

The hand on her shoulder nudged her gently.

“Wake up, Maggie...”

Maggie reluctantly opened her eyes, and realised she was lying in a bed that smelled of cigarettes. She turned her head, and saw Uncle Sam standing over her.



“Hey,” Sam said, wearing a kind, but sad, smile.

“What time is it?” She asked, rubbing her eyes.

*It was only a dream... right?*

“It’s seven in the morning,” Sam said. He was dressed in more appropriate clothing now, though the straight cut trousers and Indian-style Nehru shirt appeared more sixties than seventies to her eyes.

“Where’d you get the threads? You look like John Lennon,” she said, smirking. The circular-lensed, yellow-tinted sunglasses he had perched on his nose seemed to complete the look.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he laughed. “Quinn and Colin ended up raiding a thrift store, since they were low on cash. It’s a few years out of style, but it’s a little better than women’s pyjamas.”

She nodded, and moved to sit up. As she became upright, a sharp pain sliced through her head, causing her to wince.

“This headache...” she said, holding her temple. “It started out a dull throbbing, but now it’s like getting stabbed with a knife.”

Sam looked grave. “That’s not a good sign.” He stood from his seat on the bed. “Once we get a hold of some money, I’ll go pick you up some acetaminophen...”

Although Sam was her uncle, Maggie nonetheless felt like he was fussing over her like a parent. Or maybe it was just his doctor side coming out. She kind of liked it. She’d never been close to her Dad; was this what it was like to have a loving father?

“I dunno if Tylenol will cut it,” she said.

“Hmm...” Sam looked pensive for a moment, before regarding her with a sheepish grin. “Ever smoked a joint?”

Maggie’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Uncle Sam! I thought you were a straight edge!”

Sam was looking at his feet, bashful. “Cannabis is a relatively safe pain relief, you know? Safer than store-bought painkillers in large quantities. It’s San Francisco in 1978, so I figured... probably pretty easy to find, right?”

Maggie had heard somewhere that potheads tended to have less vivid dreams, and after what she’d just been through, that sounded terrific.

Maggie grinned. “Well, you score it, and I’ll smoke it. I’ve been much more doped up than a few puffs of the magic dragon in my time. No sweat.”

She hoped he wouldn’t press her about her drug-addled experience not so long ago, and she was pleased to see that he did not. To be honest, she barely remembered it herself.

Sam rose from the bed, and stretched.

“The others are getting us some breakfast,” he explained. That was music to Maggie’s ears; she was famished.

She climbed out of bed, squinting through the feeling that gripped her head. She couldn’t help but feel this was karmic retribution for Colin’s head pain.

Dizzily, she moved towards the bathroom, leaning against the wall as she walked. Her vision was degrading the longer she was on her feet.

“Uncle Sam...” she said, gripping the door frame. He was by her side in an instant, holding her up.

“Talk to me, what’s happening?”

“I think I’m about to faint,” she said. “My vision’s blacking out...”

“Okay, it might be low blood pressure,” he said, and gently lowered her to a sitting position on the floor.

She leaned over and, remarkably quickly, felt herself return to normal.

“Okay...” she breathed. “That was scary.”

“Rest here for a moment,” Sam said, crouching in front of her. “You’ll be alright. It was just the act of standing that did it, I think. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

He looked towards the hotel room door. “Let’s hope the others are getting you something salty.”

“I feel like an invalid,” Maggie said dryly. Sam regarded her with sympathetic eyes, and sat against the wall beside her.

“I’ve met a lot of different people in my time,” he said. “Some of them had physical disabilities, some of them had intellectual disabilities, some of them had mental illness. But you know what they all had in common? They were all worth meeting, worth knowing, and worth helping. Everyone deserves people who care about them.”

Maggie nodded, leaning on his shoulder.

“My husband...” she started, then shook her head. “Not Billy; my other husband, Stephen. He was a paraplegic. He was also one of your ilk... super smart physicist.”

She felt her eyes welling with tears. “I can barely remember his face...”

Sam wrapped an arm around her.

“That could be the ‘swiss cheese’ effect from leaping, or it could be a result of this thing that happened to you. But we’ll fix it, okay? You’ll remember him again, I promise.”

“You keep saying that, but we barely even have money for food. How are you going to work this out?”

Sam looked away, thoughtful. He licked his lips.

“Quinn made that machine in a basement with scrap parts, right? One thing I’ve learned from him is that we don’t need a big government project with billions of dollars to work things out, as nice as that would be. We just need the right equations and some elbow grease.”

Maggie nodded, smiling weakly.

*I hope you can do it before I’m in unbearable agony.*

“I’m ready to complete my journey to the toilet,” she said with a smirk.

## 2.4 · CAB FARE

“Those Kro-maggots really threw off my style,” Rembrandt complained, as he looked down with disdain at the dated navy blue mod-style suit Quinn had picked out for him. “I woulda still been wearing my shimmering suits and sporting my ’stache if it weren’t for them.”

Quinn watched him, as he prepared for his day busking with Sam. The four of them that weren’t laid up in bed were downtown, among the masses. Quinn and Colin were going to watch the performance, waiting for enough change to come in to get them a cab fare, then head off to this world’s – and time’s – version of his home.

It was true that Rembrandt’s fashion choices had changed since he’d been back on Earth Prime, and subsequently held captive. He had dropped his larger-than-life outfits and bravado quite a bit, and he recalled Remy had once been quite possessive of his moustache - a trademark look for the Cryin’ Man - but it had been gone since his imprisonment. He’d also taken a lot of pride in his showy suits in the past, but he hadn’t worn any in a long while.

Quinn figured that his ideas of things going back to the way they were must have been shattered enough for him to give up on his style. And it was true, the Kromaggs had completely thrown a wrench into all of their plans to return home and resume their lives. Remy’s hope of rekindling his career was extinguished the moment those bastards invaded.

His attention moved to Sam. He'd been surprised to see the older man's real appearance. He didn't know what he expected, really, but it was still quite a trip to see the true face of the person who'd looked like Maggie for the previous few days, as they worked on repairing the timer. He had towered over him, though he knew that the guy behind what he called the 'aura' of Maggie was actually near 6 feet in height. Now, they were pretty close in height, though Quinn still had a couple inches on him.

He still hadn't really explained the science behind his ability to travel in time, and of course Quinn wanted to know everything. He'd explained his basic theory, tying a string together and balling it up. That made enough sense, but taking the place of other people? That was the part that puzzled him.

Sam seemed, to Quinn, like some superhero, using his swiss army knife of talents and incredible compassion to leave a trail of sunshine and rainbows through time. If anyone could get him to believe in a higher power, it would be Sam Beckett.

Still, if it *was* a higher power dragging them all around at present, they sure weren't making it easy.

Sam dropped a hat on the ground, and Rembrandt began the opening "*ohh*" to his hit song. After a moment, Sam began chimed in with an "*oooh*," playing the part of the backing singers.

*"My friends ask me, why I cry,"* Remy crooned.

*"Cry-y..."* Sam sung softly, giving a wink to Quinn.

To start off the money, Quinn threw in the last of his change.

"Good luck, guys," he said, and stepped back next to Colin, who was enjoying the performance in its own right.

"They're both great singers," he said, tapping his toe.

To Quinn, the only thing Sam *didn't* seem to be any good at was acting like a woman. He wondered how many times he'd had to feign being one at this point.

"They're really something," he finally said.

Colin squinted at him. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Quinn went over what he'd just said in his head, and realised that to someone unfamiliar with that phrase, it really meant nothing. This kind of thing had been happening since he'd met Colin. He frequently had to remind himself that Colin had a different vocabulary.

"I think it's short for the phrase 'something else,' which insinuates some level of distinction, I guess," he explained. "So it means they stand out among others who might be compared to them. Usually it's a phrase of admiration, though occasionally it's meant to point out some negative qualities. Depends on the tone of voice."

Colin nodded thoughtfully.

"Cool," he said, borrowing the slang he'd learned from Rembrandt.

The song came to a close, leaving the performers with 6 more quarters than they'd had before. That was a start.

"Any requests?" Rembrandt asked, partly to the crowd, and partly to Quinn and Colin.

"YMCA!" Someone called.

Quinn covered his mouth to stifle a chuckle. He'd forgotten that was a pretty new song at this point in time.

Rembrandt looked at Sam to affirm that he recalled the song through his memory troubles. Sam gave a tight nod and a grin. He counted them in, and began:

*“Young man,”* they sang in unison.

*“There’s no need to feel down…”* continued Rembrandt.

The two of them seemed to just get each other’s cues without rehearsing, and Quinn admired that.

Now it really seemed that people were gathering. This had been a good prompt. As soon as the chorus started, people started dancing and clapping in time. But it wasn’t the dance that Quinn typically knew; only Rembrandt and Sam were doing it. The dance must not have existed yet, he guessed.

However, by the end of the song, the crowd had picked up on the movements. Quinn wondered if they had just introduced the dance to history.

As the song closed out, Quinn checked the hat. It had at least quadrupled in value now, and he looked back at Colin with a thumbs up.

“Thanks guys,” he said to the singers as he grabbed enough change to pay for the fare. He stood and patted Rembrandt on the arm.

“You two are great as a duo,” he said. “Check the record stores to find out what’s flying off the shelves, and you’ll do just fine.”

Rembrandt nodded in agreement.

“Good luck with the parents,” he said, looking behind Quinn, at Colin. “What’ll you tell ’em?”

“Think the truth will be a bit much?”

“I’m gonna say yes,” Rembrandt’s eyes were dancing.

“Well in that case, I don’t know. We’ll think of something.”



As the taxi pulled up at Quinn's house, Colin picked nervously at his fingernails, suddenly gripped by terror.

His own parents, though they died when he was young, were supposedly doubles of these parents. He couldn't recall anything about them, but that didn't stop him from being overcome with nerves as the prospect of meeting them crystallised.

He stepped out of the car as Quinn paid, and looked at the neighbourhood around him. A quiet street, with much less of the offensive smell characteristic of the downtown area, though it was still there, underlying the brisk fall air.

Quinn had pointed to this house, surrounded by a white picket fence. A white two-storey home with a patio in the front, garnished with a carefully manicured garden. It was the kind of home Colin could have only dreamed of as a child.

Colin stepped up off the road, and stared at the house. He sensed Quinn coming up behind him, and felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Home, sweet home," he said. He was looking at it with poorly masked emotion.

"What are we going to tell them?" Colin asked, feeling glued to his spot.

Quinn looked unsure for a moment, but his expression cleared into resolve.

"We're journalism students looking for human interest stories."  
Colin felt his brow furrow. "Human interest?"

“You know... interesting stories that aren’t necessarily news, but put a spotlight on someone in the community.”

Colin frowned. Quinn chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it. Just remember, your name is Colin... uh, Firth. And mine is Jim Hall, okay?”

Colin mouthed the names, tasting them. They were bitter.

“Okay,” he conceded. “Colin ‘Firth’ it is. Why Jim Hall?”

“Uhh, it’s just a name I used with my Mom’s double once. Not such a different situation, to be honest.”

He approached the gate. It opened smoothly, and he looked back with a smirk.

“This gate’s been squeaking since I was twelve. But, I guess in 1978, I’m not twelve yet.”

He continued up the path, and climbed the stairs as Colin closed the gate behind him, and surveyed the garden.

A young golden retriever came from around the corner and bounded towards Quinn. It sniffed him for a moment, before flopping to the patio floor and rolling over.

“Bopper!” he exclaimed, and started to rub the dog’s belly. “Aw, you’re so young and energetic.”

Colin reached the top of the stairs.

“He’s cute.”

“Go on, give him a pet,” said Quinn, standing.

Colin stepped forward, and held out his hand. Bopper stood up, and gave it a sniff. His tail started to wag and he lifted his snout, awaiting a fuss.

Colin gave his face a rub, and scratched behind his ears.

“Some guard dog,” came a voice, and the brothers looked towards the door to see Michael Mallory standing with his arms folded, looking at them with slightly narrowed eyes.

Both Colin and Quinn were momentarily speechless. Colin didn’t remember much about his father, but hearing that voice knocked the breath out of him.

“Uh, sorry,” Quinn said once he found his voice again. “This little guy is a sweetie, we couldn’t resist the exposed belly.”

“He doesn’t usually do that to strangers,” said Michael, scratching his head. “Well, dogs are *usually* a pretty good judge of character. Who are you?”

“I’m Colin... Firth,” Colin proclaimed, and held out his hand. Michael shook it.

“And I’m Jim Hall,” Quinn added, also shaking the hand. “We’re journalism students looking for human interest stories. We heard you’ve got some kind of child prodigy for a son? We’d love to hear more about that. Quinn, right?”

At the mention of his son’s name, Michael stiffened.

“How do you know my son’s name?”

Quinn was nervous now. “Word of mouth,” he said haltingly.

Michael’s face was dark. “Not interested.”

“If you don’t want us to interview him, what about you?” Colin tried. He knew Quinn wanted him to just stand there looking pretty, but Quinn was clearly losing the battle here. “You’re a scientist, are you not?”

Quinn picked up on his cues, and pulled himself away from his floundering. “Oh yeah, we hear you build backyard rockets. Got anything in the works right now?”

Michael was looking behind them towards the street.

“Some other time, perhaps.”

He stepped back, and grabbed the handle of the door.

“You have a good day,” he said as the door shut.

Colin locked eyes with Quinn. Both were equally bewildered with what had just transpired.

“He was being... protective of me,” Quinn muttered. “But why?”

## 2.5 · GIG ECONOMY

As the brothers returned to town, they stepped out of the taxi to the sounds of a keyboard in the air – playing Billy Joel, if Quinn identified it correctly – along with a voice being amplified through speakers.

*“I don’t need you to worry for me, ’cause I’m alright...”*

Quinn realised it was Sam’s voice.

*Where did he get the equipment...?*

*“I don’t want you to tell me it’s time to come home...”*

Exchanging a puzzled look with Colin, the pair followed the sound along the street, and ended up in front of a record store, whose sign told Quinn it was called ‘*San Fran Disco Records*’. Just outside the door, Sam and Rembrandt had a keyboard on a stand, an amp, and a couple of electric guitars in stands behind them.

Rembrandt was leaning against the wall, tapping a finger to the music. He caught sight of the brothers, and waved.

“Hey, Q-ball!” he said, a wide grin on his face, “These cats let us use their gear in exchange for a promotion between songs.”

He held out a hand, and Quinn grasped it.

“Nice goin’,” he said. “How’s business?”

“Great! I think we just need to do this maybe 3 hours a day, during the most busy times. People round here love this.”

*“Go ahead with your own life, leave me alone...”*

The sound of coins on coins chimed as Sam completed his rendition, along with light applause.

He stretched, turning his microphone off.

“How’d your visit go?” he asked Quinn.

“Not so good,” Quinn admitted, flickering a look to Colin.

Rembrandt switched on the microphone he’d been nursing, and began to uphold his contractual obligation.

“Ladies and gentlemen, come on in to *San Fran Disco*, where you’ll find the latest and greatest chart toppin’ hits!”

Sam smirked as he watched, but returned to the conversation at hand.

“Not so good, how?”

Quinn sighed, and took his own place, leaning against the brick wall. “I blew it. My Dad got suspicious as soon as I brought up the younger me. Should have chosen a different cover story.”

“Suspicious?” Sam squinted.

“Yeah... it was kind of weird, really. His eyes were watching the road. Maybe something happened to the me of this world.”

“Nonetheless,” Colin interjected, “I enjoyed what I saw of your house. And Bopper is a very lovely dog.”

Quinn gave a tight smile. “Yeah, he’s a special boy.”

Sam stroked his chin. “Sounds like something to get to the bottom of...”

Quinn raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Sam turned away, lost in thought. Quinn scratched the back of his head, and looked at Colin, who shrugged.

“It might be nothing,” Sam continued his thought. “But, every time I ignore something like this, it ends up coming back to bite

me.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I know the whole God or Time or Fate or whatever thing is pretty out there, but I can’t help but think maybe *you’re* here to help whatever’s going on there.”

Quinn was a little taken aback. “Wait, *you’re* the one who gets assignments from your divine boss or whatever, not me.”

“Well,” he began, gesturing to his chest, “I’m me, so the rulebook’s already out the window, you know?”

“So you’re going with your gut, huh?”

Sam nodded, with the ghost of a shrug. “Sometimes, my gut is more accurate than Ziggy.”

Quinn frowned.

*I suppose it’s possible.*

“Well, when you finish for the day, let’s plan our next moves back at the hotel.”

Sam patted Quinn on the arm. “Sure thing.”

He turned back to the instruments. “Now...”

He picked up one of the guitars, which Quinn now recognised as a four-string bass guitar. He said something in Remy’s ear, whose mouth curled into a smile. Rembrandt sat down at the keyboard, switched on the mic, and awaited Sam’s cue.

Sam played a light funk tune on the bass, nodded to him after a few bars, and Rembrandt chimed in with a breezy accompaniment, before beginning the song:

*“When I wake up in the morning, love...”* he sang, *“and the sunlight hurts my eyes...”*

Quinn couldn’t quite identify this song, but it sounded familiar. Colin was tapping his foot again, and Quinn just stood there

listening to the laid back song for a while, before deciding they'd better go check up on Maggie.

*“Just one look at you, and I know it’s gonna be, a lovely daaaaay...”*

*“Lovely day, lovely day, lovely day...”* Sam sang softly, under Rembrandt’s sustained note.

Quinn thought fondly about how fantastic an era of music this was, as he headed toward the Dominion, with Colin hot on his heels.

\* \* \*

Maggie was clutching her head in pain as she heard the door of the suite opening. The searing agony came in waves, and she was smack dab in the middle of one right now.

“Hey,” she said, without looking up.

“Maggie, are you alright?” came Quinn’s voice, and she sensed him rushing over to her.

“Well, no. But hey; what else is new?” she said with a bleak sigh, her eyes tightly shut.

She felt a body sit on the side of her bed.

“There’s nothing you can do right now,” she said, in the hopes that he’d just leave her be.

“Do you need some company?” Quinn asked, his voice laced with pity.

Maggie sighed. “Ask me again when I can look you in the eye without my brain feeling like it’s gonna rip itself in two.”



Maggie buried her face in her pillow, as she felt Quinn place his hand on her lower leg.

“Well...” he said, “I’m here if you need me, okay?”

“Me too, Maggie,” came Colin’s voice from somewhere across the room.

*Golly gee, that’s ever-so heartwarming,* came a sarcastic voice in her head, that she assumed must have been the part of her that didn’t know these people. The part of her that did, on the other hand, was aching to hold Quinn’s hand.

This feeling prompted her to pipe up, despite her pain:  
“Quinn... are we... um, married?”

Quinn was silent for a moment.

“N-no...”

This was enough for her to open her eyes and look at him, in spite of the severe pain it caused.

“Then... why do I remember our wedding?”

Quinn looked towards Colin, grimacing.

“It’s a really convoluted story, but we were... sorta married? In a bubble universe. But it only exists in our memories now.”

“Oh...”

So, her *real* marriages, on either side of her current dual being, were to Billy Colbert and Stephen Jensen, the former of whom she divorced, and the latter was murdered by someone who she’d hunted down and seen die, if she recalled correctly.

Quinn was *not* her husband. Not technically. At least *that* matter was cleared up. More or less. No more confused dreams about her love life, right?

She closed her eyes again, and set her head down.

She felt Quinn's hand clasping hers.

"That doesn't mean I don't care about you, okay?"

She nodded, her eyes longing to open again and gaze upon Quinn, but the pain wouldn't allow it.

"I mean it," he continued. "Both of you. Even though one of you did some messed up things to us, you're both Maggie, and..."

He trailed off, and Maggie wondered why.

She forced her eyes open, and saw tears on his cheeks. He was choked up.

*Quinn...*

Colin approached them.

"What Quinn's trying to say is you mean a lot to him, and he's going to do everything in his power to help you."

He gave her a warm smile. "We all will."

*They really do care?* Maggie thought, and she didn't know which half of her had this sentiment.

She didn't know how to respond, so she remained silent. She felt Quinn pat her hand before releasing it, and his weight on the bed lifted.

"I've got some equations to figure out," he muttered, rummaging in the nightstand beside her for a pen and paper.

"Would you mind filling me in?" Colin asked him. Quinn's rummaging ceased for a moment.

"On the equations?"

"Yeah. Maybe I can help."

"Sure," Quinn said, and Maggie could sense some pride in his voice. He'd definitely been spending a lot of time talking nerd stuff with Colin, though there was a big gap of progress that Colin

had to fill in a short period of time. He'd been at Edison levels of technology just a handful of months ago, but he'd taken to computers at a rate that far surpassed Maggie's knowledge.

Well, that wasn't completely true. The part of her that was Sheriff Maggie had a decent handle on computing, though her zest for it was entirely lacking.

Regardless, Maggie knew that Quinn was proud of his brother for all the information he'd been able to absorb in such a short time, and he was not going to let that progress go to waste.

"Well, you two have at it, just don't be too loud," Maggie said through the squalls of pain that separated her from her surroundings. "Good luck."

The last thing she perceived as she drifted off to another restless sleep was a warm hand squeezing her own.

## 2.6 • 420

“Who wants nachos?” Rembrandt called, as he and Sam entered the hotel room.

He held a series of takeout containers, which held the dish. Rembrandt had been tickled to learn it had just caught on earlier that year. Unfortunately, the offering was hardly gourmet, being more a simulation of cheese sauce slathered ballpark nachos than the more flavoursome jalapeño dish he would have preferred.

“Smells good,” remarked Colin, lifting his head up from the notes the brothers had spread all over the table.

Quinn, who was facing the other way, looked around and gave a distracted wave as he scribbled.

“Hey, have you guys been doin’ math without me?” Sam said with mock disappointment, and crossed to the table to see their work.

Rembrandt placed the food on a side table, and surveyed the scraps of paper, arranged in a way that he assumed the eggheads understood, covered in letters, numbers, and other gibberish.

He grabbed one of the polystyrene containers and cracked it open. As he ate, he noticed nobody else was getting into the food.

“Hey man, we worked hard for this food, least you could do is eat it!”

Quinn looked up, seemingly realising for the first time that it was there.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, and grabbed a container. “Easy to forget about how hungry I am when I’m neck deep in this stuff.”

The other two men took containers of their own, leaving the final one for Maggie.

Rembrandt looked over to her on the bed.

“She been like that all day?”

Colin met his eye. “More or less, since we’ve been here.”

Rembrandt reached into his pocket, and produced a small paper bag he and Sam had managed to procure from some army vets in a homeless camp.

“Well, she’ll be wanting those nachos after this,” he said to himself.

He wandered over to her bed, and gently nudged her.

“I’m awake...” she said, keeping her eyes shut. “It just hurts my head when I talk. Or open my eyes. Or move. Or hear you guys talking. I wish I had a dark room to lie in.”

“Well, maybe this’ll take the edge off,” Remy replied, opening the bag and pulling out one of the four small joints that populated it.

He placed it between her fingers, and they closed around it.

“Thanks,” she said, and opened her eyes into a pained squint. Rembrandt lit a match from one of the hotel’s branded matchbooks, and she allowed him to set the end alight.

As she took a long, desperate drag on it, Rembrandt grabbed the complimentary ash tray that sat on the coffee table near the TV, and moved it to her nightstand. She coughed out the smoke, and the jerking motion made her clutch her head.

“What is that smell?” Colin wondered aloud, causing Quinn to laugh.

“Try not to breathe in the smoke,” he said with a knowing look at Remy, patting his brother on the back.

“Remember that time you and Maggie were all drugged up?” Rembrandt asked the kid who he affectionately referred to as ‘Farm Boy.’

Colin nodded, his face sour. “Don’t tell me she’s going to be intoxicated like that again...”

“Better that than the pain she’s in right now,” Quinn said.

Rembrandt noted that Sam had been awfully quiet since he’d started looking at the notes on the table. He saw that the Doc was now making some corrections to some of the equations.

Quinn followed his gaze.

“It’s good to get some assistance,” he commented to Rembrandt.

“Sure is,” Rembrandt said, thinking about Sam’s musical help. That this one guy could ease their burdens so much was impressive, and he only hoped that the Doc himself wasn’t taking too much of that burden onto himself. The big man upstairs had really put a lot on the guy’s shoulders already.

“Say...” he said, a thought coming to him, “you think the Professor of ’78 is in a position to help, too?”

Quinn grinned.

“Way ahead of ya,” he said, and pulled a note from the coffee table. “He’s an Assistant Professor. I’m gonna go visit tomorrow.”

“Professor?” Sam was looking at them with questioning eyes.

“Quinn’s old mentor,” Rembrandt explained, “he was slidin’ with us for a while, ’til–”

“–Rickman shot him,” came Maggie’s voice. “Yeah, that’s his name. Can’t believe I forgot...”

She was sitting up in bed, looking at them through tired eyes.

“Guess it doesn’t matter now. He went ‘*splat*.’”

She stuck out her tongue and made an open palm gesture towards the floor.

“Feeling better already?” Sam asked, looking relieved.

She shrugged. “Enough to have my eyes open. Can you pass me the nachos?”

Rembrandt grabbed a hold of the last container, and passed it to her. She hungrily began to eat.

“That’s really good,” she said, mouth full.

Satisfied that Maggie was doing okay, Rembrandt turned back to the others to finish their discussion.

“Anyway, the Professor’s a big book-smart kind of guy.”

“He specialises in cosmology,” added Quinn. “but he’s well read in a lot of areas. And he’ll have some resources we don’t. Labs, equipment...” To this, Sam’s face lit up.

“Great! I’d like to meet him. What’s his name?”

“Maximillian Arturo,” Quinn said.

“Huh, that rings a bell,” said Sam, getting lost in thought.

“Maybe I’ve read one of his papers. Wish I could remember...”

Quinn pursed his lips. “Maybe you’ve read his work on Coset Wormholes in Keller Oribifolds?”

Sam clicked his fingers and pointed as he recalled. “That’s it!”

“Oh *yeah*, of course. Closet wormholes in killer ribeyes,” Maggie commented with a snort, eyes still on her food. She looked up at Remy with an exaggerated gesture. “*Groundbreaking* stuff in the field of beefology.”

She stifled a laugh, and Rembrandt gave her a token grin. She may have been a little stoned, but it was a relief to see her in good spirits despite everything.

“Looks like we’ve got a heckler,” Quinn said, sharing an amused smirk with Sam.

“Oh jeez,” Maggie said, now no longer smiling, but looking up at them all with uncertainty, “am I being a pain? I haven’t smoked this stuff since I was in basic training. You gotta tell me if I’m getting on your nerves, okay?”

“You’re fine, Maggie,” Sam said. “You go ahead and crack as many jokes as you like. It’ll let us know you’re feeling alright.”

“Basic training?” Rembrandt tested. “Only one of you ever went there, right?”

At this, Maggie leaned her chin in her palm, looking into space.

“Huh...”

This train of thought made her go silent for a while, her brows knitted as she tried to work something out.

A moment passed as Rembrandt waited for her to come to some conclusion.

“Huh what?”

She looked up at him, startled. “What?”

“You looked like you were in deep thought.”

Maggie blinked a couple of times. “I was just thinking about those burgers at White Castle... you know they call them *sliders*?”



She seemed highly amused at this. Rembrandt tilted his head, confused.

“How the devil did you get to *that* from basic training?”

She looked at him blankly for a moment, before explaining: “Well, I was thinking about my time training at Fort Knox. We’d go up to Louisville when we had time off base, and we sometimes went to White Castle.”

She looked toward the ceiling, her jaw slack. “I wish I had a slider...”

“Next she’ll be baking cookies,” Colin muttered, referencing the last time he saw Maggie acting this loopy.

Quinn, in contrast, seemed happy to hear this meandering story.

“This is the clearest memory she’s had since we got here,” he pointed out.

“That’s a good sign, right?” Rembrandt asked.

“Not necessarily,” Sam said, pensive, looking at the equations. He pointed at a section. “We need to collect Maggie’s biological data so we can populate the variables in this formula, but if we follow my current assumptions, it may indicate a dominance trend.”

Quinn’s smile dropped away. “Oh, I see what you mean.”

Colin chimed in: “That would suggest a return to baseline; so if she was left alone, she’d eventually stabilise, would she not?”

“Yeah, but—” Quinn began, but Rembrandt interrupted.

“Hey, brainiacs, give us some plain English, would ya?” he said, feeling quite left out.

Sam put his hands on his hips, surveying the notes, before raising his eyes to meet Rembrandt's, and nervously running a hand through his hair.

"I think that if we don't separate the two Maggies, one of them is going to take over the other. I don't know which one."

"And the one that doesn't?" Rembrandt's voice trembled.

"Her atoms will disperse and she'll be gone," Colin finished, finally grokking what Quinn had been trying to explain to him.

"Oh, boy!" Maggie proclaimed with feigned positivity, her words dripping with sarcasm. "Let's take bets on which one of me sticks around."

But she was met with a room of grim, sombre faces.

Her facade dropped away, too, and the five of them fell into a morbid silence.

After a minute, Maggie piped up. "Got an ETA on this process?"

"Can't say," Quinn replied. "We need to get samples of your cells into a lab; that may be able to give us the data we need."

"And that brings us back to the Professor," Maggie concluded.

"Precisely."

## 2.7 • ANGRY BRITISH MAN

The university campus was more or less how it had been during Quinn's time there, though with some key differences that marked the time period.

Beside him, Sam surveyed the students in their flared jeans and luxurious blow-dried hair, carrying stacks of books across the grass.

"Sure brings me back," he mused.

"You must have spent a lot of time in a university if you have seven doctorates," said Quinn.

Sam nodded. "Oh, yeah. Gosh, it would have been fourteen years, I guess. From age sixteen all the way to thirty."

He gazed into the distance with a nostalgic smile.

"If you have a double on this Earth, where would he be now?" Quinn probed.

He stroked his chin. "Hmm, late '78... I might have just finished up med school, and started my dual Engineering and Computer Science degrees at Caltech, while putting in intern hours at a teaching hospital."

Quinn laughed. "And *you* were surprised at *me* getting a lot done in a short time."

"It's easy enough to study for exams when I only need to read the textbooks once," he said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Oh, I see," Quinn nodded. "Eidetic memory?"

*So that's it.*

"It was quite the blessing," Sam admitted. "And then, I started leaping and my memory went haywire."

He gave a self-conscious chuckle. "You know, the first time, I couldn't even remember my own name?"

Quinn considered this with fascination.

"If there really is some kind of higher power involved in all this, why would they do that to you?"

"You know, that's a really good question," Sam said. "I've never really had the opportunity to think about these things; not 'til I met you. It's just been one thing after another. I can never get a break."

"I know how *that* feels. Every place we go, we have to figure out the new rules and hope we don't get into mortal danger... but we still do, anyway."

"It's impressive you've managed to survive so long."

"Well, not all of us did," Quinn said, the pain of regret flooding into his chest.

The two of them had reached the sciences building, and Quinn stared at it with nostalgia, before realising he didn't know where the Professor's office would be in 1978.

"Where to?" Sam asked him. Quinn tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully.

"He's far from being tenured at this point, so I don't know what kind of dinky office he'll be in. I guess we find a faculty member and ask 'em to point us in the right direction."

He walked into the building, glancing around at the staircases and corridors, before spying an older man with white hair and

thick-rimmed glasses, carrying a briefcase. Quinn figured it was a good bet this man was faculty.

“Excuse me,” he said to the man, “Do you work here?”

The man seemed flustered, but smiled at him. “Why, yes. How can I help you, young man?”

“I’m looking for Professor Arturo... would you know where he can be found?”

The smile on the man’s face faded. “Oh, you mean the angry British man? He’s currently in the faculty lounge, making everyone miserable.”

Quinn stifled a laugh. “Yeah, that sounds like him. Thanks.”

The man gave him a polite smile. “I hope you’re not turning in a late paper. He’ll bite your head off.”

With that, he turned away and disappeared into the crowd of students.

Quinn turned towards the doorway, where Sam was waiting, and gestured for him to follow. He looked down the hall, hoping the faculty lounge was in the same place as it had been in the 90s.

As Sam approached, he pointed. “He should be down that way. By the sounds of things, he’s not gonna be a ray of sunshine to deal with.”

He began heading down the corridor, with Sam catching up.

“Can’t wait to explain to him that we’re inter-dimensional time travellers, then,” Sam said with a bitter laugh.

“It’s gonna take some convincing, certainly. The guy has no patience for the unexplainable.”

“Then I’ll keep quiet about the higher power stuff,” Sam said, picking up on Quinn’s subtext. Quinn nodded in agreement.

The sign on the door was clear: this was indeed the faculty lounge, to Quinn's relief. He tapped on the door nervously.

A middle-aged woman opened the door, and eyed Quinn.

"Students aren't permitted in here," she said in a terse voice.

"Sorry. I'm not actually a student, but I'm here to see Professor Arturo."

The woman pondered this for a moment, before leaning towards him.

"You'll get him out of here for a while?" she said in a low voice. Quinn nodded.

"At least ten minutes."

"Make it twenty, if you can. I'll get him."

She shut the door.

"Not a well-liked guy, I guess," Sam commented.

From behind the door Quinn could hear a booming, angry voice. Then, stomping towards the door, before it opened and Quinn came face to face with the Professor, aged in his mid-thirties, glowering at him.

"Who the devil are you, and why have you seen fit to interrupt me during my lunch hour?" he asked with a scowl.

The deep-set furrows in the face Quinn knew were mere lines at this point, and the beard Quinn had never seen him without was vacant from his chin, in favour of a moustache flanked by generous side burns.

Quinn opened his mouth to answer, but found himself pre-empted by Sam, who'd lunged forward to shake his hand.

"Professor Arturo, pleasure to meet you. I'm Doctor Sam Beckett. I'm here with my student, Quinn Mallory. We're visiting

from the Physics Department of MIT.”

Quinn stepped back to let him do his thing. He was doing better than Quinn would have done; if not for his honorific, then for his seniority over the both of them.

Arturo’s stormy expression seemed to clear as he took in Sam’s introduction.

“We have a very important matter to discuss with you,” Sam continued. “Do you have somewhere private we can talk?”

“MIT, you say?”

Sam flashed him a smile. “Professor LoNigro sends his regards.”

Arturo looked bashful, perhaps surprised to find out he was known to this other Professor.

“Well then, gentlemen, come along,” he said cheerfully, and led them down the hall to a small office that Quinn could swear had been a janitor’s closet in his time.

It was a cramped space, filled with books and papers. On the wall, a small chalkboard with some incomplete equations scribbled on it.

“Pray-tell, what brings you to me, of all people?” Arturo asked, as he sat at his desk, lacing his fingers.

Quinn exchanged a glance with Sam.

“Look, what we’re about to tell you is going to sound implausible at best, so before we do that…”

He approached the chalkboard, assessed the work, and picked up the chalk.

“Here’s a freebie for you,” he said, completing the algorithms. “Gesture of good faith.”

He turned back around to see Arturo's jaw hanging open.

"How did you... I've been grappling with that for weeks!"

"You would have got it eventually... I read it in one of your books," he said with an enigmatic smile.

"I haven't published any books..."

"Not yet," Quinn shrugged.

Sam chimed in: "A few years back, Professor LoNigro and I developed a theory of... time travel."

Arturo's eyes narrowed. "Pardon me?"

"The theory proved sound when I managed to build a functioning time machine, which was first tested in 1995."

"Nineteen ninety... what?" The Professor was struggling with this greatly.

Quinn placed down the chalk, and stepped toward the desk.

"That was also around the time I crossed the Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky Bridge, after I accidentally opened a gateway to a parallel Earth." He leaned in towards Arturo. "*You* went in there, with me, Professor."

Arturo stared for a moment, a mixture of confusion and anger on his face, before unexpectedly coming out with a nervous laugh.

"Alright, you've had your fun, hazing the green Assistant Professor. Jolly good. Now, what are you *really* doing here?"

"Look, I *wish* we were joking," Quinn said. "But we're kind of stuck, and we need your help."

*What can I say to earn his trust?*

"Listen," he finally said, sitting on the one spare chair in the room, and pulling it up against the desk, "I doubt I'm in my home dimension right now, but the Professor I knew used to be married



to a woman named Kristina, who passed away of a brain aneurysm in her twenties. And, one of his earliest memories is of his mother's body being pulled off him after his aunt's house was bombed in the second World War."

Quinn could see the colour drain from Arturo's face, as he stared, unblinking, back at him.

"How could you possibly know about that?" His eyes glistened and his voice wavered.

"You told me," Quinn explained, and took a breath before continuing.

"There's someone I care about whose life hangs in the balance right now, and..." he stopped for a moment, feeling his throat constrict. Sam picked up the slack.

"Quinn isn't really my student; he's *yours*. Just... not yet. You taught him most of what he knows."

Arturo was silent, studying Quinn's face. Quinn smiled weakly back at him.

"I'm happy to explain my theory, if you don't believe time travel is possible," added Sam.

"I daresay you'd better," Arturo said, after a deep breath.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Sam, Quinn, and the Professor were in an empty lecture hall, with two chalkboards filled with equations.

Sam had gone through his string theory, gave a heavily redacted explanation of Project Quantum Leap, and then let Quinn explain

his own discoveries. Finally, they'd finished up with their current predicament.

Sam's photographic memory had served them well, with him being able to fully write up the sea of scrap paper they'd been looking at the night before.

"So, that's more or less what we're dealing with," Sam said, finishing his extremely long-winded explanation, and waited for Arturo's reaction. The Professor stared at the chalkboard for a while, before finally turning to Quinn.

"Why do you think I can help you with this? I'm hardly at the forefront of physics. I'm no more than an assistant."

Quinn scratched the back of his head.

"Because you're one of the smartest and most resourceful people I know. I once saw you make penicillin out of trash!"

Sam raised an impressed eyebrow at this.

Quinn continued: "I know all of this is far-fetched..."

"Yes, well," Arturo gestured to the chalkboards, "If it were a mere prank, it would have to be the most elaborate and scientifically sound prank I've ever seen."

He pressed his lips together as he considered all of this.

"We're stranded and our only income source is street performance right now," Sam said. "We need access to a lab so that we can run some tests and fill some blanks in the equations. And we may need certain parts and equipment."

Arturo finally folded his arms.

"Very well. Doctor Beckett, Mister Mallory, I'll help you. On one condition."

"Name it," Quinn said, mouth curling upward.

Arturo gave a sly smirk. “This ‘sliding’ machine you described. I’d like the plans to build one.”

Sam met Quinn’s unsure eyes. Quinn seemed to want Sam’s input on the matter, but all he could do was shrug.

“What... what if I just helped you along with all the theories I already know you’re going to figure out,” Quinn suggested.

“Now, how would that leave me in any better a situation?”

“On the off chance this *is* your home world,” Sam said to Quinn, “sharing that kind of detail could impact the timeline in a way that undoes some key events in your personal history. If you grow up in a world where the machine’s already been invented, you might never build it yourself, which in turn may affect your presence here. I’d tread carefully.”

Arturo seemed to take this in thoughtfully.

“Hmm, yes, I see how that might create a paradox.” He squinted, looking at Sam. “Then again, *you* claim to change history on a regular basis.”

Sam gave a conceding gesture. “True, but I *usually* have the help of a computer that’s constantly monitoring changes to the timeline, and calculating the odds of anything going wrong.”

“Coming to see me at all was a risky move,” Arturo added. “There are now a number of things I will need to act surprised about in my future.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. We’re low on options,” said Quinn.

Arturo threw up his hands, defeated.

“Fine. Meet me in my office tomorrow afternoon at 3 o’clock sharp.” His eyes flicked toward the ceiling. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what a day.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief, and watched Quinn give the Professor an unrestrained hug, laughing.

“I *knew* you were one of the nice Arturos,” Quinn said, causing Arturo to give Sam a puzzled glance as he was squeezed.

## 2.8 · SKIPPING AHEAD

Maggie awoke from a wonderfully dreamless slumber, one of several short stints throughout the night, and now, day. While she seemed to be free of the nightmares, she now found her head was in splitting pain once again. She rubbed her forehead and moaned.

“Ah, welcome back, Maggie,” came Rembrandt’s voice from somewhere across the room. “You hungry?”

“Yeah.” She opened one eye and glanced around the room, before a burst of pain forced the eyelid to close again. It was enough to see that it was just the two of them in the suite.

“Where’s everyone gone?”

Rembrandt threw a bag of salted peanuts to her. “Q-ball and the Doc have gone to see the Professor, and Farm Boy’s gone to snoop on Q-ball’s parents. Just leaves me to keep you company.”

Maggie gave a weak snort, thinking about how Rembrandt hadn’t used a single actual name in that whole statement.

She clutched the peanuts, and tore open the bag, her eyes still tightly shut as she chewed on them.

“Want another... *you know what?*” Rembrandt suggested.

Reluctantly, she nodded. “It’s kind of embarrassing, but it’s better than being completely out of commission.”

“Would it make you feel more comfortable if we did it together? Definitely won’t be my first time.”

Maggie smiled at this. The singer's past as a touring performer probably was the kind of environment that encouraged a lot of substance use. A little mary jane was probably small potatoes.

"Sure," she said, in answer to his offer, and it didn't take long for the two of them to be relaxed on their beds, surrounded by clouds of earthy smoke.

"Do you really think they'll be able to help me before... you know..." Maggie said, having one final toke on the spent joint.

Rembrandt smoothly exhaled the puff of smoke he'd been holding in, making a large smoke ring that slowly dispersed as he spoke.

"Sure they will, Maggie. Seven-time-Doctor and Q-ball, workin' with the Professor? That's a dream team."

Maggie's head was as cloudy as the room. The only thing she remembered about the Professor was an older man with a limited vocabulary dying of a gunshot wound, but everyone seemed to be placing their faith in his help.

"What was he like? The Professor?"

Rembrandt took a little while to answer.

"Real big opinion of himself. Short temper. Called people idiots all the time." He chuckled. "Ah, man. He was great."

Maggie joined in on the laughter. "Oh yeah, sounds like the life of the party."

"He was a softy, really. Just had to go past the first four or five layers of the onion. Kinda guy that did the right thing, just complained about it the whole way."

*Sounds like my Dad, at least when I was a kid.*

The two of them spent a little while in silence. Maggie felt more deeply affected by the drug this time, and it was nice. The pain

had dulled to something she could almost forget about, if it didn't surge whenever she moved her head. She felt relaxed, despite knowing her possible fate.

*Which me will stay, and which will go?*

The two halves of her, which she had dubbed 'Sheriff Maggie' and 'Slider Maggie', did seem to be getting a little easier to distinguish than they had been. She felt one side of her feeling bitter to the core, and a kind of jealousy flared up every time she thought about Slider Maggie's experiences. However, there was a defiance that came with the jealousy. Sheriff Maggie didn't want to be *consumed* by Slider Maggie, she wanted to *be* Slider Maggie. It was a conflict that caused an uneasy tightness in her chest.

And then there was Uncle Sam. Her memories of him blended together to the point that she didn't know which was which at all. In Slider Maggie's world, she didn't know if he was a time traveller or not. If he was, did he even know that his world was destroyed?

"I wonder if he's still in the past, leaping from person to person, wondering why nobody in his present is contacting him?" she wondered aloud.

Rembrandt looked at her, puzzled. "What?"

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Oh, right, I forgot I was just thinking all that and not saying it."

She rolled over to face him. "I was just thinking about the Uncle Sam from the Earth that was destroyed. What if he's stuck in the past, and doesn't even know that there's no future to go back to?"

She felt her eyes welling up as she thought of how tragic that would be.

“Hey, maybe one day he’ll jump into someone who can kick Rickman’s butt before he kills all those folks.”

It was a nice thought. But that was really all it was, a thought. Maggie couldn’t find it in her to hold out hope of such things.

She stretched, and gingerly rose off the bed. To her surprise, she felt okay. Not brilliant, of course, but as okay as she had felt since she’d been in this state of fusion.

“I wanna get out of here,” she announced. Rembrandt raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“You sure you’re up to it?”

“Yeah,” she said, almost as surprised as him. “I want some sunshine. Can we go for a walk, Remy?”

Rembrandt sluggishly climbed off his bed. “Sure thing.”

He glanced at her eyes, and added: “Think we better steer clear of the fuzz, though.”

Maggie’s eyes widened, and she moved to the bathroom to see her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were noticeably bloodshot.

Great, now that was all she was going to be able to think about while they were outside.

\* \* \*

As Sam and Quinn trekked back to the hotel, their mission a success, the two physicists talked animatedly about things that a layman observer couldn’t possibly comprehend, both enthusiastic about having someone off whom to bounce ideas.

Through it all, Quinn wondered how much of Sam’s extensive knowledge was forgotten through his damaged memory. He was



pushing the limits of his own knowledge, and Sam hadn't slowed down. With these supposed gaps in his memory, Quinn had to wonder just how vast his knowledge must have been before. He wondered if this was how Professor Arturo had felt at the moment he'd seen the chalkboard in Quinn's basement all those years ago.

As they walked along the city sidewalk, the stimulating conversation between them was brought to an abrupt end, when Quinn spotted a familiar face hailing a cab.

"Hold that thought," he said to Sam, and dashed off towards Michael Mallory.

"Hey!" he called out as he approached. Michael, who was standing by the cab with the door open, looked at him with a furrowed brow.

"Hey Da- uh, sir," Quinn fumbled. "I'm glad to see you again. I want to apologise for yesterday, I don't know what's going on but it's clear I made you uncomfortable."

His father looked him over momentarily.

"I think you may have me confused for someone else," he said curtly, and got into the cab. He shut the door and it pulled away, leaving Quinn even more confused than before.

*Wait, why is he in a taxi? He has a car.*

Quinn watched the cab for a moment, before making a snap decision, and hailed a cab for himself.

"Follow that guy... not too close." he told the driver, and he mouthed 'sorry' towards Sam, on the street, who had watched this scene in bewilderment.

\* \* \*

Colin skipped over the white fence, and ducked behind a bush.

Unlike the way they had approached Quinn's childhood home the previous day, today Colin was going to try and be covert about exploring the house, and seeing if he could figure out the reason behind Quinn's foster father's paranoia.

He'd already seen Michael Mallory leave for work, so at least he wouldn't run into him, but Quinn had all but guaranteed his mother would be home, so he still had to be sneaky.

He crouched and made his way to the basement hatch to the side of the house, which was secured with a padlock, as expected; nothing he couldn't pick. He dropped to a prone position, and peered through the window just to the right of the hatch, and his heart skipped a beat when he locked eyes with a small child.

Colin crawled away from the window, alarmed. He'd already blown his cover. This wasn't ideal. Colin ducked behind a hedge, cursing his misfortune.

*Was that Quinn?*

The child did bear a resemblance to his brother, certainly.

"Hello?" Came the voice of the five-year-old. Colin heard the window open. "Who are you?"

Colin sighed deeply. If he was going to get out of here before his mother noticed, he'd have to engage the boy.

He stepped out into the open, and sat on the ground. Little Quinn was at the window, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Are you the man who wants to take me away?"

Colin frowned. "No..."

"Then why are you here?"

At that moment, Bopper rounded the corner and made a frenzied beeline towards him.

“Um, I am... here to pet Bopper,” he lied, as the dog jumped on him, and began to lick his face. He rubbed the dog’s back. “Good boy...”

He gently coaxed Bopper off of himself, and stood.

“That was fun. Now, I’m going to go find that man, and um, tell him not to take you away, okay?”

Quinn looked up at him, pouting. “Mom already did, but she says I gotta stay in the basement for longer. I’m bored.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Colin said, brushing the dirt off his clothes. “Well, I have to go now.”

“Wait, what’s your name?”

“Uh... Skip,” Colin replied, recalling the name of Quinn’s childhood imaginary brother.

He crouched and slunk away from the house, feeling the young Quinn’s eyes on him as he went.

As he cleared the fence and returned to the street, he was startled to see a taxi pull up in front of him. The surprise turned to heart-pounding anxiety as he saw Michael Mallory emerge.

Colin froze as his father locked eyes with him.

And then, Michael’s eyes moved to the gate of the house, and he walked past Colin without a word. Colin watched him start to open the gate.

*Huh? It was like he didn’t recognise me.*

As he headed up the path to the house, Colin crouched out of sight of the door, before seeing yet another taxi pull up.

A moment later, he and Quinn were peering through bushes at Michael Mallory knocking on the door of his own house.

This was turning out to be a strange kind of day.

## 2.9 • DOWN MEMORY LANE

Quinn exchanged a troubled look with Colin, as they crouched by the fence, peering through the palings at Michael Mallory rapping on the front door of the house he owned.

First his lack of recognition, then the taxi, now this? If Quinn didn't know any better, he'd think he was looking at a double of his father.

The pieces slowly started to connect in his mind as he watched Amanda Mallory open the door and look at Michael with trepidation.

“Are you...”

“I'm not your husband, no.”

Colin glanced back at Quinn with wide eyes.

“Why are you here?” Amanda asked, accusing.

“I just wanted to apologise for the way I spoke to you the other day,” said Michael. “I'm returning home in an hour, and I didn't want to leave on a sour note.”

“I see...”

“When you said he'd passed away, I couldn't believe it,” he said, emotional. “I'd thought by sending him here he'd be safe, but... I took my failure out on you, and I'm sorry.”

Quinn felt the blood draining from his face.

*It can't be, surely? No way.*

He grabbed Colin's hand tightly, barely realising he was doing it.

Missus Mallory gave Michael a tight smile.

"Well, I'm sorry we couldn't protect him. We were devastated too..."

Colin leaned in towards Quinn, and whispered: "Young you is alive, and hiding in the basement."

That seemed to confirm it: this was Earth Prime, and he was living in his own personal history. He suddenly felt quite unwell, as he realised the implications.

*I've surely altered all kinds of stuff already...*

The grip he had on Colin's hand tightened.

Then it hit him, like a brick: a vague, long forgotten memory from childhood, seeing a man through the basement window, calling himself 'Skip.' A man that looked just like...

*Oh boy.*

He was so lost in this thought that he hadn't realised the conversation at the door had concluded, the front door had closed, and Michael Mallory was already opening the front gate.

Not knowing what else to do, he stood from his crouching position and looked into the face of his birth father.

"H-hello again," he said, with a half-hearted wave.

He sensed Colin staring up at him in alarm.

Michael looked at the two of them, one guy who'd clearly followed him from downtown, and the other who had just been caught eavesdropping.

And Michael merely served them an expression of disbelief, before turning to hurry away from the pair.

“Wait!” Quinn cried, grappling for some piece of information that would get him to turn around. “I need to talk to you about the Kromaggs!”

That most certainly did the trick. Michael stopped in his tracks, and spun around, with an alarmed look.

“What did you just say?”

Quinn sighed with relief. “You know, ugly guys with pointy teeth, like to eat human eyes, for some disgusting reason?”

Michael stepped forward, frantic. “Who *are* you?”

Quinn tugged on Colin’s arm, and he stood.

“We’re your sons.”

He felt Colin’s eyes burning into him, but he kept his gaze trained on his father.

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “That isn’t funny. I just found out both my sons are dead. Tell me who you really are.”

Quinn walked carefully towards him, as he explained:

“My name is Quinn Mallory, and this is my brother, Colin. Two years ago, you left your sons on two different worlds while your people were fighting a war. When you came back, mine told you I was dead, right? That’s what that conversation was about...”

Michael took a few steps back as Quinn closed in on him. Quinn stopped walking, giving him some space. He held up his hands.

“It’s complicated, but no, I wasn’t dead, and neither was Colin.”

“Please don’t go yet,” said Colin, looking at Michael with shining eyes. “We’ve spent so long looking for you.”

He flicked a glance at Quinn, before looking back. “And we may actually be in need of your help.”

Quinn reached into his jacket, pulling out the timer he'd thankfully brought with him to show to the Professor earlier.

"If you overstay your slide, we've got a timer with twelve days left on it... just needs a few tweaks and you can be back home by then. I already have the coordinates... I think."

Michael stared at the timer with surprise.

"You're a slider..."

"Apple doesn't fall far from the tree, right?" He grinned.

Michael narrowed his eyes. "How did you get the coordinates?"

Quinn flipped open a small compartment in the timer that he'd installed during one of the more quiet slides a while back, and two microdots fell out into his hand; the chips left for the brothers to learn of their heritage.

Finally, Michael closed the distance between them, and picked up one of the chips, studying it.

"My God." He looked into Quinn's eyes, searching. "It's really you?"

Quinn gave him a bittersweet smile.

"Hey, Dad."

\* \* \*

Rembrandt closed his eyes as he took in the sun. The air was chilly, but the sun gave a penetrating warmth that counter-acted it. In his inebriated state, it felt wonderful.

He was lying, face-up, on the grass of Golden Gate Park, next to Maggie, who was similarly enjoying the early afternoon sun. She



was licking a popsicle.

“The last time I was in San Francisco, I almost died, didn’t I?” she said without warning.

Rembrandt turned to look at her, unable to suppress his smile at the fact she was remembering things from his Maggie’s past. She was staring up towards the clouds, her eyebrows low over her eyes.

“Yeah, that’s right. When you went to Earth Prime with Q-ball for the first time, you couldn’t breathe.”

“That was weird...” she said, and chuckled a little. “The pollution’s way worse in 1978, but I’m okay this time...”

“This probably isn’t Earth Prime, but even if it was, Q-ball said your lungs adapted or something...” he said, trying to use what little explanation Quinn had given him back then.

“Doesn’t matter now,” she said, brushing off the issue. “Just wish I hadn’t ruined Quinn’s reunion with his Mom by choking like that.”

Remy was surprised at the depth of her recall on this memory. He wondered if the Maggie he knew was slowly starting to take control. Despite himself, he felt some comfort in the idea that his Maggie might be the dominant one.

“Do you remember when we first met?” he pressed, against his best judgement.

He watched her squint her eyes, struggling to access the memory. Then she looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Did you and Quinn lock me in the trunk of a car?”

Remy laughed. “I think it was Quinn and Wade that did that, but I was there, sure.”

“Wade... I mentioned her before, didn’t I?”

“You don’t remember her?”

“When I try to think of her, all I see is an angry girl giving me the stink eye,” Maggie said, with an amused snort. “She hated me, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess she wasn’t real fond of you,” Rembrandt agreed. “I think she was head over heels for Quinn, and she saw you as competition.”

Suddenly, Maggie burst out with laughter.

“I literally *married* Quinn in a bubble universe, grew old with him, and it *still* wasn’t enough for him to pursue a relationship with me!”

Rembrandt’s eyes widened as he realised just how much of his Maggie’s life she was now recalling. He glanced at her, and she looked troubled, despite laughing mere seconds earlier.

She was quiet for a moment, then she spoke: “My head is killing me.”

Taking the cue, he scrambled to his feet, and helped her up.

“Let’s get you back to the hotel,” he told her. She nodded in reply, before rubbing her temples.

## 2.10 • PAST TIMES

Sam leaned, arms folded, against the kitchenette counter in the suite, wondering where Maggie and Rembrandt could have gone.

After watching Quinn disappear into a cab in a very dramatic fashion, there wasn't much left for him to do but come back here and prepare for the afternoon busking session. But his duet partner was nowhere to be found, and worse was that neither was Maggie, who really should not have been going anywhere in her state.

There were two new butts in the ash tray, which seemed to suggest either Maggie had been in a bad enough way to smoke them both, or maybe she and Rembrandt had lit up together. That seemed irresponsible.

He let his shoulders sag, and turned to the minibar to see what snacks might be available.

As he surveyed the selection in the fridge, which was mostly small glass bottles of soda and Reese's Pieces, he heard a noise he was afraid he might never hear again: the Imaging Chamber door.

Completely forgetting his peckishness, he stood and spun around in the direction of the noise.

Nothing.

"Al?" Sam called out weakly. "Ya there, buddy?"

Was he just hearing things? He couldn't say he'd ever had an auditory hallucination of that sound before, but considering how frequently he heard it, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility

that his brain might try to manifest it here, now that he hadn't heard it in a few days.

*But, maybe...*

The detector that Quinn had built was sitting on his nightstand, and Sam grabbed it. After turning it on, he moved the wand around the room.

Towards the middle of the room, he heard the faintest clicking sound, but that was it. Still, that was more than nothing. Maybe, just maybe, Al was closing in on his location in spacetime. He prayed this was the case.

As he returned the device to where he'd found it, the door of the room swung open, revealing Quinn, Colin, and the man Quinn had approached on the street when last he'd seen him.

"Oh... hello?" Sam said, looking at the stranger. Quinn took a deep breath, and gestured to him.

"Uh, Sam, this is our Dad, Michael Mallory." His hand moved out toward Sam as he turned to Michael. "Dad, this is Doctor Sam Beckett."

Sam moved forward to shake the man's hand, and looked questioningly at the brothers.

"Last I heard he wouldn't even talk to you," he said.

"Different father," Colin said matter-of-factly.

"We have a lot to explain," Quinn said.

\* \* \*

Sam's eyes were narrow, shaded by a tightly furrowed brow, as he worked through the information he'd just heard from Quinn

and Colin. His mind raced.

“Okay, so... this really *is* the Earth where you grew up, Quinn?”

The four of them were sitting on the couches by the TV in the suite, with Sam alone on one, and the other three huddled on the other, Michael flanked on either side by his sons.

“And this is your birth father, who left *you*—” he pointed at Quinn, “—here as a child to protect you from a war, while leaving *you*—” he pointed at Colin, “—on a *different* Earth? Using the same technology *you*—” he pointed back to Quinn, “—would go on to independently invent completely by accident?”

Sam bit his lip. “Have I got all that straight?”

Quinn had an expression that, to Sam, read as somewhere between sheepish and amused. “Pretty much,” was all he said.

Michael was sitting there, in silent awe of his sons.

Sam leaned back in his seat, looking Quinn in the eye. “Seems awful coincidental, wouldn’t you say?”

Quinn narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah, a real blessing,” he said slowly. “*Except* for the fact I may have sabotaged my own future by messing around in the past like this.”

Sam stroked his chin. “It may not have changed *so* much, if you’re still here. But I sure wish I had Ziggy around to tell us...”

Michael leaned forward, and put his face in his hands.

“This is certainly a predicament,” he said. “I set out to bring home my boys, and instead I find adult versions of them who never knew me. Does this mean I must now let all those years go by, knowing they’re alive and well, but never bringing them home, so that they still grow up to be the same people I’ve met now?”

“I wouldn’t give up my childhood for the world,” Quinn said, with a sad look at his father. “I’m sorry.”

Michael took his hand. “Then I’ll respect your wishes.”

Quinn smiled. “At least you know we’re alive, and we’re going to find you one day, right?”

Colin shifted uncomfortably.

“My childhood was not so nice,” he said in a morose tone. “Nor my adulthood, for that matter. Why did you put me on that primitive world?”

Michael’s face buried further into his hands.

“At the time, we had no control of the worlds we would end up in, so we took you both to the first two politically and ecologically stable ones with living doubles of your mother and I that we found.”

Quinn interjected: “And you split us up, because...”

“Your mother and I each kept the coordinates to one of you. As you can see, I had yours, Quinn. That way if one of us ever had them coaxed out of us through some mind game or another, we couldn’t give them both up and at least *one* of you would be safe.”

“The parents you put me with had died by the time you came to collect me,” Colin said, “and I languished in an orphanage. I grew up to be shunned for inventing technologies which I later discovered were commonplace on most other Earths.”

“I’m sorry, son. Elizabeth and I... we made a real mess of things, didn’t we?”

“It’s not too late to change things,” Sam said, causing all three men to look at him.

Sam looked pointedly at Michael. “Little Colin’s still in that orphanage, waiting for you.”

A wave of incredulity passed over the family. Quinn was the first to react.

“What happened to creating a paradox? If Colin’s not where he was when I found him...”

“When I first started leaping, my brother had died in Vietnam. Now, he has a daughter named Maggie. Big changes can happen, if they’re meant to. I’ve found that the universe is largely, well... self-correcting.”

“So all that talk in front of the Professor earlier?” Quinn was looking at him, searching.

“That’s the rational endpoint, *but...*” He looked up at the ceiling. “Sometimes... we have to trust that we’re doing the right thing. Even if Ziggy disagrees.”

*I’m talking like some sort of preacher*, he thought with distaste.

‘You just gotta have faith’ was never a satisfactory answer when he went to church as a kid, but it seemed like the words he lived by, these days.

Colin stood, looking troubled.

Michael looked up at him. “I’ll let *you* make the final decision on this, Colin. It’s your life.”

He nodded with uncertainty, and laid back on his bed, apparently deep in thought.

As Sam was trying to think of what to say next, Rembrandt burst into the suite, a pale Maggie holding on to him tightly.

“Gotta get this girl to bed,” he said in lieu of greeting, as he helped her get to her bedside.

Maggie’s red eyes were barely open, as she let herself fall onto the bed, before burying her head under a pillow.

Rembrandt turned back towards them, and Sam watched his similarly bloodshot eyes stop dead on Michael.

“Mister M?” he said, startled.

“Remy, it’s our birth Dad,” Quinn told him excitedly.

The rest of the conversation went unnoticed by Sam as he approached Maggie.

“Are you alright?” he asked her, taking a hold of her hand. She squeezed it, and moved the pillow so that her mouth was uncovered.

“I... I was fine, but I don’t know. We were just reminiscing, having a nice time, and then boom, pain comes back with a vengeance.”

“Reminiscing...” Sam frowned. “What about?”

“How I first met Remy, and... *ow!*” She winced.

Sam was silent for a moment, piecing together the evidence.

“So it hurts the most when you try to dredge up memories? Is that it?”

“I don’t know...”

From what Sam had observed, Maggie had seemed to be in the highest spirits when she was just relaxing and letting thoughts and memories pop into her head, instead of seeking them out. That might have been an added benefit to the medicinal marijuana; lending her the ability to be more passive about her thoughts. Though, it clearly hadn’t been entirely reliable in that regard.

Sam patted her hand. “Okay, I want you to try something for me... don’t think too hard about anything. Don’t chase memories, just let your mind wander wherever.”



He saw Maggie nod under the pillow.

“Okay.” Her hand felt around for him, and she grasped his arm.  
“I love you, Uncle.”

Sam felt his heart melt, and he gave her a warm pat on the shoulder. “I love you too.”

He looked over towards the others, and his heart warmed even more to see Quinn leaning on his father, as they watched TV together.

## 2.11 • NOT QUITE READY

“Sorry I’m late,” Al said as he strode into the Imaging Chamber, eyes studying the handlink. “It was a kick in the butt trying to find you, Sam. Ziggy nearly fried herself running through models with the timer data, and...”

Al trailed off as he looked up and realised he was in the middle of a crowded lecture hall, making eye contact with an extremely startled, extremely *young* Sam Beckett.

“Oh boy...”

This had never happened during leaps; Ziggy had always been able to zero in on the right Sam’s brainwaves, even though there was a younger version of him in the past. But since this parallel world nonsense got mixed up with leaping, nothing had been going their way.

The younger Sam, aged somewhere in his twenties, was rubbing his eyes, and glancing around the hall, trying to figure out if he was the only one to see this apparition. The other students, and lecturer, who was droning on about something called ‘Transmission Control Protocol,’ had definitely not picked up on Al’s entrance, though with his loud electric blue patterned shirt and yellow trousers, Al would have to assume that all eyes would have been on him if they had indeed been able to see him.

He raised a finger to his lips as he maintained eye contact with Sam, whose face conveyed mounting alarm.

“Sorry to freak you out, kid. Nobody else can see me. Pretend I’m not here and for the love of Ziggy, *don’t* make a scene.”

Al knew such a request was futile. Knowing Sam, he'd draw attention to himself no matter what.

Sam tugged on the sleeve of the student sitting next to him, a guy who looked some years younger than him.

"Hey, I don't suppose you see a guy standing right there?" he whispered, pointing towards Al.

The classmate followed his finger, and then looked back at him.

"No..." he whispered back, giving him a funny look. "You drop acid before class, man?"

"Just tell him you did!" Al barked. "I told you not to make a scene."

"Uh... yeah, I guess... I guess I did," Sam said. The classmate gave him a smile that Al thought looked like he was impressed.

"Square Sam's letting his hair down? Right on, man. Seize the day."

The kid leaned in further. "Don't let the Prof catch on, whatever you do."

Sam smiled awkwardly, and returned his eyes to Al as his expression turned grave and his face began to pale.

"Listen, kid," Al said, "I'm going to walk through that wall now; just letting you know so you don't freak out. Hopefully this is the last you'll have to see of my mug for at least five or six years, but if it's not, I apologise."

He walked to the nearest wall, and passed through it, feeling the younger Sam's eyes burning into him until he got all the way through. He found himself outside, standing on a sunny patch of grass.

He breathed, then yelled into the chamber at the top of his lungs: "Ziggy, centre me on the *right* Sam for Pete's sake!"

“I’m sorry Admiral, but I’m afraid that isn’t possible,” Ziggy’s smooth, sultry voice echoed.

“And why the hell not?!” Al was seething now.

“Unfortunately, you appear to be connected to the brain waves of the alternate universe Sam Beckett, which is not something I’m currently able to alter due to the remote nature of the parallel universe. This has left your focal location at the alternate Sam Beckett, currently in Los Angeles, too far from our Doctor Beckett’s geographic location for me to centre you on him. My sincerest apologies, Admiral.”

Ziggy’s ‘sincerest apologies’ tended not to have any sincerity at all.

*Oh, for the love of...*

“So I’m stuck with the half-baked version of Sam for now?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Do you have any data on our Sam’s whereabouts?”

“I do, Al.”

Al stiffened at her using his first name. He’d told her to just use their short form names for brevity some time ago, but it still somehow felt weird.

“Which is?”

“The anachronistic appearance of an AI-controlled, late 1990s vehicle in 1978 was what allowed me to zero-in on the correct date. I cross-referenced this with hotel records and found a Doctor Sam Beckett staying at the Dominion Hotel of downtown San Francisco, along with four others.”

“Okay, so I just have to gain the trust of half-baked Sam and get him to call the hotel.”

“It may be prudent to convince this alternate to travel to San Francisco so that I’m able to centre you on the correct Doctor Beckett.”

Al raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You’re not worried that’ll mess up history?”

“Preserving the history of a parallel world in which I do not reside is outside my parameters. I’m frankly unconcerned with what happens in such a timeline. Furthermore, I cannot reliably calculate odds for a universe not my own.”

*Damn, that’s cold,* Al thought. Then again, having an unrestrained Ziggy was a little exciting, in an anxiety-ridden sort of way.

Al moved towards the entrance of the lecture hall, where he awaited Half-Baked’s eventual departure. This proved fruitful after about 20 minutes of waiting.

Students poured out of the double doors, and soon enough the youthful Sam exited, his eyes on his feet, and a hefty stack of textbooks nestled in his arms. He didn’t look to be in the mood for more chitchat from Al, but he was going to get some anyway.

“Hey there, Sam. Sorry to butt in again, but I’ve got a favour to ask.”

Sam gave a harrowing glance at him, and returned his gaze to the floor, doing his best to pretend he hadn’t seen him.

“That’s okay, kid,” Al said, walking beside him, his body passing through the crowds of students. “It’s a good idea to act like I’m not here. Let’s go somewhere a little more private.”

Sam veered away from the thoroughfare, and ducked behind a building to a secluded part of the campus.

*Atta boy.*

He leaned against the brick wall, and slid down it until he was sitting on the grass.

“Okay,” he muttered, “I’m having some kind of psychotic break, right? Katy *told* me I was gonna go nuts if I took on this triple workload, but...”

Al looked on with pity.

“Aw, jeez, Sam. I’m sorry to put you in this position.” He sat down beside the nervous kid. “You may be relieved to know that I’m *not* a hallucination.”

“Sounds like something a hallucination would say.”

“Well, there’s not a lot I can do to prove I’m not, but how’s this: There’s a man staying in the Dominion Hotel in San Francisco who has the exact same name as you. Call the hotel and leave him your number, along with the name Al. That’s me, by the way.”

Half-Baked Sam squinted at him with suspicion.

“Trust me,” Al continued, “you’ll get a call back. And all will be revealed.”

He bit his lip. “I hope.”

## 2.12 · PHONE CALLS

“So who *is* this Professor?” asked Michael, as he followed Quinn, Colin, and Sam across the campus green. Colin looked back at him with a shrug.

“In about fifteen years, he’ll be teaching me physics,” Quinn said. “He’s a brilliant guy. Abrasive, but brilliant.”

Colin had never met Professor Arturo, either. He’d heard the odd story from the others, but he felt quite alienated when he came up in conversation. He wondered why they never used his first name, opting to call him by his title, or occasionally his surname. He wasn’t even sure if he’d ever been told the man’s given name at all, come to think of it.

Colin had to admit to himself that his head was elsewhere today. After the opportunity to rewrite his history had come up, he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

If he agreed, where would that leave him? He would surely be a completely different person; would that new version of him be better off? And how would that affect Quinn? The thought of all those ripples caused by the decision put on his shoulders really shook him.

He supposed he had some time to think about it, now that his father was sticking around for a while. He’d watched Michael as he’d nervously let his timer elapse, just an hour after meeting them. It had been pretty brave; it showed how much he truly cared about them, which was something of a question mark up to now for Colin, who’d felt a little abandoned.

And now, he was going to help them with Maggie, who he'd only seen lying on the bed, occasionally moaning in pain.

But the elephant in the room still hadn't been addressed: that of how his people won the war. And, if that method could be used here on Earth Prime, when it would inevitably be needed.

It still remained to be seen, too, whether they'd be able to return to their own time. If only Sam was in contact with Al and his team in the future, they might have a clue.

So many unanswered questions.

By the time Colin came out of his train of thought, he realised he'd followed the group all the way into a building without even noticing.

He nearly bumped into Quinn as he stopped at a door, and knocked.

The door creaked open, revealing a man with a broad face and a withering glare. The handset of a telephone was pressed to his face by his shoulder, with the curled cord extending back to the desk behind him.

He gestured for them all to come in, and turned, returning to his desk as he barked into the telephone.

"No, William, that girl is a blistering idiot, and frankly I do not care whether her house has a bloody tennis court, I don't want you seeing her." He slammed his hand on the desk. "I'm your father, and you'll do as I say until such time as you move out of my house."

A few seconds passed of bewildered silence. "William! So help me, I will ground you until your hair is grey."

A tone came from the phone, as Arturo gave a frustrated sigh, and slammed the phone onto the cradle.



He composed himself, and looked up at the four who were squeezed tightly into this snug room.

“Was that your son?” Quinn asked.

Arturo narrowed his eyes, giving Quinn a pointed look of warning. Quinn shut his mouth, but Sam picked up where he left off.

“Do you always speak like that to your own child?” He said, matching Arturo’s glower. Arturo stood from his seat, but still found himself towered over by the men he faced.

“How I raise my boy is none of your damned business!”

“If you don’t want to lose him, maybe it is,” Quinn muttered quietly, avoiding eye contact.

Perhaps it was the height factor, or the fact that this Professor was younger than the grumpy older man that had been described to Colin in the past, or the fact that Quinn was speaking from his knowledge of the future, but he said no more on the issue.

“Gentlemen, I, uh... see you’ve multiplied,” he said, with a raised eyebrow and a look towards Michael and Colin.

Quinn gestured towards them. “This is my brother Colin and my father, Michael Mallory. But, not the one from this Earth.”

Arturo stood, looking confused, and extended a hand to Michael.

“Don’t think about it too hard,” Michael said to him, and shook his hand.

Arturo didn’t shake Colin’s hand.

“Will these two be of any use?” he asked, glancing at Quinn and Sam. Quinn gave a proud nod.

“You might be surprised.”

As the only one in the room with no formal education, Colin felt like the odd man out. But Quinn had always placed a great deal of faith in him, which gave his confidence a boost.

All the same, there were significant gaps in his knowledge that left him lagging behind at times. He sure wished there'd been universities like this one on 'Amish World.'

"Very well," Arturo said, "I suppose I'll find out. I've secured us a lab between five AM and midday daily, and Lecture Theatre E between three and eight PM. I will need to be in and out based on my teaching schedule, but I'll give you keys. I trust this will be sufficient?"

"It'll have to be," said Quinn, looking pensive.

Sam let out a sigh. "I'll have to tell Rembrandt he's gonna be a solo act from now on."

\* \* \*

The sound of melodic humming filled the hotel room, as Maggie roused from yet another uneasy sleep.

She felt some déjà vu as she opened her eyes to only Rembrandt again. He was looking in the mirror, combing his hair and humming a tune that sounded familiar, but she wasn't sure.

*Don't try to recall*, she reminded herself.

Since Sam's advice, she had indeed been feeling better. Even now, she was able to open her eyes without the searing levels of pain she'd felt before, even without the help of the weed.

It wasn't perfect, of course. Sometimes she couldn't help her train of thought pushing the limits of her readily accessible

memories, and she'd be rewarded with a fresh reminder of its agony.

It was a strange tightrope she was walking. As though, by actively trying to fish for memories from one part of herself, it was somehow hastening the process of one overtaking the other, and causing the other side to fight to remain. At least, that was her theory of what was happening.

So, she had to swim in the shallow end of her mind, where the two sides of her mingled without conflict. Uncle Sam seemed to be a safe person to think about. The early years of her life, too - they seemed quite similar to one another. The antipathy towards her father was a common thread.

She couldn't pursue memories about any of the sliders further back than their first encounter with Sheriff Maggie, which made it hard to listen to their conversations.

Finally, she spoke up.

"What time is it?"

He looked away from the mirror at her. "Nearly four in the afternoon. The eggheads are all at the university, so I'm the sole breadwinner tonight."

"I wish I could come watch. Put my mind off everything."

He looked at her sadly, but gave her a half-hearted grin, seemingly in an attempt to put her at ease.

"Well, you keep improvin' like this and maybe the Doc will see fit to give you a day pass."

"I don't think I'm really going to improve, so much as stave off the inevitable," she replied bleakly. "The best I can do is not help it along."

The sound of the phone ringing made Maggie jump, and subsequently clutch her newly pounding head.

Rembrandt picked up. “Uh, hello?”

As the spots in Maggie’s vision cleared, she saw Rembrandt’s look of surprise.

“Did you say *Al*?”

He snatched up a notepad and pen and scribbled a phone number.

“Uh, th-thanks,” he said, before hanging up, and looking at Maggie, shaken. He handed her the notepad.

“If Sam gets back before me, make sure he gets this, okay?”

She peered down at it, and was surprised at what she saw.

*SAM - ??? AL ???*  
*WANTS A CALL BACK*  
*555-2329 EXT. 443*

## 2.13 • SAM<sup>2</sup>

Sam sat on the bed in his dorm room, his head buried in the various notes his professor had written on the subject of DOS. There was conspicuously no comprehensive manual for Apple DOS 3.1, to everyone's chagrin. However, his attention was definitely not on the documentation. Instead, he was trying very hard to ignore the old guy in strange clothes that was sitting in an invisible chair across the room.

But, they both knew his efforts were in vain.

It was bad enough that this 'Al' guy was here, but his roommate Jay was also present, strumming aimlessly on his electric guitar, which was in desperate need of tuning. The discordant notes were making him want to throw the instrument out the window.

"I can't believe you're putting up with this," the incorporeal man commented. "My ears are gonna bleed if this guy keeps it up."

*Well then, why don't you leave?*

"You want me to tune that?" he finally said to the 21-year-old.

Jay's hazel eyes looked him over. "I didn't know you played. When did you get time to learn guitar with all your hundreds of degrees?"

Sam blinked in surprise. He'd been here for a few months now; had he really not brought out his guitar in all that time? Well, he'd been pretty busy.

“One of my *doctorates* was in music,” he said with a smirk. “I played piano at Carnegie Hall when I was nineteen, and I’ve been playing guitar since I was a kid. Pass it over, would you.”

He held out his hand. Jay passed the guitar to him, and he began tuning it by ear.

“Jeez, leave it to you to even be a nerd in music,” Jay teased. “Know any tunes written *after* the 19th century?”

The man Jay couldn’t see cackled. “Give him a good one Sam, wipe the smile off his face.”

*If you’re not a product of my own mind, then why do you seem to know everything about me?*

Sam finished up his tuning, and gave the guitar a few strums in various chords, before launching into the opening riff of *Purple Haze*.

After a moment of filling the room with the wailing Hendrix song, he abruptly stopped playing and handed the guitar back to a bewildered Jay.

“Does that answer your question?” he gave a cocky smirk as he listened to his invisible cheerleader applaud.

“You’re just full of surprises,” Jay said, marvelling. “I thought all you were good for was burying your head in a book.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty swamped,” he said, giving a pointed look at the apparition across the room. “Don’t have time for much *messing around* right now.”

The man... ‘Al’ (Sam was loathe to use the name he’d supplied, as if giving him a name made him more legitimate; more real), held up his hands defensively.

“Hey kid, I’m *trying* to make myself scarce, but I wanna be here when you get that phone call.”

*There isn't going to be a phone call.*

He returned to his reading, and his mind started absently conceptualising ways to improve the efficiency of a personal computer's central processing unit.

But these thoughts were interrupted when the dorm room's phone started ringing.

He exchanged a glance with Al, who gave him a smug look, and put down the documents. But it was Jay who reached the phone first.

"Hello, you've reached Jay's love nest," he said, putting on his most studly voice. Sam gave him a sour look. Sure, most phone calls they got were girls looking for him, but sometimes Sam's family called.

"Nah man, I think you've got the wrong number. Ain't no Al here."

Sam flung himself off his bed and snatched the phone away.

"Hello?" he said, eyes wide.

"Uh... is this Al?"

The voice was awfully familiar.

"No, but, he told me to leave you his name." Sam met Al's eye, alarmed. So maybe this guy wasn't as imaginary as he'd thought. Al just puffed on a cigar, which thankfully didn't seem to be dispersing any corporeal smoke into the room.

"Oh... *ohh*... I see. This number you left. It's Caltech, isn't it? What's your name?"

The man spoke carefully, seeming to know more than he let on.

"Sam Beckett..." Sam replied, recalling that the guy he'd left the message for was supposed to have the same name.

“I was afraid that was the case,” said the man. “Is... is Al with you right now?”

“I’m not sure I’d put it that way,” Sam replied, watching Al walk up to him and place his ear *inside* the phone handset.

“Oh. Yeah. He’s not *technically* with you. You’ve probably seen him phase through walls and the like, huh?”

“Sam, can you hear me?” Al called out.

“Al? Oh, thank god, I can hear you! What in the world happened? How’d you end up in my old dorm?”

Al groaned. “Ziggy flubbed the lock-on process because she only had a sixty second wormhole window to find you, or some baloney, and I got homed in on your double instead of you. He’s about as unhappy about it as I am, Sam.”

Sam looked at Al with a befuddled squint.

“Oh, I know that look,” Al said. “Yes, you’re currently on the phone to the older version of you. Surprise! Your time travel theory worked.”

“What?” Sam felt weak at the knees, and sat down on his bed. “I knew I was on to something, but I... are you serious?”

“Must be a lot to take in,” the older Sam said. “Sorry to dump all this on you when you’re already overwhelmed with your studies. In a few months, DOS 3.2 will have a real manual, by the way.”

“How did you...” Sam swallowed as he tried to process this information.

*If he’s me, he must remember...*

“Oh boy...”

“Get used to saying that,” said his older version, with a chuckle.

“I have night shift at the hospital in an hour...” Sam said weakly.



Al shouted into the phone: “Sam, I can’t get Ziggy to centre on you unless the younger you takes a vacay in Frisco.”

Sam looked up at him. “Wait, what?”

“That’s the favour I told you I needed.” Al gave him a forced smile. “How’d you like to go on a road trip with me? Take some time off from your workload and find yourself... in a more literal sense than the expression usually implies.”

Sam spent a moment in silence as he tried to figure out ways this could *not* be happening. Right now, a dream was the most likely candidate. One very strange, long dream.

“Al,” came the older Sam’s voice, “is he freaking out?”

“Of course I am,” Sam replied, pinching the bridge of his nose. Behind Al, Jay was looking at him with a worried expression. Sam held the handset against his chest.

“Would you mind giving me some privacy?”

Jay stood. “Sure... I don’t know who you’re talking to, but you look like you’re having an existential crisis over there. Good luck?”

He grabbed his wallet and headed out of the room. Sam breathed out, and returned the phone to his ear.

“Say, was that Jay Lindell?” the Sam on the other end of the phone mused. “I think he’s gonna drop out next semester. You might be able to convince him not to, though. Try hiding his guitar so he doesn’t waste his time thinking he’s gonna be a rockstar. Believe me, he’s better off in IT.”

“Okay, just slow down,” Sam pleaded. “What’s all this about San Francisco...?”

“Al’s presence is linked to my mesons and neurons, and by extension, yours,” the Sam on the phone explained. “He keeps me

in communication with the future by appearing as a hologram. But something got a little cross-wired along the way and he ended up tethered to you instead of me.”

Al continued the explanation: “I can only go a few miles from my central point, which is you. So I need you to go to San Francisco, so I can talk to the right version of you.”

“And you expect me to what, up and leave all my obligations?”

“Don’t you want to find out more about your future?” the Sam on the phone tempted. “I’m working on something pretty major right now. Bet you’d love to hear all about it.”

Sam fell back onto the pile of papers spread out on his bed and stared up at the ceiling, curling the phone cord between his fingers.

“Let’s assume I went. Wouldn’t messing with my studies change the future? I have something like eight papers to turn in before Christmas break, and a practical engineering project.”

“Piece of cake. Should have all the resources you need here, and you can pick my brain if you need help.”

Sam pursed his lips.

“Can... can you call me back tomorrow? I need to make sure I’m not dreaming all of this.”

“Sure thing,” the older Sam said. “Same time tomorrow? Make sure to have an answer for me. I really need Al’s assistance to help get back to my, uh... just let me know, okay?”

“Okay...”

Sam hung up the phone, and stared at Al for a moment, who tapped his cigar, letting ash fall, which disappeared before it hit the floor.

“You’re still stuck with me for a while, but I’ll leave you be for tonight,” he said with a wink, and tapped on the weird flashing thing in his palm. “See ya round, kid.”

A Star Trek style door slid open behind him, suspended in the middle of the room, and filled with white light – which had been what initially caught Sam’s eye when Al had first appeared in the lecture hall – and he stepped through the doorway, giving a quick wave before the door shut, and he was gone, along with any trace of the mystery door.

Sam looked at the clock, and realised, as his head began to swim, that he’d better head to the hospital.

## 2.14 · AGE GAP

Quinn sipped his black coffee, thinking about how much he wished he had a pair of glasses. His eyes were not getting any younger. As soon as they got tired, he had to strain to keep focus; and he was pretty darn tired.

He stared at the display on the timer. Nine days left, give or take. There was never enough.

The data extracted from Maggie's cell samples had been sufficient to populate the formulas, and it was looking pretty bleak. They had at most a week to separate the Maggies before the process became irreversible.

Sam's provision of his time travel equations were incomplete thanks to his patchy memory, and apparently he had a whole thing with his younger double needing to travel here so Al could show up; the whole thing was a mess.

Meanwhile, the combined knowledge of Michael and himself gave them a pretty good picture of the vortex equations, but there was a significant downgrade in computer tech to bring up the timer code. And that was where he was at now: sitting at one of the world's most sophisticated computer terminals outside of the military, and it was *still* taking forever to load. He wondered bitterly whether it would take as long to load as Sam had taken to type the whole thing up. Assuming he didn't crash the thing.

"How's it going?"

Quinn looked up mid eye-rub to see his father looking on.

“I feel like the timer’s going to run down to zero before this old thing loads,” he whined.

Michael chuckled. “Old thing? I thought you said it was state of the art.”

“For the seventies, sure.” He stood from his seat. There was no point in watching this take its sweet time. He turned to Michael, straightening his back.

“Listen, I’ve been avoiding this, but... I need to know.”

Michael picked up on the grave tone. “Know what?”

Quinn pressed his lips together. “How did your world stop them?”

“The Kromaggs, you mean?”

Quinn nodded. Michael thought for a moment.

“How do you know about them?”

“We’ve run into them a bunch of times. And they’re going to invade this world in about twenty years. It’s... gonna be bad.”

Quinn evaded his father’s eyes, fearing he’d start losing his cool. He felt a hand on his arm.

“Not all of them are irredeemable monsters, you know. We actually managed to come to a truce.”

“You did?” Quinn certainly didn’t expect that.

Michael looked down, regretfully. “We came up with a weapon, called the Voraton device, but its use would have meant certain doom for all of us. So now, it’s... our trump card, I suppose.”

*So it’s like a nuclear deterrent.* It sounded like a pretty tense situation.

“So why are they invading all these worlds in my time?” Quinn rubbed his forehead, and began to pace, trying to get a handle on

all of this.

“I didn’t know they were! Maybe the truce gets broken some time in the future. Or...”

“Or what?”

“Part of our truce was that all who disagreed would migrate to another Earth. Probably ninety per cent of Kromaggs were sent away, and I set up what I called a ‘*Slide Cage*’ to prevent anyone from returning without the proper backdoor access. But I wasn’t aware they had sliding tech.”

Quinn clenched his teeth as he tried to put everything together. His double, the one who he had met so long ago, had claimed to have given them that technology.

“I’ve been to the Slide Cage,” he said simply, avoiding the shame associated with his double. “I’m not sure what you expected that place to be, but it was a warzone until I managed to get everyone out of it. Almost everyone.”

“What? How?”

“I was able to reverse engineer the data from the microdots to work out the backdoor. You know, you could easily redesign it not to capture, but to deflect like a mirror. You just need to—”

“I thought I’d... made it comfortable,” Michael cut in, looking crestfallen.

Quinn sighed. His Dad was a brilliant engineer and scientist, but he didn’t have a great deal of foresight. Then again, Quinn was little better in that department, jumping into a vortex without knowing what he was doing all those years ago.

“You made Purgatory,” Quinn said, with a grim look. Michael nodded sadly.

“You’ll have to explain your idea to me, then.”

“Sure,” he said, taking a final swig of his coffee.

*But that won't stop the other me dooming the multiverse.*

If there was anything he wished he could go back and stop, it was that Quinn. But he just didn't see any way to influence that Quinn, even now that he was in a position to change things.

“Come on,” he said to his father, heading out of the computer lab, “I'll draw you a diagram.”

\* \* \*

Around eight at night, Sam was in the lecture theater, with a yawning Quinn sitting on one of the student seats scribbling something on the half-desk. Sam was in the front of the room, double checking some calculations on the chalkboard, when Al's face popped in right through the chalk scribblings, making Sam jump backward in surprise.

“Oh, for the love of...” he cried, and struggled to regain his composure. “Listen, Al, I'm glad to see you, but can you just use a *door*? One day I'm gonna drop dead of heart failure.”

“Hi to you, too, Sam,” Al said, nonchalantly puffing his cigar. “Your half-baked self just got off the Greyhound.”

He turned around to the chalkboards. “Sorry to interrupt, uh, whatever all this is.”

Quinn had approached him now. “Al's here?”

Sam nodded. “And I gotta go meet myself at the bus depot. You know where it is?”

“Of course,” Quinn confirmed. “Let's go.”

Twenty minutes of walking through the dark streets, and the two of them, along with the hologram, had arrived at the bus station.

Sam peered at the face of his mid-twenties double, and it almost felt like looking in a mirror; but the smoother skin, the lack of deep set lines, and the full brown head of hair, the style of which reminded him of the Bee Gees, made the whole experience surreal.

Similarly, the younger him was glaring back with a mixture of recognition and fear, presumably put off by the signs of aging.

Sam waved at the kid awkwardly.

“Hey there,” he said, and trailed off, not really knowing what else to say.

The younger Sam nodded a greeting, his eyes wide and lips speechless.

“I’m Quinn,” the slider broke the silence, and held out his hand. Sam took it and they shook their greetings.

The young Sam seemed to relax more looking away from Sam and towards Quinn, and Sam looked between them, thinking how close they must be in age.

“We’ve got some fun things to discuss,” Quinn said with a grin. “Do you want to go get something to eat?”

“Sure,” young Sam replied.

Al met Sam’s eye as Quinn led the young Sam away. He looked worried.

“Ziggy has no opinions on messing up the timeline of this world, you know. She said it’s ‘outside her parameters.’ For all she cares, as long as she gets you and your niece back to our Earth, this place can take a jump.”



Sam frowned.

“I’m pretty sure *Quinn* has a few opinions on the matter, because we’re on his home world, and we’re quite sure he’s already changed some things.”

“Oh boy,” Al’s eyebrows shot up. “I’ll have to talk to Gooshie...”

“If Ziggy won’t help preserve the future here, then I’ll have to follow my instincts,” Sam said, his jaw set.

Al laughed. “Sure, when has that ever gone wrong?”

\* \* \*

Colin wandered, absent-minded, through the busy evening streets. He wasn’t sure what day of the week it was; he never really paid attention to that. His timekeeping was dictated by the timer. But it seemed like it must have been a Friday or Saturday night.

He didn’t know where he was going. He just needed a little alone time, to think about his choices.

He’d spent a lot of his life on his own. Then, after Quinn found him, he’d spent almost no time alone at all. It was quite a change. While his life on Amish World had been plagued by intense loneliness, there were times he craved solitude, and he appreciated the small windows of time he had to himself.

And now, although the streets were bustling, he was certainly alone.

The chilly early December air caused a shiver in his shoulders, and he finally decided he’d better go inside. He chose the nearest dive bar, and went inside.

*That's odd.*

Although the streets outside were full of bodies, this place was empty, save for one bartender, who glanced over at him, and nodded a greeting.

Colin looked back outside, as people walked past the glass doors. On the glass, a sign, which Colin saw as inverted: '*Al's Place.*'

He looked back at the bartender, a somewhat stout man with greying hair and moustache.

"Can I get you a drink, son?"

## 2.15 • PAPER UMBRELLA

Colin took another glance around the dive. He'd wanted time alone, but this place was deserted. All except this bartender who was smiling at him jovially. For a minute, he just stood there as the man looked at him expectantly.

*He asked if I want a drink, I'd better answer.*

"Sure, uh, whatever you think I'd like," he said, and furrowed his brow when he realised he said that.

The bartender looked thoughtful for a moment, before starting to mix something up.

"Is it always this quiet in here?" Colin asked, thinking there must be some reason nobody was coming in here. The bartender gave an unconcerned shrug.

"You should see it on the fourth of July," he said.

"Why? What's on the fourth of July?" Colin asked, taking a seat on a barstool. The bar smelled of old beer and tobacco, though there was no actual smoke in the air.

The man tilted his head. "Not from around here, are you?"

Colin placed his elbows on the bar, and planted his chin in his hands.

"I'm from, uh, Canada," he said, using the same old excuse the sliders made every time this kind of thing came up. It rang hollow, and he got the impression the bartender didn't believe it. And yet, he didn't press the issue.

“You looked a little lost when you came in here,” he said, placing a little paper umbrella in a highball glass, and placing the strong-smelling beverage in front of him. It looked just like a drink he’d ordered a long time ago, just after sliding for the first time. He picked up the red umbrella and studied it.

“In case you need to protect your drink from the elements,” the bartender joked, and Colin met his eye with a glare, as he realised this man was using the same phrasing he’d used the first time he encountered a decorative umbrella.

The bartender didn’t react to Colin’s surprise, and just resumed polishing glasses.

“So, you in town for long?”

Colin sipped from his glass, and somehow wasn’t shocked to find it tasted just the same as that first time.

“I’m here for about nine more days.”

“Heading home for Christmas?”

Colin swirled the cocktail in his hand.

“I don’t really have a home,” he admitted. “I just... travel, here and there. With my brother, and a couple of friends.”

“Ah, I hear the nomad lifestyle is all the rage these days.” He looked back at a framed photo of a Kombi van on the wall behind the bar. It was parked at a beach, and the roof rack was loaded with some large surf boards.

“Did you rope your brother into it or did he rope you?” He had amusement in his eyes.

“He roped me,” Colin said truthfully. “It was quite unexpected, and I had no time to prepare. People are probably wondering whatever happened to me, I suppose.”

The bartender stroked his chin for a moment. “But you still left?”

“Yes, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, you could say. And I wanted to get to know my brother.”

“You didn’t know him before?”

“No, we’d just met.” Colin downed the remainder of the drink, and put the paper umbrella in his pocket. He didn’t know why, but it felt significant.

“You didn’t grow up with your own brother, huh? That’s a shame.”

Colin eyed the man, who’d so easily managed to drill down to exactly what was bothering him in just a few pointed questions.

“I grew up alone in... a remote community that stifled my natural talents and interests.”

The bartender took his empty glass.

“That explains why you don’t know what the fourth of July is, I assume. Another?”

Colin bit his lip. “No thanks. How much do I owe you for that?”

“Tell you what,” said the bartender, “I’m feeling generous. I’ll fix you up another if you’ll stay and talk a while longer. On the house.”

“Forgive me,” Colin said, puzzled, “but how exactly does this place turn a profit if you’re giving free drinks to your only customer?”

The bartender just flashed him a wink, and continued making the second drink without answering the question.

“So, your brother shows up out of nowhere and whisks you away with no notice, and now you’re just travelling to parts

unknown? Is that right?”

“That’s exactly right,” Colin said, with a hint of melancholy. “He’s trying to catch me up on everything I missed out on, but I missed... a *lot*.”

“You wish you could have grown up together?” The man placed the second drink on the counter, and Colin took a sip.

“I wish a lot of things.”

The bartender nodded sympathetically. “Nothing wrong with wishing once in a while. Never know if they might come true.”

Colin laughed. “What if my wish coming true would cause a ripple effect that completely changed the makeup of my neurons? I would be a completely different person. And who knows what other repercussions it would have to the people around me and my past actions?”

The bartender looked at him with surprise. “Most people don’t think that critically about mere wishes.”

“Most people don’t have a real chance to make their most improbable wishes come true...” Colin took another sip of the drink. What was in this thing, that he was talking so freely?

“Even then, I think most people would still jump at the chance, rather than talk themselves out of it.” The bartender smiled. “But, you’re not like most people, are you?”

“You’re not like most bartenders,” Colin countered, as he squinted at the man, as if to try and see what was really under that bartender costume.

“I’m just here to lend a sympathetic ear,” he said. “That’s the number one task when you’re working a bar, you know.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Colin said, sure now that this strange little man knew far more than he was letting on.

“The name’s Al,” he said, frowning, and pointing to the sign on the door. “I was sure you’d read my sign, thought you would have put two and two together. You seem pretty switched on.”

Colin shook his head, but said no more as he took another sip of his drink.

Al the bartender stretched, and leaned against the bar. “You don’t think you deserve good things happening to you, do you?”

Colin shot him a glare. “What makes you say that?”

“Rationalising away that wish of yours, finding reasons it couldn’t work out for you. I think you must have been put down all your life for things you did trying to make things better, and you came to believe what they said.”

Colin was no longer having a nice conversation. It seemed like this Al was invading his mind and trying to pry information out of him, like what he’d heard Kromaggs do.

He suddenly felt very uneasy about the things he’d said here.

“But then again, I’m just a bartender,” Al continued. “You can take my advice with a grain of salt.”

Colin had no idea what that meant.

“I just want you to know that no matter what you choose, whatever changes, you’ll still be the same guy in here.” He placed a hand on his heart.

Colin, despite his suspicions, finished off the drink, and stood.

“Thanks for the chat,” Al said with what appeared to be a genuine smile, though Colin was on edge. “If there’s one thing better than closing a big tab, it’s a stimulating conversation with an interesting patron.”

Colin turned away.

“Y-yeah,” he said. “Thanks for the free drinks.”

As he opened the door to leave, Al called out. “Say ‘hi’ to Sam for me.”

Colin stopped dead in his tracks as the door shut behind him, and he swung around to ask the guy what he meant by that, but he was now looking into a bar with all the lights off, and a chain with a padlock on the door where there definitely hadn’t been one just a second ago.



## 2.16 • BIG DECISIONS

Quinn stretched as he peered around at the now way over-populated hotel suite. Bodies reclined on the beds, and couches. The only one who was missing was Colin. But he was a big boy, and it wasn't that late.

Maggie sat up in her bed, but she had an eye mask over her face, in an attempt to keep out the overhead light that seemed to cause her some pain.

His Dad was watching *Saturday Night Live*, along with Rembrandt and the two Sams.

“This show's going to keep going for at least another fifteen years,” Sam told his younger double. Quinn looked at the TV to see Walter Matthau in a bee costume, and immediately lost interest.

“It's extremely hit or miss,” he said with a wry smile, and the young Sam – who they'd decided would be referred to as ‘John,’ his middle name, to avoid confusion – looked back at him with a smile and a raised eyebrow, that suggested he agreed.

He and Sam then looked to an empty part of the room, reminding Quinn that there was yet another person here that he couldn't see.

“Oh, apparently it's still going in 2002,” Sam said. “And, still just as hit or miss, Al says.”

Rembrandt sighed. “Not on *this* world it ain't.”

John stared at him for a moment. “What do you mean, ‘this world?’”

“What, they haven’t told you what’s going on yet?” Rembrandt glanced at Sam and Quinn with surprise.

“We wanted to ease him into it,” Quinn explained. “He did just get here like two hours ago, and he’s already had to process a few things.”

“Well, ease away,” said John.

“Okay, so, while you were inventing time travel,” Quinn began, rubbing the back of his neck, “I was inventing interdimensional travel.”

John tilted his head with surprise. “You’re kidding?”

Sam continued: “And I’m actually not so much the *future* you as a *parallel* you. But... also from the future.”

“Wait, wait,” John said, “Al mentioned something to do with a ‘wormhole’ when I was on the phone to you. Are you telling me that was the—”

Quinn and Sam joined him, in unison, as he said: “Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky Bridge.”

“Yeah,” Quinn confirmed. “There’s a lot to explain, and you’re welcome to join us in the lab tomorrow.”

John’s eyes shone with excitement. “Suddenly, writing a paper about the technology behind dial-up bulletin board systems seems insignificant.”

“Yeah, the computer tech of this time period is a serious time sink,” Quinn said, shaking his head. “Everything is so clunky and slow.”

“Um, fellas?” came a quiet voice that Quinn hadn’t heard all evening. He turned towards Maggie, who had her hand raised.

Along with the eye mask, she looked pretty weird to Quinn, causing him to stifle a laugh.

“Why don’t you just use Higgins?”

Quinn felt his breath catch, and he met Sam’s eye, who looked just as stunned. Why did it take someone at death’s door to remind them of the obvious?

“Why didn’t we think of that?” Sam said, slapping himself in the forehead. “Higgins is far more sophisticated than *anything* from 1978.”

“What’s a Higgins?” John asked.

Quinn thought for a moment. “You know *Knight Rider*? No, wait, that’s from the eighties...”

“Uh... how about *HAL 9000*,” supplied Sam with an amused snort. “But without the bloodlust.”

“What did we do with the car?” Quinn asked. He merely recalled Rembrandt driving it to the hotel on the day of their arrival, and dropping them off to bring Maggie in.

“It’s in a quiet street with a tarp strapped to it,” Rembrandt said. “Covered it as best I could.”

Quinn nodded. “Alright, I’ll definitely be cannibalising it tomorrow.”

He turned towards the bathroom, thinking about brushing his teeth, but turned the other way as the door of the suite opened, to reveal a pale-looking Colin.

“You alright, bro?”

Colin looked at him with the expression he’d last seen when his brother had thought he’d seen a ghost.

“Um. I don’t know. Maybe.” His gaze moved to Sam, who was rising from the couch with some concern. “Do... do you know some bartender called Al?”

Quinn watched Sam’s expression instantly flick from mild concern to frantic astonishment. Sam crossed to Colin, and pushed him back out the door.

“Give us a minute,” he muttered, and they were gone.

\* \* \*

Sam closed the door and began to pace the hall as Colin watched him silently, his eyes wide. First thing, Sam figured, was making sure they were on the same page.

“Can you describe him? Where was he? What did he tell you?” he asked.

“Middle aged, portly, has a moustache,” Colin said. “Unnervingly easy to talk to. I found him in a bar, but...”

“And he mentioned me?” Sam’s head was swimming.

“He said to tell you ‘hi.’”

Colin was still looking very out of sorts. What advice had the guy given him to cause this reaction?

“What bar?”

“It was called ‘*Al’s Place*.’ But it was so strange, nobody was in there, and when I left, it was like it had been closed all along. I thought I’d imagined the whole thing, but...”

He pulled a red paper umbrella from his pocket, and turned it over in his hand. “It couldn’t have been just my imagination, right?”

“No, he’s... he’s real, alright,” Sam said, leaning against the wall, and dragging a hand over his mouth.

“Who is he? I got the feeling he knew more than he let on. Is he a time traveller too?”

“I don’t know what he is, exactly,” Sam said, coming short of pinning the label of ‘God’ onto the man. “But whatever he told you, it was important. I only ever met him the one time, and he helped me make an important decision. If he spoke to you, it was probably to help you decide something big, too.”

Colin’s anxiety seemed to melt into a pensive look into space.

“My father left me with a decision, if you remember,” he said, after taking a few drawn out breaths.

Sam nodded. “Your younger self in the orphanage.”

“But I’ve been unable to get past the unpredictable effects any change will have on my life, and that of everyone else.”

“And that’s what he was talking about with you?”

“He didn’t say much of substance. But, he did say that I’d be the same in here,” Colin said, pointing to the left side of his chest. He sighed.

“I’m a lot more worried about up here, though.” He tapped his temple. “What are we, but the sum of our thoughts and experiences? Would I cease to be, as you see me? Would any of this have happened to me?”

Sam patted him on the arm. “It’s a big deal, I know.”

He leaned in, as the memories of the decision he’d made at the version of *Al’s Place* in 1953 crystallised in his mind, as if Al the Bartender had reached into his brain and unlocked them in the last twenty minutes. “But, you know, sometimes...”

He looked down the hall, wistful. “Sometimes, deep down, far beyond the rational part of your mind, you just know the right thing to do. You feel it. And maybe you have to sacrifice something to do it, but you never regret it.”

He straightened, breaking the tension with a shrug. “I know, I know. Not very sciencey. But I think that was maybe the point of that visit you got.”

Colin gave him a slow nod, as he absorbed Sam’s words.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “I’ll take all of this under advisement.”

## 2.17 • CLEARER IMAGE

Al paced, as John watched him with confusion.

*Bartender called Al.*

That was the strangest leap Sam had ever had, and the last time Al had seen him before he leaped away, he was making all kinds of nutso statements about a bartender maybe being God.

It couldn't be that guy, though. Could it? The guy would have to be in his seventies or eighties by now, if it was him.

Al watched Colin return to the suite, while Sam lingered at the door, making pointed eye contact, then flicked his eyeline out the door, and back. Al nodded in understanding, and pressed a button on the handlink, blinking himself from his position beside the couch, to the hall.

Sam closed the door once again, and his serious expression had turned into a smug grin.

“You thought I was going off the rails,” he said, pointing an accusing finger, “but he showed up again. Here, tonight.”

Al shifted uncomfortably, as Sam laughed; that same laugh that had unnerved him so much, back in the 1953 mining town.

“Sam...” Al said in a warning tone, but he couldn't come up with a useful counter to Sam's manic energy.

“Don't you get it? This proves we're here for a reason. Maybe several reasons.” He gave a relieved sigh, as if his burdens had just lost their crushing weight.

“How do you know it was the same guy?” Al asked, trying to inject a little doubt into the strange situation.

“Middle aged, moustache, tending a bar called *Al’s Place*? Al, it’s the same guy. I feel it in my gut.” Sam leaned against the wall, and let himself slide to the floor, just as John had done some days before at Caltech. He looked up at Al.

“As soon as I started talking to Colin, I remembered everything about that leap, just like that.” He snapped his fingers. Then, he became more subdued, and patted the floor beside him.

“Sit. I need to talk to you.”

Al was glad he’d settled a bit, but the new tone unnerved him just as much, if he was being honest. He obliged Sam’s request, sitting on the floor; but the wall, being a hologram to him, provided no back rest, so he had to support himself with an arm.

“What’s eating you, pal?”

“That bartender gave me a choice, and it was both the hardest and easiest decision I’ve ever made.” Sam was looking at him with a bittersweet smile.

Al felt he *maybe* knew where this was going, but opted to play his cards close to his chest.

“Go on...”

“I could have gone home, right then. But there was something I had to do.”

*He could have gone home?* That was a new piece of the puzzle. Al kept his best poker face, knowing there was more.

“It’s about Beth...” Sam said, and appeared to struggle to form his next words. Al gave him a smile.

“I know, Sam.”



Sam stiffened. “You do?”

He raised an eyebrow, chuckling. “A mysterious stranger appears to my wife like some kind of angel and you think I wouldn’t connect the dots eventually?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Sam’s cheeks were flushing.

Al shifted positions, allowing the arm that had been supporting him some rest.

“Not to mention, I had some residual memories that prompted me to get a full report out of Ziggy.”

He puffed his cigar, thinking about the shards of memories of ogling women, and one-night-stands, that plagued him, even now. Every time he saw Tina, he had a clear image of what she looked like under those skimpy clothes, even though there was no time he actually should have seen her that way.

“Imagine my jaw hitting the floor when I found out I’d been married five times in the old timeline,” he said with a snort. “I’m grateful for what you did.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Sam said. “I didn’t even remember what I did until tonight, but I’m relieved I finally got a chance to talk to you about it.”

“And you’re telling me you gave up your chance to go home to keep my marriage intact?” Al eyed him, incredulous.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Sam smiled at him. “You deserved a chance at happiness.”

“In exchange for yours?”

“One thing that bartender told me, back then, is that I’m only doing this as long as I want to.” Sam gazed into Al’s eyes. “Every time I leap now, I ask myself: would I rather go home, or help someone else? The answer’s always the same.”

Al broke from his eye contact, and looked up at the ceiling. He couldn't argue with that. Sam was the ultimate helper. He could scarcely think of a more appropriate person to be doing this job. But it didn't mean he wasn't pretty beat up about this. Didn't Sam deserve a life of his own?

He felt he'd better tell Donna about this conversation.

"But, there's something else he said to me," Sam continued. "He said that I can take a 'sabbatical.' I'm still not sure what he had in mind, but once I get back to my correct Earth, maybe it would be a good time for that."

He gave his eyes a rub. "I'm burning the candle at both ends right now. Could really use a break."

Al perked up. "You mean you might come home?"

"I don't know. Maybe home, maybe something I don't expect. God or Fate or Time is fickle that way. But, however it presents, it won't be permanent."

"I'll take what I can get," Al said, with a grin.

\* \* \*

Maggie experienced the next few days as an amorphous blur, only catching the day of the week, or time, in snippets of conversation that went on around her, as she languished in the hotel room. She spent most of her time in bed, only getting up for pressing needs such as the bathroom and water. She felt useless, and frustrated with her position in all this.

While most of the work went on at the university, she had been hearing bits and pieces after they returned, and it seemed like

they were making progress.

Of course, it was entirely possible they were reserving their negativity for times when she wasn't listening.

For the most part, she had been able to maintain a level of equilibrium with regards to her symptoms, but it *was* getting progressively worse, slowly but surely.

They hadn't told her how long she had. She figured they didn't want her panicking, which could have caused a worsening of the condition. But not knowing also had its challenges. Would she just wake up one morning and find one half of her gone? And would that be horrifying, or a relief, to whichever one of her remained?

Then, one chilly afternoon, John stayed behind when the others left. The younger Sam had barely had a chance to talk to her, and she wondered what he was doing, past the eye mask that blinded her to the room.

"Catching up on your papers?" she asked him, not knowing why else he'd be sticking around in here.

She heard his footfalls arrive at her bedside.

"Nah, I'm working on them on campus. I actually wanted to speak with you..."

"I'm not much of a conversationalist right now," she said, with a wry smile.

"I know. And I'm told you can't really access your memories right now, either. So feel free to kick me out of here any time."

She felt him place something in her hand – the last joint from the stash.

"If you want me to light it, let me know."

She smirked. “You think I’ll need this? What are you planning to talk about?”

“My brother died in Vietnam, and I hear you’re his... um, daughter...” He sounded unsure, and his voice was unsteady.

“I’m the daughter of a *version* of your brother,” Maggie explained. “Well, two versions, I guess. But they weren’t much different from one another.”

“Y-yeah, I know,” John stammered. “I just wanted to ask what he’s like.”

Maggie raised the joint. “Oh Lordy, light me up,” she said with a nervous sigh.

She heard the match strike, and a moment later the end of the joint was smouldering.

“That bad?” John asked nervously.

Maggie breathed in the smoke, and held it as long as her lungs would allow, before coughing it out.

“Let’s just say if my Dad saw me smoking this thing, he’d blow a fuse.”

John was silent for a little while, allowing her time to feel the effects of the drug. She was so used to her Uncle’s confidence, that hearing more or less the same voice being so uncertain was strange. And the fact he was quite a bit younger than her was not something she could get used to. It didn’t help that she’d had this eye mask on, and so hadn’t seen the young face he must have.

As the pressure on her head eased, she dared a peek out of the mask, and saw the young Sam, rubbing his hands with anxiety. He looked just as she remembered from her childhood, when he would visit during the summer. She felt like she was ten again.

“Oh, that is a weird feeling,” she said, as she pulled the mask up to sit on the top of her head.

She took another drag, as he sat down on the edge of the adjacent bed. He was looking at her with intense sadness.

“He was a real strict father,” Maggie said, continuing on from the original question. “But he loved you and Grandma a lot. Which made it all the more difficult that he didn’t show me any affection, when he showed it with his other family so freely. He had me addressing him as ‘Sir’ as long as I can remember.”

She wanted to tell him about the later years of her life with her father, but the timeline divergence wasn’t going to allow her to explore those memories.

“The service must have really changed him,” John observed. “Do you... have any good memories with him?”

Maggie thought for a time. “I guess the further back it goes, the warmer he was. I suppose there might be some good times where I can’t access the memories right now. I know he was a great brother to you.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to upset you with my less-than-ideal upbringing.”

“That’s okay,” John said weakly. He stood from the bed, and wandered across to the couch, leaning on the back.

“I’ve been studying the calculations,” he said, and turned his gaze down on his fidgeting hands. “They suggest you only have two more days.”

Maggie felt her chest tighten. Two days was so soon. “Have they figured out how to help me?”

Sam seemed to brighten. “Yes, they’re building it right now,” he said, sheer excitement seeming to override his anxious

demeanour.

“The equations they’ve all figured out, and that computer in the future giving the time travel data, I’ve never seen anything like it. You couldn’t be in better hands, I think.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, and added: “I hope that doesn’t sound self-centred, considering one of the people working on it is the other... me. It’s just been a mind-blowing week, and...”

Maggie smiled at the enthusiasm.

“That computer system built into your car; I’ve been learning so much about the future of technology, and AI. Just the CPU alone is incredible, at least to me.” He was gesturing wildly. “And that timer. God, it’s so much to process, but I just want to know everything.”

“Take it easy,” Maggie said, smiling at the exuberant mid-twenties guy, who reminded her, presently, of Quinn. “So you really think they’re gonna do it all in time? Separate me, then get everyone back to their rightful time and world?”

“Absolutely,” John said, but it wasn’t said in as certain a way as Maggie would have liked.

## 2.18 • TRIAL SEPARATION

Quinn wiped his brow, as he finished tightening the final cap nut on the machine. They didn't have a name for this device, it was just 'The Machine.' It wasn't like it would have much function once it was used, though he figured it might be a good idea to store it in case something like this ever happened again. But, what were the odds of that?

He surveyed their collective effort. The bulk of it was a seven foot long chamber, four feet in height, and divided in two, and two feet wide, capped by a door at one end, and a number of coils and circuit boards at the other.

The idea was to open a wormhole at the top of the chamber into the same dimension, with the exit displaced two feet down, and using the *Quantum Leap Accelerator* tech provided by Sam and Ziggy to leap one of the Maggies through, pulling her into the bottom half of the chamber. That was the theory, anyway.

They'd gone over the calculations time and time again, each trying to find potential problems, and it all seemed sound. But seeing it built and real made Quinn's stomach turn over. They were really going to shut Maggie into this thing and turn it on, weren't they?

"Mister Mallory! How goes it?" came the markedly cheerful voice of Professor Arturo. Quinn rubbed a rag over his hands, clearing off the grease as he gave the Professor a troubled smile.

"Well, it's built. Just gotta be tested..."

“Wonderful! I shall look forward to seeing one of these wormholes.” Arturo put an approving hand on his shoulder, and Quinn couldn’t help but feel reassured. The older Arturo had become something of a father figure during their travels, and this validation brought him right back; especially knowing how hard it was to get a kind word out of the Professor at all.

As Arturo assessed the machine, a grin crept onto his face. His eyes twinkled as he walked around it.

“This project has renewed my faith in the future of our species,” he quipped. “I can’t say I’ve felt quite this giddy since I was a boy.”

Quinn watched him studying each bolt, each panel, each control.

“Marvellous,” he murmured, and rubbed his hands together. “May I do the honours?”

Quinn held up a finger. “Hang on, before you fire it up...”

He crossed to a table, and grabbed his trusty spacetime distortion detector. He turned it on, and held up the wand. It hummed faintly.

“Okay, give it some juice.”

Arturo moved to the main controls, and checked the computer panel built in, before tapping on the keyboard.

“I’ll try it at ten per cent initially,” he said, before pulling the main lever.

The machine hummed with electricity, and a weak undulating blue light filled the chamber. Immediately, the detector began to click, and Quinn brought the wand close. The clicks were strong, stable, and evenly paced.

“Okay, great,” Quinn said. “Try fifty per cent power.”



The Professor typed at the computer, and the light grew, along with the pace of the clicks on the detector.

“Okay, looking good,” Quinn said, feeling much better about his odds of saving both Maggies now. “Alright, we’ll get everyone in the room to see the hundred per cent test. I’m sure Sam’ll want to be here for that.”

Arturo powered down the device.

“Before you do...” he said, pursing his lips. “My initial purpose for coming in here was to have a short tête-à-tête with you.”

Quinn gave a knowing nod. “Let me guess: you want to talk about the future, and how to stop things from messing up because you know too much.” He had been planning on making time for this, too.

“Most astute, Mister Mallory.”

“That is really the big question mark in all this,” Quinn admitted. “And I know that if we use Sam – uh, Doctor Beckett – as an example, we know that some things *can* be changed, but it’s never as outrageous as the last couple of weeks have been. There’s going to have to be a balance between making sure the timeline brings me back to this moment, and helping my friends and family.”

“Yes, you’ve saddled me with quite a burden,” Arturo mused. “If you have the time in the next few days, perhaps you might like to write me a list of notes. Things that must happen in the future, unavoidable things, and things I am able to alter. If that cockamamie computer in the future I’ve been hearing about can assist with that, it would be all the better.”

“I’ll talk to Sam,” Quinn said, rubbing his chin.

Yes, he could certainly write up notes. As long as they didn't get into the wrong hands. One thing he knew for sure, however, was that Professor Maximillian Arturo would never be the same, after all of this.

"Thank you, my boy," Arturo said with a jovial smile, and turned away. "I'll fetch our colleagues."

Quinn, realising the other thing he wanted to talk about, grabbed his arm. "Wait..."

Arturo looked back at his uneasy face.

"About your son..."

Arturo's cheerful expression faded. "What happens to him?"

"I don't know; that's the problem," Quinn said. "All I know is that you had one, and he wasn't in your life any longer when I knew you. I just don't want you to... push him away, you know? If you don't have to."

Quinn kicked the floor with his shoe.

"I don't know what happened between the two of you: you never talked about it. In fact, you never even told me his name. I don't know if I can fix anything just by telling you this, but I thought you should know."

Arturo's eyes were unfocused, as he considered Quinn's words. Quinn was glad to see him taking it seriously, knowing it seemed to be a touchy subject.

"I see. Very well. I shall think more on this later." He headed for the door, considerably less spirited than he had been.

Quinn figured that was as much as he could ask for. Now that he knew the potential future, it was up to him. A *lot* would be up to him, wouldn't it?

“Hey Maggie, it’s time.”

Rembrandt gave her a big smile as Maggie pulled the eye mask up. She squinted in the light, and Remy took her hand, helping her up. She was so pale, and there were dark rings around her eyes. He wondered what kind of funky stuff was happening in her body at that moment.

“I’m so nervous, I feel like I might throw up,” she remarked, to Rembrandt’s disdain.

“Well, try to avoid my shoes, if you don’t mind,” he said, trying to keep the mood light. She responded with a ghost of a smile.

He escorted her to the door, where the two Sams were waiting to play paramedic. They each took an arm over their even-height shoulders, and walked her down the hall.

As the taxi drove them to the university, in the silence of the early morning hours, Maggie rested her head on her uncle’s chest, looking sicker by the minute. Rembrandt wondered if it was the nerves, or whatever crazy thing was going on inside.

“How you doing there, Maggie?” he asked, voice shaking.

“I’m conscious,” she muttered. “That’s about all I’ve got going for me right now.”

Sam gently brushed hair off her face.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “You’re gonna be just fine, I promise. Don’t you go giving up, okay? Either one of you, in there.”

John watched with wide, terrified eyes, and Rembrandt wondered how much experience he had with patients at this

point. He noticed he was keeping a firm grip on her hand, and he wondered if it was for *her* comfort, or *his*.

Quinn met them at the rear of the sciences building, with a stretcher. Maggie was loaded onto it, and the Sams carried her the rest of the way. Rembrandt followed them, after paying the fare, and finally witnessed the machine that they'd all been talking about.

He gave a low whistle at the thing, though he had no idea what he was looking at. The first clue came when they opened one end and slid Maggie in like she was a pizza going in an oven.

He glanced at Colin, who was standing by, holding the detector thing Quinn had built.

“She safe in there, Farm Boy?”

Colin shrugged. “Just as safe as she is outside it, at this point.”

Rembrandt didn't find that very comforting.

Quinn and the Professor were standing by the controls, looking grave, and Michael Mallory was peering into the ‘oven’ at Maggie, who had both hands clutched around her temples and eyes, and wore a tight grimace.

Rembrandt approached the other side.

“Hang in there, Maggie!” He called out.

“Sorry man, I don't think she can hear,” Quinn said, as he typed on a keyboard.

There was a moment of eerie calm, as everyone present, save for Maggie, exchanged looks in silence.

“We gonna do this?” Quinn asked, his eyes on Sam, whose attention was on another part of the room.

“Hang on, Al's getting the final go-ahead from Ziggy,” he said.

After a few seconds, he turned to Quinn. “Go for it.”

Quinn tapped a command into the computer, and nodded to the Professor, who pulled the lever.

Inside the ‘oven,’ Maggie was drowned out by a bright blue, which lit up the room. Everyone looked away from the light, and Rembrandt’s eyes moved back to Quinn, who was concentrating on the computer screen intensely.

Quinn gestured to the Professor, and he brought the lever back to its ‘off’ position.

As the light subsided, Rembrandt could see two figures, one where there had just been an empty space before.

“It worked...” came the weak voice of John, as Sam rushed over to the machine, and pulled open the door.

He pulled out the Maggie on the top first, onto a waiting bed that had been adjusted to the correct height. She was unconscious, and he took her pulse.

John brought a lower bed to retrieve the second Maggie, and started by throwing a blanket in over her. That’s when Rembrandt realised that the Maggie on the bottom level was entirely unclothed. Now that he saw it, it seemed entirely obvious that there was only one set of clothes on her, but he hadn’t thought of it up to this point.

With both Maggies on beds, it was obvious to everyone that both were out for the count. But was that good or bad? Rembrandt looked at the faces around him in an effort to find a clue.

Sam, ever the professional doctor, was fussing over the pair, checking vital signs. His remarkably neutral expression could only be described as ‘concentrating hard.’

John, on the other hand, looked stressed, and was taking cues from Sam for what to do.

Colin looked about as bewildered as Rembrandt felt, but he approached each Maggie and ran the wand of the detector over them. At each Maggie's feet, there was no response, but as he reached their heads, it was clicking like mad.

Rembrandt turned his attention to Quinn, who was rushing over after seeing this response from the detector.

"Why is it doing that?!"

Sam looked up at him. "Watch this..."

He opened one Maggie's right eye, and John did the same on the other Maggie.

Sam shined a light in her eye, and the pupil shrunk in response. Then he nodded towards the other Maggie, whose pupil had become similarly small.

"Same response, as if *she* had the light shone in her eye, too..." John said shakily.

"What does that mean?" Rembrandt asked.

"Strong distortion was detected in the region of the brain," Quinn murmured, looking deep in thought.

"We'll need to run some more tests, but you're on to something; I believe it's neurological," Sam said. "I think their brains might still be... entangled, somehow. Behaving as one."

"Can we fix it?" Rembrandt's heart was pounding.

Sam looked at him, brow deeply furrowed. "I don't know. At 1978 levels of neuroscience technology... I just don't know."

## 2.19 • BLACK COFFEE

*What... what just happened?*

There had been a flash of blue, that much Maggie remembered. But she couldn't for the life of her remember what she had been doing before that. But now, she seemed to be emerging from the Ladies Room of a diner, with slightly dripping hands.

As the door behind her swung shut, she wiped her hands on her... jeans. Jeans and a blouse with blue floral embroidery over the chest. She knew these clothes.

*When was I wearing this outfit before?*

A brief image of the inside of a jail cell flashed in her mind, but she couldn't connect it to anything.

She looked across the vacant diner, and saw another figure, standing just inside the entrance, illuminated from behind by sunlight. Another woman, in a law enforcement uniform.

"Oh, boy..." said Sheriff Maggie as the two locked eyes.

A flood of information entered Maggie's head as she recognised her double. The slide. The leap. The fusion. The god-awful headache. And the machine.

*Uncle Sam and Quinn were trying to...*

She ran across the otherwise empty room, towards Sheriff Maggie, whose hands grappled for a wall as she threatened to fall over in her confusion.

“Did they separate us?” Maggie asked, frantic. She gingerly raised a hand and touched her double on the shoulder, trying to decide if she was real.

“I don’t know, we seem pretty separate to me,” Sheriff Maggie said, as she narrowed her eyes. “But where the hell are we?”

Maggie turned around, taking in the environment. “It just looks like some diner, but I don’t know how we could have got here. It might not be... reality. Maybe it’s another dream?”

“Maybe they made a mistake, and we... leaped.”

They stared at one another for a moment, letting the implications dawn on them.

\* \* \*

Sam stared daggers at Al as he smacked the side of his handlink for the seventh time.

“What’s taking so long?” Sam demanded. He stole a glance at his younger double, who seemed to be in a state of shock.

*He’s actually got a reason to freeze under pressure, unlike Ziggy.*

Al said something in Italian that must have been a curse.

“Sorry, Sam. Ziggy’s taking her sweet damn time correcting for the parallel universe’s minuscule difference in... temporary...”

He squinted at the handlink. “*Temporal... constants.*”

Sam rubbed his forehead. “This wasn’t meant to happen. All of our checking, and double checking, and *triple* checking, and it still went wrong.”



Al gave him a sympathetic look. “I know, Sam, but even Ziggy can’t account for every variable there could be. That’s why the retrieval program never worked.”

“That never worked because...” Sam trailed off, looking downward, as he thought of the reasons why he thought it never worked.

*Because it wasn’t meant to.*

Because the higher power that was doing all this, whether Al the Bartender, or something else, didn’t want him to go home. Because *he* chose to keep going.

The handlink squawked, and Al studied the readouts.

“Oh, come on Ziggy, you bucket of bolts!” he cried in sheer frustration. “She says there ‘should have been’ a clean separation, and has zero theories on why they still seem to be sharing a mind. *Cazzo!*”

Sam felt his tense shoulders sag in defeat.

*Even Ziggy can’t account for every variable.* The words echoed through his mind.

The only other variable he could think of was, once again, fate. Was there anything they could do now, or was it all up to the big guy upstairs? Or maybe, it was up to the Maggies themselves.

He turned to John, who was still staring into space. “Let’s keep them comfortable...” he said.

He would keep thinking.

\* \* \*

“If we leaped, why are we in our regular clothes?” Maggie said, gesturing to Sheriff Maggie’s uniform. “Shouldn’t we be in some random peoples’ clothes?”

Sheriff Maggie shrugged. “I don’t know how it’s meant to work. Should we find a mirror, or-?”

Behind the diner’s counter, a door creaked open. Both Maggies turned their attention to it, and watched a man emerge: tall, slim, and all too familiar.

“Colin?”

This version of Colin wore an apron around his waist, and a hair net on his head. He looked preoccupied, but glanced up at the mention of his name. He looked at the two Maggies without recognition.

“Whoa,” he said as he looked between the identical Maggies. “I’m seeing double. Can I help you ladies?”

Maggie approached the counter, cautious. It wasn’t like she hadn’t met a double of Colin before, but this whole situation was just too surreal.

She felt Sheriff Maggie following closely behind her, and as she leaned on the counter, her ‘twin’ sat on a stool. She checked her pockets for money, and found a twenty dollar bill.

*Might as well go with it, right?*

“Uh, sure. Can I get a black coffee, please,” she said, and looked over at Sheriff Maggie, waving the money. “Want anything?”

Sheriff Maggie raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Make it two,” she mumbled.

Colin nodded, and grabbed a coffee pot from the warmer, effortlessly pouring the cups of coffee. Not that it was hard to pour coffee into a cup, but Maggie observed a kind of familiarity

with the placement of everything behind the counter that suggested he'd worked here for some time. He presented the cups in front of both Maggies.

“So... twins, huh?” he commented, before closing his eyes with a cringe. “Wow, that sounded really dumb, didn't it? Of course you're twins, you look exactly the same. And I bet people always make stupid remarks like that to you.”

His cheeks were pink, and Maggie chuckled at this Colin, whose speech patterns were quite a lot different to the one she knew. “Sure, I guess,” she lied.

Maggie felt the need to probe more out of this Colin, if only to help her gauge what the hell was happening to her.

This was a distinct Colin double to the one she'd encountered on the world where he was the son of a TV exec, and acted absolutely nothing like 'Farm Boy' Colin. This one was more of a regular guy, but he did remind her in some ways of the Colin she knew.

“So, how did you know my name?” he asked, as he started refilling the coffee maker.

Maggie's mind raced to find an excuse that wouldn't be off-putting, but Sheriff Maggie seemed already prepared to answer. She placed her coffee cup in its saucer, and leaned forward.

“Our friend told us you worked here. Name's Quinn.”

Maggie shot her double a glare, and Sheriff Maggie just shrugged.

“You knew my brother?” Colin said, surprised.

*Past tense...*

“*Knew?*” Maggie asked. “What happened to him?”

Colin shut the top of the coffee machine, and turned to them. He looked troubled.

“Quinn disappeared a few months ago.” His eyes moved to his hands, as he grabbed a rag and started wiping the counter.

“Didn’t you hear?”

This conversation wasn’t answering Maggie’s questions, but raising further ones. Still, now she was invested.

“He did? Do you know anything about what could have happened?”

Colin’s face fell. “Yeah, I know what happened. But you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

He focused his attention on his cleaning.

“Try me,” Maggie pressed.

Colin shook his head. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“My name’s Maggie. Maggie Beckett. And this is my... sister... *Sherri.*”

Sheriff Maggie shot her a dirty look, and Maggie returned it with a surreptitious wink.

“Beckett, huh?” Colin looked up at her. “Any relation to Doctor Beckett at Cal U?”

Maggie nearly choked on her coffee.

“Yeah, he’s our uncle,” Sheriff Maggie said, and Maggie wished she wouldn’t keep bluffing on assumptions. Was it some Sheriff interrogation thing she was doing, or what?

“Oh, is that how you met Quinn?” Colin said. “Doctor B taught both of us, but I never got quite as chummy with him as Quinn did.”

This was an interesting twist. Maggie had to wonder what would have caused this universe's Uncle Sam to start teaching at Quinn's university; assuming this was a parallel universe, rather than some kind of dream, or pocket dimension.

What he said next surprised her even more.

"He saved my Dad from being hit by a car when I was a kid. He was Quinn's hero." Colin smiled as he recalled.

Well, that definitely sounded like something he'd do, assuming he'd had such foreknowledge. Maggie felt her stomach filling with butterflies as she thought about it.

"Did Professor Arturo teach you, too?" Sheriff Maggie probed.

"Yeah, he taught Quinn advanced physics." Colin said, and a faraway look moved over his face. "He and Quinn both..."

"Jumped into the wormhole?" Sheriff Maggie finished. Colin's eyes went wide as they focused on her.

*Stop talking!*

"How did you..." Colin's voice shook.

Sheriff Maggie sipped her coffee, maintaining uncomfortable eye contact with Colin. Now it was Maggie's turn to think fast.

"Quinn mentioned something about wormholes to us the last time we saw him. *Sherrri* here was making a leap of logic."

Colin threw his rag to the sink, and sighed. "Well, good guess."

"You didn't go with?" Sheriff Maggie continued.

Colin leaned against the frame of the door he'd come from, folding his arms. "No, I was terrified. And can you blame me? He never came back. None of them did."

Colin had tears glistening in his eyes now.

"I'd like to think they're still out there, somewhere."

Maggie smiled at him. “They are, I promise.”

She looked at Sheriff Maggie, who was silently sipping her coffee, looking pensive. Then she looked back at Colin, whose eyes were studying her, questioning.

Maggie didn’t know why, but she had a gut feeling there was something she had to do here. Maybe this *was* some kind of leap, after all.

“Have you talked to my uncle about what happened?”

Colin shook his head. “He went on leave after it happened. I haven’t seen him at all.”

Sheriff Maggie slid her empty cup and saucer toward him. “He’s the only one who’ll be able to help you find Quinn.”

As Colin opened his mouth to respond, the door of the diner jingled, and an older woman, aged somewhere in her forties, walked in. A woman whose features were unmistakable. Maggie was rendered speechless as the woman gave the three of them a broad smile.

“Ah, girls, I was hoping you’d be here,” she said, patting the Maggies on the shoulders in an all-too-familiar fashion. She leaned over to whisper in Sheriff Maggie’s ear, who went ghostly white as she conveyed whatever the message was.

*Okay, surely this has to be a dream, now.*

The woman looked up at Colin with a smile. “Can I get a black coffee?”

The woman, who looked just like an older version of Maggie, now approached her, and leaned to whisper in her ear.

“Just pretend I’m your Mom,” was all she said.

## 2.20 • POSSIBILITY

There was an awkward, deafening silence in the diner, broken only by the clink of the older Maggie's coffee cup on her saucer as she placed it down.

Colin was trying to act busy, but kept glancing at the woman's face, while Sheriff Maggie seemed to be deep in troubled thought. Maggie was similarly speechless; she really wanted to say *something*, but she just didn't know what. What was the appropriate thing to say in a situation as ridiculous as this?

*This is a dream. This is a dream. This is—*

Finally, the older woman broke the silence.

“So, Sherri...”

*She knows the name I just made up before she arrived...?*

Maggie tried to mask her reaction, and by the looks of Sheriff Maggie, so did she.

“That uniform really doesn't suit you, you know?” The older Maggie leaned in, and fiddled with the Sheriff's star on her chest.

‘Sherri’ pulled away. “I'm aware, *Mom*,” she deadpanned, with a heavy sardonic quality to the last word.

Maggie grasped a train of thought to vocalise.

“We were... just looking to get Colin here in touch with our uncle,” she said to her faux-mother. “Would you know anything about his whereabouts?”

There had to have been a reason this woman had appeared in this way, and she could only guess it was in some kind of relation to the conversation at hand when she came in.

The older Maggie turned to her, flashing her a smile. “Yes, I would.”

She looked at Colin. “Would you have a pen and paper? I can write his number for you.”

Colin straightened from the counter he was wiping down, and his face was lit up. “Really?”

He grabbed the notepad and pen stuffed into his apron, and handed them to the woman.

“Thanks... this means a lot,” he said. Maggie smiled as she watched him rocking on his feet with excitement. She didn’t know what kind of weird reality this was, but she felt that this version of Colin deserved a break.

As the older version of her handed him the note, she said, “I think he’ll be expecting your call.”

He looked at her with a tilted head for a moment, before scurrying away to the back room with the slip of paper.

With Colin gone for the moment, Maggie whipped her head around to the older woman.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

Older Maggie stood from her stool, stepping back from the counter. She held up her hands defensively.

“Sorry to intrude on your together time,” she said. “But I’m here to help the two of you.”

“Who *are* you?” Maggie asked weakly, hoping she’d elaborate further than what Maggie had already deduced.



“I’m a possibility,” Older Maggie replied. She pointed towards the door, where Colin’s back could be seen as he spoke on the phone. “So is he.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Sheriff Maggie asked.

Older Maggie sighed. “It means you’re all at a crossroads, and there are decisions you need to make right now. But first and foremost...”

She stepped towards Sheriff Maggie, and took one of her hands, squeezing it between both of hers. “You need to let go of... *her*.”

As she said the last word, her head turned and she locked eyes with Maggie.

Sheriff Maggie wrenched her hand away. “What do you mean ‘let go’ of her? I don’t even *like* her.”

*She doesn’t like me?*

Older Maggie shook her head.

“You two currently have a sort of mental connection right now, preventing you from being properly separated.”

“You mean this *is* a dream?” Maggie asked.

*I knew it!*

The older Maggie gave a noncommittal tilt of her head. “Yes and no. The procedure kind of put your mind into a limbo state in spacetime. It fed on temporal flux points close to you when the accelerator activated, and created this construct that exists in your shared consciousness...”

She chuckled at the bewildered faces staring back at her. “Okay, let’s *call* it a dream. But that’s not entirely adequate.”

“And what does this have to do with me?” Sheriff Maggie said, her flat voice cutting through the friendly tone of the older

Maggie.

“You’re the reason the procedure hasn’t completed,” Older Maggie explained. “You don’t want to leave the memories behind, do you? Of the life you never got to live.”

“Shut up,” Sheriff Maggie said, rising from her seat.

Maggie could tell she’d hit a nerve.

Older Maggie pressed on: “You feel like your life never started, and you’re jealous of all her adventures. You don’t want to face the reality of who you really are.”

“Stop...” Sheriff Maggie pleaded.

Maggie didn’t even know what to say. She thought about all the internal conflict as they shared a body, the envy that flared up at memories of her life, in spite of all its tragic, devastating events.

“My world is gone...” she whispered, and she felt Sheriff Maggie’s eyes flick to her. “Everything I had is gone, and you’re *jealous* of that?”

She set her jaw, and made eye contact with Sheriff Maggie. “Where do you get off?”

Maggie balled her fists, and a second later, Sheriff Maggie was keeled over the counter, clutching her jaw in pain.

“Stop!” the older Maggie grabbed her by the arm, pulling her back, and Maggie glared at her.

“This won’t help,” the older Maggie said, pleading with her eyes. “Just let me talk to her. Trust me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I used to be her,” she said, lowering her eyes.

Maggie fell into silence, and stepped back, as the older Maggie – the older *Sheriff* Maggie, apparently – moved to assist her

younger self.

“Listen to me,” she said, helping the punch-drunk Sheriff to a seated position on the stool. “It’s not too late to make your life just how you want it. You’re *not* Sheriff Maggie. This stupid badge isn’t who you are, and you can forge whatever new path you want, okay?”

“I can’t do anything right,” lamented Sheriff Maggie, as she rubbed her mouth.

Her future self wrapped her in a comforting embrace, and rocked her.

“You can, and you will. Believe me. You’re going to do amazing things. Stuff that will make you totally forget about your double’s accomplishments.”

She glanced at Maggie. “No offense.”

Maggie gave a weak smile.

Older Maggie pulled away from the hug, and assessed Sheriff Maggie’s red and swelling jaw.

“Don’t worry about that. Your physical body is undamaged,” she said with a wink, before turning towards Maggie.

“You should go,” Older Maggie said, gesturing towards the exit. “Everyone’s waiting.”

Maggie nodded, bewildered, and walked to the doors, before turning around to see Sheriff Maggie looking at her with moist eyes, and the older Maggie filling with a shimmering blue light, and vanishing.

*Dream. It’s a dream. Wasn’t it?*

She shook her head, and left the diner, into the blinding sun.

She blinked rapidly as her eyes filled with light, and she brought her hands to her eyes to shield them, only to knock a small flashlight from the hands of Uncle Sam, who cried out in surprise.

She was lying on a bed, her body covered in a blanket.

“Oh... *oh!*” she scrambled to a sitting position, as Sam stepped backwards, a smile forming on his face.

“You’re okay!”

He pulled her into a tight hug.

*What a weird dream...* she thought, feeling her grasp on what she was just doing slipping away from her memory.

She looked around her, and saw her double stirring from her own apparent sleep, with a very relieved younger Sam greeting her with a warm smile.

“Welcome back...” John said. “Now, uh... which of you is which?”

## 2.21 · CALLIN' IT

Sam pumped air into the cuff on Maggie's upper left arm, as she yawned. She had admitted to being the Maggie who'd chained him up in a shed not so long ago, and he thought owning up to it must have taken some level of courage.

But right now, that wasn't important. He got his niece back.

*He came through again*, Sam thought. Al the Bartender, or whoever, had finished what the combined brain power of all those here couldn't.

"How many more tests?" she asked with a frown. Sam took a moment to read the analog gauge attached to the cuff before answering.

"That's it. You're good to go," he said, confirming that her blood pressure was in the normal range. He pulled off the cuff and stepped away from the bed, allowing her to rise to her feet.

"Thanks." She smiled at him.

"So, you feel like yourself, right?" he asked. "Any residual memories or feelings from the other you?"

Sam knew, from unfortunate experience, that one of the potential leap effects could involve psycho-synergy, but in this special case, it had been entirely complete, with both minds not only combined, but fully synchronised. While God or Time or Fate's influence clearly untangled the minds, Sam wasn't sure to what extent that might be.

Maggie thought for a moment.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t think so, but I feel different. Lighter.”

Sam felt her hand gingerly grasp his.

“I want to stay here,” she said.

Sam looked into her serious, sad eyes, and he couldn’t say he didn’t think this might be a possibility. After all, she willingly chose to leave her old life for the unknown.

Sam could hardly argue against that without being a hypocrite.

“Here, as in this world, or here as in 1978?” he asked.

“Both,” she said. “I think this is where I’m supposed to be. Helping him.”

She gazed across the room, towards the bed where John was taking care of the other Maggie.

Sam looked at the young double as he listened to Slider Maggie’s heartbeat through his stethoscope, and wondered what she could mean. He re-established eye contact with Maggie, and looked at her, puzzled. She rubbed her forehead as she formed her next words.

“I think I... met my future self,” she said, hesitant. “I know I was in a coma, but it felt like more than a dream. I think I have things I need to do here. In the coming years.”

Sam wondered just what she had seen during her time unconscious; what experiences had changed her in this way. But he knew better than to deny something profound.

Sam leaned towards her, giving her a knowing smile. “Whatever experience you had, trust in that.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Thanks, Uncle Sam.”

Sam reciprocated the hug, and they both knew it was one of the last ones they'd have together.

\* \* \*

The sun was already beginning to rise when the group arrived back at the Dominion Hotel, with yet one more body to fit into the room. With only Rembrandt earning any cash, money was spread far too thin to get a second suite, so it was getting somewhat intimate.

Quinn had retreated to the stairwell, in an effort to have a breather, and was deep in thought when the sound of the door echoed off the concrete.

"I thought you would want to spend some time with Maggie," Colin said, sitting on the step beside him.

"Nothing I'd like more," he replied truthfully, "but there's so much on my mind right now, I just needed a moment to think."

"I understand," Colin said as he cradled his chin over his high knees.

"I've got all these notes I have to write for the Professor, so that our timeline doesn't get screwy. And I still have to figure out how to get us all back to our time."

He sighed deeply. "And I want to make sure Maggie's doing okay after all this."

He turned to his brother. "But also... I know *you've* had a lot on your mind, too. Talk to me."

Colin gave him a weak smile, and finally asked the question Quinn had been expecting from him for some time now.

“Do you think I should get our father to retrieve me as a child?”

Quinn threw his arm over his brother’s shoulder. “What I think doesn’t matter, bro.”

“But it does,” Colin said, meeting his eye. “Your opinion is more important than anyone’s. Because... maybe he could take me to grow up with you.”

Quinn felt a fluttering in his stomach. All this time, he was thinking about Colin growing up with their birth parents, but it seemed Colin was on an entirely different page.

“That would change things a lot...” he said anxiously.

“I know, and that’s what I’ve been wrestling with all this time,” he explained. “But I just want to know *your* opinion, Quinn.”

Quinn’s mind raced, and it took him some time to form an answer.

“With all that’s happened lately, all this talk of higher powers...” he began, feeling the butterflies in his stomach raging, “and, uh, certainly against my better judgement...”

He gave his brother a mischievous smile.

“I say go for it.”

\* \* \*

As afternoon arrived, the gaggle of displaced travellers gathered in the lecture hall, with Professor Arturo standing at the front, as if he was about to give a lecture.

John sat, ever the student, at a half-desk, pen poised over a notepad, and a flamboyantly-dressed hologram sat casually in the front row, smoking.



*How can I go back to my normal life after all this?*

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Arturo’s voice boomed. “Well done on last night’s accomplishments, but there remains the matter of your time displacement. Have we any ideas?”

John grinned. He’d been thinking about this for days.

He saw Sam about to speak, and pre-empted him: “I *think* it may be a matter of recreating the temporal conditions of the vortex by sending an Accelerator charge through it with my double as the focal point.”

He blushed as Sam grinned at him, approving.

“We’ll need an anchor to 1999 to make sure we don’t end up in a random year of my lifetime,” Sam added.

“What kind of anchor?” Quinn asked.

After a moment of pensive silence, the little machine that Al carried – which John had learned was called a ‘handlink’ – made a chirping and whirring sound. Al studied the device for a moment, as the two Sams looked on in anticipation.

“Well, how ’bout that,” Al said, “Ziggy’s finally come through for us.”

He stood from his seat and turned to Sam. “She says that she can provide a lock-on point in 1999 using data from your last leap, and draw the wormhole to it using the retrieval algorithms. But we have to get the timing exactly right.”

John and Sam exchanged an excited look, and there was a moment of tension as they had a nonverbal argument with their eyes, deciding which of them would announce the news to everyone else.

But, John conceded, Ziggy was not *his* computer, and Al was not *his* buddy. So, he bowed to Sam, who stood and relayed the

message, to everyone's relief.

John scanned the people in the room, none of whom he'd met until so very recently. A man who was apparently a former member of a singing group that had a hit a few years back, but advanced in age. Two brothers from the future and their father, from a parallel universe. Two identical women who were genetically his own nieces, from universes where his brother was alive. A cantankerous cosmology Professor, who'd coped with this bizarre situation remarkably well, considering he'd just been approached out of the blue by time travellers.

And then, there was the other him; from another universe and near twenty-five years in the future. Someone who was everything he wanted to be, and yet... he didn't want to get trapped in time.

*I've got a head start, though. I know all the major calculations now. What if...*

He was pulled out of his thoughts by Michael Mallory clearing his throat.

"This all sounds terrific, but I still need to return to my home."

"Yes, that's been a sticky wicket," Arturo said, "and something I've been mulling over."

He looked pointedly at Quinn. "Mister Mallory, I daresay you may need to make good on my initial request after all."

Quinn folded his arms. "Well, I *am* trusting you with literally every other secret. But you have to promise you'll keep it under wraps."

"Of course. Besides, I will not be able to operate it without the timer, which I won't have."

"What request?" Michael asked, looking back and forth at the two.

“If you remain behind after the time-displaced individuals leave,” Arturo told Michael, “We can construct a sliding device as per your son’s schematics, which should allow you to return home.”

Michael nodded. “More delays... but, that’s acceptable.”

John shot to his feet. “Let me help!”

For so long, he’d been floating along, learning all there was to know about different topics, collecting degree after degree, but never quite knowing where he would wash up. But now, it felt like he was exactly where he needed to be.

Arturo’s eyes lit up, and he clasped his hands together excitedly.

“My boy, if your older version is any indication, you shall be a welcome addition to the team.”

## 2.22 • BACK TO THE FUTURE

“One hour, people!”

Quinn placed down the timer as he did a final check on the machine, which had been altered to transmit a charge of Accelerator energy in a focused beam, rather than contain it within the chamber like it had done with Maggie.

Everyone was gathered in the lab, and there was a palpable nervous tension in the air.

Quinn reached into a backpack he'd brought with him, and pulled out a thick notebook. This thing had been keeping him awake all hours of the night, and he was glad to be done with it.

“Professor...” he waved it in the air, catching Arturo's attention, who gave a smile of recognition.

“Ah, I was wondering when you'd finish those notes,” he said, approaching Quinn.

“This should have everything you need,” he said. “Future events, schematics, equations, coordinates to important worlds – that I had available, anyway. You've already got the timer code on hard disk, which will let you replicate the functionality of mine. But there's also a few personal things in here that I want you to take on board.”

Arturo nodded, as he flipped through the pages, full to the brim with writing.

“There's information about the invasion I told you about,” he continued. “And you're actually going to meet the person who

allowed it to happen. Only, I don't think you're going to be able to prevent it, even with the knowledge I've put in here."

Arturo looked up at him grimly. "I see."

Quinn placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I want you to know that if you can't make any of the changes I've requested, I won't hold it against you. I know you'll do everything you can, and that's all I can ask for."

Arturo looked as though he was burdened by the weight of the world, and Quinn felt absolutely miserable about doing this to him. The least he could do was absolve him of any failures that might happen.

"Oh... also..." Quinn flipped to the back of the notebook. "Here are a few companies you may want to buy shares in... might make your life a little easier."

Arturo's gaze shifted back down to the pages.

"Hmm... Micro-Soft? The computer company?" he stroked his chin. "Thank you, Mister Mallory."

He closed the book. "I shall guard this compendium with my very life."

Quinn smiled, knowing that he was telling the truth, and turned his attention to his father, who was finishing up a conversation with Colin.

"Dad..."

Michael met his eye, and stepped towards him, looking spooked.

"Are you aware of what Colin just requested of me?" he asked, a little pale in the face. Quinn nodded.

“Yes, and I’m on board,” he said, and changed the subject, not wanting to complicate his feelings with logic.

“Listen, I want you to know you’re our next stop in our journey. As soon as we get back to 1999, we’re coming to find you.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Michael replied, with a wry grimace. “In, uh... twenty-one years time...”

“Just a couple decades,” Quinn said, shrugging as nonchalantly as he could. “No sweat, right?”

Michael drew Quinn into a hug. “I’m proud of you,” he whispered. As the familial embrace went on, Quinn beckoned to Colin, who joined in.

“Love ya, Dad,” Quinn said. “And thanks for sticking around to help us out.”

“Pleasure was all mine,” Michael said, as the three finally broke out of the hug.

\* \* \*

“Twenty minutes!”

Rembrandt watched the people around him: families, friends, colleagues. Then there was him, the odd man out. The one here who didn’t choose to go on this journey in the first place, who had no expertise, and only the bonds of camaraderie and friendship that he had been forced to forge after being unwillingly swept up in Q-ball’s science experiment.

He’d thought numerous times, during his time here in the past, of contacting his young self, warning him of his ill-fated drive

through a San Fran street. But, he would have never believed it anyway.

He'd even entertained the idea of staying here in the past, finding steady work as a musician, living out his life through decades he'd already experienced one time around. It was his home world, after all. He could just stay, forget about sliding.

But... it just didn't sit right with him. Not after everything that he'd been through. What he knew was to come.

And besides, he'd said it himself: his singing voice was sometimes the only thing that could get them money to survive during slides. He couldn't remove that element from the equation and risk the people he loved maybe dying without his help.

"How you doing, Remy?" Maggie had sidled up to him. *His* Maggie, he assumed.

"Me? I'm good," he said, raising an eyebrow. People didn't ask that of him very often. "I'm sure gonna miss my favourite decade, though. What about you, girl? Any more headaches?"

She gave him a broad shrug. "Nope! But, I can't wait to get back to a time when the smell of cigarettes isn't detectable in literally every room."

She grinned. "And other miscellaneous herbal aromas."

Rembrandt's eyes wandered to the other Maggie, who was in what looked like deep discussion with the mid-twenties Sam Beckett.

"Any idea why she's stickin' around here?"

Maggie pursed her lips, appearing to be struggling to recall something. "I'm not sure. But she seems at peace about it."

"A little different from the Maggie that cuffed me into her car two weeks ago," Rembrandt mused. "What happened in that

coma, anyway?”

Maggie tilted her head. “I think I had a dream where Colin served me coffee? That’s all I can remember.”

Rembrandt gave her a funny look. “Musta been good coffee,” was all he could think to say in response.

Across the room, Sam was inspecting the machine, writing notes on a clipboard. But now he put it down, as he met Rembrandt’s eye. He strolled over, looking amiable.

“Cryin’ Man, it’s been a pleasure,” he said, extending a hand. Rembrandt shook vigorously.

“Feeling’s mutual, my man,” he said. “Never seen a white man play funk guitar so well.”

Sam smiled. “You take care of yourself,” he said.

“You too,” Remy replied, “and I mean it. Don’t wear yourself out. You work way too hard, man.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah, I guess I do. Well, I’ll just have to see if my, uh, *request for leave* is granted.”

Rembrandt didn’t know what he meant by that.

\* \* \*

“Three minutes, everyone! In position!” Quinn’s call brought everyone out of their conversations, and Sam watched the room turn from irreverent goodbyes to determined concentration.

He turned to Al, who was standing nervously at the side of the machine, looking down at the handlink.

“Ziggy’s ready, right? No more delays for temporal constants?”



Al slapped the side of the handlink. “Ready. I’ve just gotta push this button at the exact moment the Accelerator starts up.” He pointed to a blue area of the flashing device.

“Are you telling me I have to rely on *your* reflexes to make this work?” Sam said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Who taught you to quick-draw a gun, huh?”

*Well, he has a point there.*

“Okay, okay. Well, just stay focused.”

A hush fell over the room. Sam glanced around the lab, meeting everyone’s eye as he scanned, a silent goodbye. He didn’t know what would happen to him after this. In all probability, he’d resume leaping.

“Everyone... it’s been wild,” he said to the room. “And thank you. I guess this is goodbye.”

A solemn expression passed over the faces of everyone in the room. His niece gave him a nod through tearful eyes.

“Three, two, one,” Quinn extended the timer, and the wormhole burst open. He nodded to Arturo by the machine.

Sam watched Al’s eyes, focused intently on the lever as Arturo pulled down. Right as it hit the ‘on’ position, his finger came down on the handlink.

From the machine came a beam of blue, right into the centre of the vortex.

Sam nodded, and jumped in.

He had to assume that the others had followed, but the tunnel-like environment of the vortex faded from his vision, and he found himself hitting a hard floor, looking upward at a blue ceiling.

“Ow,” he said, rubbing his sore elbow as he climbed to his feet. He looked down at himself.

*Is this my Fermi suit?*

He glanced around, a feeling of shock descending on him.

“Oh my god, this is the Waiting Room...”

*I’m home?*

A voice came from behind. “Oh snap, the retrieval worked!”

*Who is that?*

Sam turned, and saw the door open, with a figure in the doorway. A tall man was looking through some kind of high tech eyeglass-looking device. He then folded it up and nodded. That’s when Sam got a good look at his face.

“Welcome back, Doc,” said the man, who then leaned out of the door and yelled: “Hey, everyone!”

“Wait...” Sam said, confused. “Colin...? How did you...”

Colin winked. “Haven’t seen you in a few years. Gonna have to catch you up.”

*Why is he talking like that?*

His concerns about Colin were put aside as Al appeared in the doorway, poorly hiding his excitement behind a smug facade.

“Ready for that sabbatical, Sam?”

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## **END OF PART 2**

# PART THREE: ORIGINAL QUINN

## SUMMARY

After Quinn is fused with his double by Doctor Geiger, the sliders return to the post-apocalyptic Earth Prime in an attempt to salvage the tech they left there in 1978, during Part 2, and undo the process.

What they find instead is the remains of a secret project designed to cross both time and dimensions, guarded by someone unexpected.

With Kromaggs closing in, there's only one place to go for a chance to undo the tragic failure of a leaper.

### 3.1 · A PARADIGM SHIFT

Sherri had gone through this many times, but it was always disorienting. The feeling of electricity, the loss of awareness of her surroundings, and then something completely different snapping into focus. Her mind blanking. Her stomach dropping as she tried to figure out where she was. The anxiety.

But, it was getting easier. Every time, a little more of her memory was retained, a little less feeling of seasickness.

***Point One:*** *What are you doing?*

She found herself in the middle of drinking from a disposable coffee cup. She half choked on the liquid, and stifled her cough, as she pulled the cup from her lips. She looked down to see her free hand holding the handle of a baby stroller. Okay, she was pushing a stroller. She placed her cup into the holder that she spotted on the side.

***Point Two:*** *Is there anyone here with you? Are they expecting anything of you?*

Besides the most likely inhabitant of the stroller, which she couldn't see due to the shade, she glanced around herself to see a woman just beside her. She was looking at Sherri, amused.

She couldn't quite pick it, but the woman, who was quite young, with short auburn hair and brown eyes, seemed vaguely familiar to her.

“You alright?” asked the woman.

Sherri breathed out. “Yeah, just went down the wrong pipe,” she said, and pulled back the shade of the stroller.

Inside, a toddler slept. A boy, somewhere between two and three years old, she guessed.

*This could be trouble.*

The last thing she needed was the accusing eyes of a toddler that saw an imposter instead of his Mommy. She pulled the shade forward again.

***Point Three:*** *What are your surroundings? Anything unusual? Scan for time period indicators.*

She was on a sidewalk, certainly, beside a paved road. Cars passed by as normal. She studied them for a moment. The models were a mixture of eighties and nineties, with an occasional beat up seventies model. The newest car she spotted was a 1996 Ford Taurus.

*Okay, so the earliest it can be is '96.*

“You coming, Steph?” The woman who’d been beside her had advanced along the pavement by a good twenty feet, and was looking back expectantly.

***Point Four:*** *Who are you?*

‘Steph’ was a start. Most likely, she was called Stephanie. So she was almost certainly a woman, which she’d suspected by her feminine cut jeans and shirt, but she knew not to make any assumptions. Confirmation was key when dealing with unknown dimensions. She also noticed a wedding band on her finger.

As for the stroller, it was likely, but not definite, that this child was hers.

*Married woman named Steph, with a small child.* She could work with that.

She pushed the stroller, catching up to the waiting woman.

“Sorry, I was a little lost in thought.” She smiled at the woman, who gave her a quick look of concern.

“Is something wrong? You can talk to me.”

***Point Five:*** *Find your allies and draw out information.*

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just had a brain fart and completely forgot what we’re doing,” Sherri said, laughing off the contrived memory lapse. “I thought I was done with the baby brain, but once in a while...”

The woman gave her a momentary squint with confusion, which shifted into worry.

“We’re just... going back to your place. And if you forgot *that*, it’s probably for the best that we are! I think you need to get out of the sun.”

“Yeah, I feel a little faint. Let’s go.”

She let the other woman lead her to the correct house, which was only a few blocks away. She recognised the architecture and landscape as distinctly San Francisco, which was quite the relief, since she’d spent the last twenty years living there. Less to figure out about the environment, leaving her more time to work out what she was doing here.

As they reached the stoop leading up to the Italianate terrace, Sherri’s companion, who she still hadn’t figured out the name of, helped her lift the stroller up to the door.

Sherri rummaged through her enormous handbag, looking for the front door keys, before finding them nestled under a couple of spare diapers.

She studied the bundle of keys for a moment, before picking out the most likely match to the keyhole. The door clicked open on

the first attempt, and she found herself filling with pride over her good guess.

The woman with her helped her pull the stroller all the way in the door, and Sherri resumed pushing it towards what she could see was a living room, accented by a large bay window that overlooked the street.

“Better let him sleep in there a little longer,” she said, praying that the little boy wouldn’t wake up while she wasn’t alone.

She scanned the room for identifiers: photographs, bills, trinkets, and of course, mirrors.

A full-length mirror just happened to be on one wall, and she peered in, giving herself a once-over, under the guise of fixing her hair.

The woman looking back at her looked quite young; perhaps early or mid twenties. She had long blonde hair, pinned into a half ponytail. There was a light layer of makeup on her face, and her emerald eyes sparkled in the light.

It was after finally seeing her reflection that she noticed the pinboard filled with photos just inside the kitchen doorway.

Her heart caught in her chest as she recognised a man in a large portion of the photos.

*We finally got a lock?*

It was about damn time. This was what she’d been working up to all these years. Finally, all her training was going to pay off. Assuming they got the right one, of course...

Concealing her excitement, she casually sat down on the couch, next to the woman to whom she really needed to put a name.

“Feeling better?” asked the woman, and Sherri nodded.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said.

**Point Six:** *Get some alone time.*

She forced a yawn. “Man, I could use a nap.”

“Cory been keeping you up all hours?” the woman asked. Sherri nodded, taking note of the boy’s name. The woman smiled. “Well, that’s alright. Go, get some sleep. I’ll keep an eye on the little guy.”

“Really?”

“Uh... yeah, that’s what I’m paid for, isn’t it?”

*Okay, she’s either a babysitter or a nanny.*

“Uh, right, right.”

She got to her feet, and strolled towards the staircase she’d spotted upon entry to this house.

She briefly looked back. “Thanks,” she said to the woman, before hurrying up the steps.

As she rounded the corner from the staircase to the upstairs hall, she jumped as a figure awaited her. The surprise turned to relief as she saw who it was.

Tall, mid-forties, brown hair with a fleck of white at the front. The small flashing device in his hand. The giddy grin on his face.

This was the man she’d first met in 1978, under the strangest of circumstances. Not quite her Uncle Sam, but an alternate version, with whom she’d forged a unique relationship over the past twenty years. The version of Doctor Sam Beckett who she called by his middle name, John.

“Sherri! Guess what?” he said, the energy of his gestures matching the excitement on his face. “I think this is it! Everything we’ve been working towards. You made it.”



Sherri passed through the hologram, and continued down the hall.

“I’ve got company downstairs, so I can’t celebrate with you right now,” she explained in a low voice, as she checked each doorway for the master bedroom. “Just tell me what I need to know.”

John drew his excited eyes away from her, and to his handlink, and he gave it a couple of taps.

“The year is... 1996. Wednesday, June twelfth, to be exact. Your name is Stephanie, you have a two-year-old son named Cory, and you’re married to our target.”

Sherri entered the bedroom, which was to the front of the house, with a continuation of the bay window from the living room below it. She closed the door and sat on the edge of the bed, as John phased through behind her.

“I already knew most of that. Who’s the babysitter? Her face is familiar to me.”

“Babysitter... let’s see...” John studied the device for another moment, which emitted a whirring sound. “Oh, you have a live-in nanny. That’s convenient. Her name is... Wade Welles.”

“How do I know that name?” Sherri wracked her brain.

“Maybe ’cause it’s in here.” He reached over to an unseen surface, and grasped an object which, upon contact with his hand, appeared to Sherri as part of the hologram. An old notebook with yellowing pages. “It’s not the same one, of course...”

Sherri tried to form a clear picture of who Wade was, but all she could recall was that she had a strong connection to the people she had met all those years ago.

“If you don’t remember, don’t worry about it,” he said, placing the book back. “The main thing is what we’re here to do. You

remember *that*, right?”

Sherri nodded. One of many mantras she drilled into her memory for weeks, months, years, before her first leap.

“I’ve never once forgotten. It would be pretty weird if I did, right at the very moment I actually *needed* to remember.”

“Well, stranger things have happened,” John chuckled. “Remember that time you had to win a kickboxing tournament and you completely forgot your twelve years of training in exactly that?”

Sherri cringed. “Yeah, that was... not ideal. But my recall has increased every leap since.”

“Forgetting things must be a pain,” he said with a shrug. “I wouldn’t know.”

She glared at him, then made the decision to get back to the mission at hand.

“So anyway, you got a track on him? Where is he now?”

John’s irreverent expression gave way to intense focus, as his fingers danced over the handlink. The device was about the size of a cell phone, and had an advanced touch screen interface. A large crack was down the centre of the glass, owing to its occasional slippage from his grasp while performing dramatic gestures when he got worked up – which was often.

“He’s off-world right now, but Higgins thinks he’ll be showing up at fifteen hundred hours, give or take twenty minutes.”

Sherri glanced down at her wrist, where a watch told her it was already three. “So, now then?”

John followed her gaze. “Oh, yeah. Hold on.”

He held up the handlink, and turned in a slow circle before stopping as he faced away from the window.

“Detecting some vortex traces in this direction...” he pointed it downward, still studying the screen. “Elevation... subterranean.”

“Basement?” Sherri asked.

“Most likely,” he said, tapping on the screen. “Okay, I have a lock on the wormhole. Should be opening up here in the next three minutes.”

Sherri stood, and padded to the stairs. In an effort to avoid Wade and Cory, she tiptoed to the bottom, and made a U-turn, scanning for a door to the basement.

“Over here,” John said, having blinked himself downstairs. He pointed to a door against one of the inner walls, before phasing through the door into the room. She followed him, and shut the door behind her as she pulled on the cord dangling in front of her. The light flickered on, illuminating an extensive laboratory.

*This is definitely it.*

She exchanged a glance with John.

“Incoming...” he said, peering down the stairs. She waited just a few seconds, before the swirling blue vortex appeared, kicking up dust. A well-dressed man tumbled out of the gateway, and onto the floor, before standing and brushing himself off.

Sherri watched John appear beside the man. He circled him, scanning him with the handlink.

“It’s a match. This is definitely the Quinn Mallory we’ve been looking for.”

## 3.2 • UNSTUCK TOGETHER

“For cryin’ out loud, what were the odds of this happening *again?*”

The question was on all their minds as Rembrandt helped Quinn, fused with his double, to his feet, as the group prepared to slide out of Doctor Geiger’s creepy lab.

This guy had apparently somehow hijacked their wormhole, sending it to this place instead of to Quinn and Colin’s home world, while sending in one of Quinn’s alleged doubles – though he seemed nothing like Quinn at all – and caused them to merge into one very confused guy.

“Just be grateful for the upgrade on this thing,” Colin said, studying the timer in his hand. “I think the new safety protocols stabilised the wormhole enough to prevent something catastrophic when we were sliding in here...”

“How much more catastrophic can you get?” Maggie said, gesturing with her head towards Quinn, who looked like a completely different person.

What had once been a full head of loose, golden brown hair, was now mousy, and gelled to make it stick up, something their Quinn had never done, and Remy hoped would never do, as it looked pretty off. He kept thinking of a 30-year-old Bart Simpson when he looked at the guy. His blue eyes were now brown, and just every feature was off in some way. And that was to say nothing of his behaviour.

While Quinn's speech patterns, personality and intellect shined through in short bursts, the guy they seemed stuck with the rest of the time was kind of a dope, and the mad scientist who did this had been claiming that the Q-ball they knew was destined to disappear if they didn't act fast.

Given their experience with Maggie, Rembrandt didn't know how this Doctor Geiger could possibly have known which one of the two was fated to remain, but then, there were a lot of things Rembrandt didn't know. For example, where did Geiger go when Diana had shut down his magnetic field? He just sort of vanished in a way that looked pretty painful.

But, he supposed, there were other things to worry about right now than the fate of Doctor Frankenstein.

"Well, if we're talking catastrophe, this 'Combine' thing was the most volatile thing I've ever seen," Colin said to Maggie, gesturing around the room. "Merging a couple of Quinns would have been nothing compared to what we just averted."

He looked down at the timer, which was in its last minute. "Anyway, we've gotta go."

Maggie kept the guns in her hands pointed slightly to either side of the group of security guards and lab assistants, as she inched toward her friends. The security guard made a move to lunge, and she trained one of the pistols on him.

"Alright, let's just continue being gentlemen here, shall we?" she said, and the large man backed away, palms open.

Rembrandt looked towards Diana Davis, the scientist who'd helped them stop Geiger's plans... eventually, at the last minute. "We're gonna go separate them. Are you coming?"

"You know how to do that?" she asked, incredulous.

“We ran into an almost identical situation like, two weeks ago... give or take twenty years,” Maggie explained, with a bitter laugh. “So, we just need to get back to the Earth we were on at the time, and use the machine we left there. Easy, right?”

She raised an eyebrow, giving Diana a wry smile. “Only thing is, it’s currently overrun by hostile non-human invaders who see human eyeballs as a delicacy.”

Diana’s eyes widened.

“In that case, I think I’ll take my chances with these guys,” she said, gesturing towards the security guard and scientists that were ostensibly her underlings – but importantly, they were human.

“Okay, have fun with that,” Colin said, dismissive, as he opened the wormhole. “Everyone else... let’s go. Remember, anything could be waiting for us. Keep on your toes, guys.”

The composite Quinn looked at him with a furrowed brow. “I don’t know why, but you sound really weird to me right now,” he said, as Rembrandt walked him, arm over shoulder, to the vortex.

“Oh yeah? Well, you *look* really weird,” Colin countered, before diving into the rippling portal.

\* \* \*

The road was dusty and deserted as the sliders stumbled out of the vortex. Rembrandt had to admit that the landings were a lot smoother than they used to be, but he still managed to fall over and bang his knee – the same knee he’d cut open a while back – and it was still not entirely healed.

Quinn's arm was still wrapped around him, and he rose to his feet with the added effort of another man's weight.

"Okay man, you can let go of me now," he said. Quinn obliged, and steadied himself as he glanced around.

"My god, what happened here?" he said, as he surveyed the abandoned buildings and cars.

"What, you don't remember?" Rembrandt asked. "The Kromaggs, Q-ball. This is Earth Prime."

Quinn rubbed his temple.

"Ease up, Remy," Maggie interjected. "This happened to me, too. Everything got confused and jumbled around in my head."

She placed a hand on Quinn's shoulder. "Try not to think too hard. I know that's hard for at least one of you in there, but it'll make things less painful."

"I'll keep that in mind," Quinn said with a frown, as Colin approached him from behind, running a hand over the gelled hair Quinn inherited from his double.

"I don't think hair is meant to be this... vertical," he commented with an irreverent smirk.

"Since when do you snark? You never used to snark..." Quinn said, knitting his brows. Rembrandt tilted his head at this comment.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "The two of you are always joshing each other like this."

"It's just brotherly banter," Colin said. "I was trying to lighten the mood a little. I can stop if you really don't like it, man."

Quinn shook his head. "It's not that I don't *like* it. It's that I feel like it shouldn't be coming out of *your mouth*."

Colin just shot him a puzzled look.

Quinn threw up his hands. “I don’t know, I can’t figure out why. Everything feels weird to me right now, so I’m probably talking crap. Let’s just get to where we’re going.”

He looked around for a moment, before grimacing. “I, uh... forget where that is.”

Rembrandt exchanged a sad glance with Maggie.

“We’re going to Cal U in San Francisco,” Colin said. “Only thing is, I have no idea where we landed. We could be anywhere in the timer radius, and every minute we’re out in the open increases our chances of being discovered. This sucks.”

Quinn stifled a laugh, causing everyone to glare at him.

“Sorry,” he said. “Like I said, it just sounds weird to hear you say something ‘sucks.’ It just doesn’t fit.”

Colin shook his head, bewildered. “I swear to god, this is just how I talk. Honest.”

Quinn looked quite troubled, as he rubbed a palm to his forehead, indicating the presence of a headache.

Rembrandt looked at him with pity. Besides looking like a whole other person, his mind was clearly seriously messed up in some dramatic way. With Maggie it had been mostly memory related, but Q-ball and his double weren’t even identical to start with, let alone their personalities being anything close to one another.

It seemed the other Quinn had lived a very different life to Q-ball, and Rembrandt wondered in what real sense they even *were* parallel doubles, beyond the name they seemed to share. Did the rest of them have doubles that looked different? The whole thing just raised too many philosophical questions. He suddenly wished



he had the Professor to ask about this. He'd always seemed to have answers, even if Remy didn't understand half of the words that came out of his over-educated British mouth.

Maggie ignored this tangent, and began striding towards a building that looked like it had once been a shopfront and offices.

"Focus, guys," she said. "We need to keep off the streets, and check for clues."

She stole a quick look back at Quinn. "Stop thinking so hard, you hear me?"

"Yes ma'am," he replied weakly, and the three of them hurried after her.

### 3.3 · NEXUS QUINN

*This is it.*

Sherri trotted down a few steps, plastering a smile on her face, as the version of Quinn before her – which they’d designated *Nexus Quinn* – looked up at her with surprise.

“Steph, what are you doing in here? The basement’s off limits!” he reprimanded, his harsh tone causing Sherri to flinch out of pure reflex. She reasserted a confident posture, and descended the final few steps.

“If you want that much privacy, you may want to invest in a lock, Quinn,” she said with a light smirk, hoping that Stephanie would have this kind of relaxed attitude to her husband. She casually leaned against the banister. “Where’d you just come back from?”

His expression softened, giving way to excitement about his adventuring. A broad smile drew across his face.

“Oh man, I can’t even describe to you how cool that place was,” he said, blue eyes shining. “The technology is incredible, and the inhabitants–!”

He rushed across the room to a computer workstation. “I gotta record the coordinates, because I’m not done there by a long shot.”

Sherri had encountered a few people matching Quinn’s bio-genetic signatures during her time in training, and each were different in subtle ways. She just had to suss out this one’s quirks.

She moved her gaze to John, who was looking over Nexus Quinn's shoulder as he typed.

"Okay, so he has advanced to the point of at least storing coordinates," John said, typing furiously into his handlink, in a strange parallel to this Quinn's equally furious typing on his keyboard. "We could be nearing the key date... if only we knew what that actual date *was*."

*Let's hope we haven't missed it*, she found herself thinking.

Nexus Quinn spun around on his swivel chair, to face Sherri.

"This could be really lucrative for us," he said, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

Sherri forced a smile as she studied his appearance. His hair was neatly combed and styled, he wore a smart pinstripe shirt tucked into trousers and a belt, and his shoes, though somewhat covered in dust from his journey, had clearly been recently polished.

She took mental notes. *Takes pride in his appearance, quite business-minded. Possessive about his lab, seems to slide alone.*

She noticed him looking at his wristwatch, the design of which struck Sherri as a mid-range *Audemars Piguet*.

*Okay, whatever he's doing on these other worlds is bringing in a decent paycheck.*

Although the house here wasn't a mansion, it couldn't have been cheap to live so close to the bay. And to have a live-in nanny as well, they must have been doing pretty well. However, she wasn't familiar with the rules of this world just yet, and the economic situation could have been dramatically different.

Not to mention, she wasn't aware of the financial positions of Quinn's or Stephanie's parents in this world. They could have

been funding a lot of this lifestyle, too. She'd have to get John to look into that.

“Well, that sounds great,” she said, finally replying to his comment. “When's your next slide?”

“Same as usual,” Quinn said, distractedly flipping through a notebook. “Listen, I've got some stuff to do... so...”

Sherri took the hint. “Okay, okay,” she said, holding up her hands, “I'll get out of your hair.”

She exchanged a look with John, before turning towards the door and heading up the stairs.

“See you after your shift,” Quinn called out as she passed through the door. She briefly turned back.

“Yeah... my shift,” she said, her eyes panning over the basement, cluttered with electrical gear. John was wandering around, studying everything closely. She closed the door, and leaned her forehead against it, taking a moment to breathe.

She hadn't felt this nervous in some time, but this was such a big deal that the tense feeling in her chest was threatening to overpower her resolve.

She just needed to calm herself. Anxiety was the biggest enemy of a mission. It caused irrational thinking, paralysis, and worst of all, mistakes. She couldn't allow it to control her right now, like it had controlled her in her old life.

*I feel a wooden panel door and its brass knob. I smell a salty ocean breeze from the bay. I see the polished wooden banister of a staircase. I taste the remnants of a cappuccino in my mouth.*

*I hear... a screeching toddler.*

She winced at the scream that pierced through her attempts to calm herself. She peered towards the living room, hidden as best

she could behind the stairs, to see Wade unstrapping Cory from the stroller, and picking him up.

“There there,” Wade said, bouncing him on her hip. “What’s the matter?”

“I want Mommy...” cried the little boy, and Sherri felt her heart breaking.

*She’s not here right now. Sorry, kid.*

“Mommy’s having a sleep right now,” Wade said, shushing the child. “Why don’t we put on some Barney, huh?”

The crying seemed to calm down at this. As Wade crossed to the television, Sherri used the opportunity to start ascending the stairs. But upon placing her foot on the third step up, a loud creak betrayed her presence.

“Oh, did Cory wake you?” Wade asked, as Sherri attempted to appear like she was just coming down the stairs.

“No, no. Couldn’t sleep,” she muttered, training her eyes on Cory, who was now staring at her. She smiled at him, hoping her grandmotherly appearance would appease the child. “Hey, little man.”

He stared at her, wide-eyed and silent, as she approached. At least he wasn’t screaming now.

“We were just about to put this on,” Wade said, waving around a VHS tape with a purple dinosaur on it.

Sherri responded with an unconvincing grin, that may have looked more like a grimace than anything. The look made Wade giggle.

“Yeah, I know. I’m sick of it, too.”

She popped open the case, and appeared to struggle to continue one-handed.

Sherri held out a hand. “Here, let me.”

She grabbed the tape and popped it onto the VCR, which sat atop a large television presently showing a screen of static snow.

As the tape fed into the VCR, waking up the machine, its signal replaced the snow, and a well-worn tape began to play, featuring painful children’s music.

Wade sat Cory down on the floor, and his eyes were now glued to the dancing dinosaurs and their child friends.

*So far, so good*, Sherri thought, relaxing just a little. The child hadn’t raised any red flags yet, but she figured she had just got lucky.

She thought about Quinn’s last comment. ‘*See you after your shift.*’ She must have a job. But what? And when?

She turned to Wade. “My, uh, *shift* is soon, right?”

Wade’s eyes widened, startled. “Oh yeah! I gotta get your dinner together!”

She hurried towards the kitchen. “Sorry, I’ll have it ready in twenty minutes, okay?”

She disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Sherri concerned for what this job was that she apparently had.

“You’re a nurse at Saint Francis Memorial, and you start at five,” John said, striding through the wall. Sherri gave a sigh of relief.

“Thanks,” she murmured to him. Fortunately, she had medical training that would get her through it. “While I’m gone, I’ll need you to stick around here, keep an eye on Quinn.”

John nodded. “Of course.”

As he spoke, his eyes looked past her, towards the television. He bit his lip. She turned, following his gaze, and saw that Cory was staring at the two of them.

“Oh boy,” John said, as Maggie crossed to the boy.

“Hey, Cory,” she said softly. He looked up at her in confusion.

“Where’s my Mommy?” he said, in a voice that threatened a new round of cries.

“Uh, she’s not here right now,” Sherri said. “Promise she’ll be back soon. But me and my friend here are going to be playing with you for a little while, okay? I want you to pretend I’m Mommy. Can you do that for me?”

Cory furrowed his brow as he stared at her. “You’re not Mommy.”

“I know, sweetie. But I want to play pretend with you. I’m your *pretend* Mommy, okay?”

Cory frowned. “Pretend Mommy...” he repeated with confusion.

John approached, kneeling on the floor.

“Hey there! My name is Sam,” he said, in as sweet a voice as Sherri had ever heard from him.

Sherri reminded herself that ‘Sam’ was his *actual* name, as ‘Maggie’ was hers. But she hadn’t used hers in a long time. On the other hand, he was still known as ‘Sam’ to most people, while ‘John’ was more of a nickname to him. Or, perhaps, code name. A remnant of a time when there was a need to differentiate him from her Uncle Sam, that just sort of stuck.

John gestured to the TV. “Who’s that?” he asked Cory.

“Barney,” replied the boy, in an incredulous tone, as though it were unthinkable that someone wouldn’t know.

“Barney,” John repeated, thoughtful. “I didn’t know dinosaurs could sing. Last I heard, they went *rawr!*”

He raised his hands, forming them into a claw-like shape, and bared his teeth as he roared. Cory laughed at his comical expression.

Sherri smiled, relieved at John’s rapport with the kid. It was always a good idea to endear oneself to small children and animals where possible.

John pulled himself to his feet again, turning to Sherri. “I gotta get back in the basement, see what our friend’s up to.”

As he raised his handlink, he gave a final look towards Cory. “Wanna see something really cool?” he asked, before tapping on the screen, and disappearing.

Cory let out an amazed squeal, and held a hand out to the space that had previously held his holographic form. His wonder turned to confusion, as he looked at Sherri.

“Where that man gone?” the child asked her.

“Sam is magic,” she explained. “He’ll be back soon, okay?”

Cory nodded. “Barney is magic,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, he’s magic, just like Barney,” she replied, patting him on the head, before spotting her reflection in the mirror once more. Stephanie’s green eyes looked back at her, and Sherri gave her a silent apology for the intrusion.

*If I’m successful in my mission, then at least there’ll be a Stephanie left to forgive me.*



### 3.4 • BIG 'MAGG ON CAMPUS

Colin hadn't seen Earth Prime like this before. It was pretty disorienting; after spending most of his childhood and adulthood here, seeing it reduced to a wasteland was heart-wrenching.

And he certainly would never have predicted having to row across San Francisco Bay in a dinghy, in the dead of night. But, here he was, doing just that, thanks to the many bridges of the bay either being demolished or set up as Kromagg checkpoints.

They were quietly rowing along the length of the Golden Gate Bridge, having arrived from the north. Their only light was from the bridge itself, so as not to draw attention to themselves. It was pretty spooky; this inky black water beneath them, and the feeling of exposure each time they passed into the beam of a light. He was just glad the water was calm tonight.

The timer had given them about 14 hours, and it was already down to 11. But, even when they reached the university, they had no idea what they would find there; or perhaps more importantly, what they might *not* find.

"You sure you don't want a turn?" Colin said to the man who apparently contained his brother.

"You're doing such a great job, I wouldn't think of it," Quinn replied, stretching his arms.

"You know he's got a headache," Maggie chided.

"Excuses, excuses," Colin said, as he worked the oar, next to Rembrandt who was rowing the other one. "Back home, it was all:

‘oh, Quinn can’t do the dishes tonight, he has a dissertation to write,’ and then I’d find him an hour later playing Nintendo in his boxers.”

Beside him, Rembrandt stifled a laugh.

Quinn’s irreverent expression turned serious, as he seemed to struggle with this quip.

*Again... why is he having so much trouble with me?*

Ever since these two Quinns had been fused, he had been looking at Colin funny. And the comments about his jokes and speech patterns were baffling. It would be easy to dismiss as some unknown side effect of what had happened to him, but it was bothering him a great deal, and he wasn’t sure why.

“Hey,” Maggie said, poking Quinn in the arm, “I see that look. Stop thinking.”

“Sorry...”

\* \* \*

It was an hour later when they finally reached the campus, and it didn’t look like it had been occupied for some time. While it seemed a relief that nobody was around, it was quite difficult for Colin to see the university where he’d spent five years of his life reduced to a ghost town.

“Jeez, this is bleak,” he said, moving a flashlight beam around the dark campus green, illuminating rubble and human remains.

“That’s one word for it,” Rembrandt mumbled, as he stepped carefully over a rib cage.

Colin kept a close eye on Quinn, who had gone very quiet since they'd reached the campus. He couldn't see his face well, due to the low light, but he sensed a lot of discomfort coming from him.

A noise came from above, and Colin flipped off the flashlight as he peered upward to see a Manta Ship flying low overhead.

He'd only heard about these things, and to see one in person sent chills down his spine.

"Quick, don't let 'em detect us!" Rembrandt hissed, and they all scrambled into the sciences building, the door of which was hanging off one hinge.

Inside, it was largely how Colin recalled it, except for the added dilapidation and blood spatter, which turned his stomach.

"Where to now?" Maggie asked. "It can't be in the same lab as last time. Does this place have some kind of storage room, or...?"

Colin thought for a moment.

"Well, our best bet might be the Beckett wing."

"*Beckett* wing?!" Rembrandt was looking at him with surprise.

Colin pointed to where Arturo's office had once been, in 1978. Instead of the tiny office, it was the entrance to a whole new area of the building.

"Through there," Colin said. "They built it in the eighties, I think, after Doc Beckett gave a big donation to the university. He and the Professor had a big hand in designing it, if I remember correctly."

He turned to Quinn. "You remember, right? It's where all our classes with him were."

Quinn looked like a deer in headlights.

"You don't remember..."

“There’s something not right about this,” was all Quinn said, as he cradled his forehead in his hand.

Colin frowned, but there was no time to press the issue. Instead, he headed to the entrance of the newest, most technologically modern part of the sciences building. The Beckett wing, where he’d studied engineering and physics under two brilliant intellects, was admittedly looking worse for wear, but Colin’s memories still caused great helpings of nostalgia for this place.

“Okay, I guess we fan out, search each room,” Maggie said, flipping her own flashlight on.

Colin placed a hand on Quinn’s shoulder. “You stay close to me,” he said. It wasn’t a request.

“Okay...” he replied, and allowed Colin to lead him towards the far end of the building.

As they walked, Colin watched his brother’s clouded expression. He was loathe to bring it up, in case of the physiological effects of his probing, but he just wanted to understand a little better.

“Bro, what’s going on?” he asked, as he busted open a door at the far end of the building with a kick. Inside, he shined his light upon a room full of dusty computers.

“I know my memory’s all weird right now, but something about this place is giving me the chills, and it’s not the skeletons,” Quinn admitted.

“Then what?”

“I have some memories of the sciences building. But, this part? Nothing. And I swear I’ve never had Sam Beckett as a teacher.”

Colin was silent for a moment, before being struck with an epiphany that left him breathless.

“Oh man.”

He turned, and kicked open the opposite door. Another normal classroom, with desks overturned and papers scattered under a layer of dust.

“What?” he felt Quinn’s hand pulling on his shoulder. He faced him with a grave expression.

“Well, we made a lot of choices in 1978, didn’t we?” Colin said. “Ones that changed our personal history.”

In the low light, Quinn’s pale face grew even paler.

“I think we’re coming up against the consequences of that,” continued Colin. “I don’t think Earth Prime Sam would have even come here if it weren’t for us...”

His mind began to race. “In fact, my memory of 1978 is pretty fuzzy. Just how much *did* we change?”

“Argh!” Quinn doubled over, clutching his head. Colin put an arm around him, steadying him.

“Damn, I shouldn’t have said that,” Colin said with a sigh.

“Guys... I found something...” Maggie’s trembling voice echoed through the corridor, and Colin walked Quinn towards her.

“Oh my god, that’s—” Rembrandt began.

Colin approached, and saw Maggie staring, wide-eyed, at a familiar-looking panel on the wall.

She glanced at each of them. “Should I... try it?”

Colin shined his light on the small, flat glass pane. “Well... there doesn’t look to be any power in this building, so I don’t think anything will happen, but...”

He stepped back, and Maggie placed her hand on it.

To everyone’s shock, the panel lit up, and a familiar voice blasted from a hidden speaker.

“Identity verified. Welcome, Ms Beckett,” the voice of Higgins barked, before the whole area of the wall opened up to reveal a well-lit stairway.

Maggie looked back for a moment at the three behind her, and then wordlessly entered the passage.

“So, uh, this just got weird, right?” Rembrandt commented, before following.

Colin looked down at Quinn, who was still clutching his temple, and relying on him for support.

“Why do I feel like I’m in *Alice in Wonderland* all of a sudden?” he mumbled.

Colin grimaced. “Down the rabbit hole...” he said, as they started down the stairs.

Behind them, the wall closed up, and Colin felt both relieved and trapped; a strange combination. The stairs went down probably fifty or sixty feet, having a turn to the right every fifteen steps or so.

Finally, they reached what seemed to be the bottom, where a small empty room awaited them.

“It can’t be a dead end,” Rembrandt whined. “I’m not walking back up all those stairs already...”

“There must be another Higgins panel in here, right?” Maggie said, feeling around the walls.

Colin’s eyes darted around what appeared to be three smooth cement walls, a floor, and a ceiling. A naked fluorescent light on the ceiling illuminated the space. No obvious signs of anything, except for a nearly imperceptible series of three small slits in a row on the ceiling, towards the back of the space. He pointed up to it.

“What do you suppose that is? A vent?”

Rembrandt stepped towards it, squinting. He flipped on his flashlight, and shined it up into the long rectangular openings.

“Huh, looks kinda like the pop filter foam on a microphone...”

“You think it’s some kind of audio?” asked Colin, and Rembrandt gave a shrug.

Maggie stiffened. “Wait... that just jogged a memory...”

She looked up to the opening. “Higgins, uh... let me in, please? Open sesame?”

“Password confirmation required,” Higgins boomed back, through what was obviously an intercom of some kind.

“Oh, crap,” Maggie said, deflated.

“Awaiting password confirmation. Alarm will sound in ten seconds.”

Colin locked anxious eyes with Maggie, and wondered if this was the end of the line.

“Awaiting password confirmation. Alarm will sound in five seconds.”

“Any bright ideas?” Rembrandt asked. Colin shook his head.

“Alarm will sound in three. Two.”

“We’re screwed,” Maggie choked out.

“Override accepted. Please wait.”

“Override?” Colin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Then, the room itself shuddered, and descended below the staircase. Evidently, it had been an elevator of some sort. After the stairs disappeared from view in favour of a set of double doors beneath, they slid open, and a man was standing before them,

holding a small touch-screen device in his hand, with a large crack in the glass.

“Good heavens, isn’t this a sight for sore eyes?” Professor Arturo said with a warm smile.



### 3.5 · FATHER FIGURES

John was absorbed in reading over Nexus Quinn's notes when his handlink vibrated and lit up with the message: *'Incoming comms from W. Arturo.'* He answered the call distractedly.

"Hey there, Will. Something up?" he said into the handlink.

"No— uh, I mean yes, but it's not urgent," the mid-thirties programmer said. "Higgins was just picking up a strange anomaly... I don't know if it's related to anything we're doing, but it just passed through our spacetime coordinates briefly. We got a track on it for about three minutes before the connection was severed."

John stroked his chin. "Anomaly? You got anything more... descriptive?"

"Not really, it's just an energy trace that didn't fit our local signatures. But you'll never guess where we tracked it to before losing it."

John waited a moment, before deciding Will was waiting on a reply. "Do continue," he said, amused.

"December second, 1978."

"You're kidding me..." The call had only been mildly interesting, before now. "Well, definitely update me if we detect it again."

December 1978, when his whole life changed course. Perhaps it was a nexus point in time, or maybe it was pure chance, but it sure didn't seem like an accident that this anomaly had bounced through there.

“We will, Doc. We have the geolocation of where it appeared, so I’ll set up a sensor there that should alert us if it passes through again.”

“Good man,” John said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He disconnected the call, and realised that Quinn was finishing up the work he was doing. John committed as much of what he saw to memory as he could before the papers were put away and the computer was shut down, before following him out of the basement.

It was around six at night, and Wade was cleaning up a messy Cory sitting at the kitchen table, in front of a half-eaten plate of vegetables. Cory’s eyes rested on John, and he gave a small wave.

“Magic Sam!” the boy said, pointing. John scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

“Yep... that’s me. Magic... Magic Sam.”

Even though he knew the two adults in front of him couldn’t see him, he felt exposed, as they both looked in the direction of Cory’s finger.

“Magic Sam?” Quinn asked, looking at Wade, questioning. She shrugged.

“I have no idea, he’s been babbling about ‘Magic Sam’ for a couple of hours,” she said, wiping down the table. “Since he watched his Barney tape. Maybe it’s something on there.”

Quinn chuckled. “Sounds like a euphemism,” he said, eyeing her.

Wade moved close to him. “I’d like to see *your* Magic Sam.”

John felt his cheeks burn as he watched them get much closer than a married man and his child’s nanny ever should. Alarmed, he moved to Cory and placed a hand over the boy’s eyes.

“You don’t need to see this,” he said with a nervous laugh. “And for that matter, neither do I.”

As he watched Quinn press Wade against the kitchen bench, mid-smooch, he felt his embarrassment harden into anger.

“You two need to cool it. There’s a child right here, for Pete’s sake!” He looked down at Cory. “Is this what they get up to *every* time Mommy’s at work?”

In response, Cory held up his arms, gesturing his desire to be picked up. John gave him a sad look.

“Sorry Cory, Magic Sam’s too... uh, magical to pick you up,” he said, passing his arms through the bewildered boy. “Why don’t you give me a big scream, huh? Three, two, one—”

Sam yelled out at the top of his lungs, and Cory joined in. As soon as he noticed the two stop their makeout session, he cut his shout, and Cory’s faded out shortly thereafter.

“What was that about, kiddo?” Quinn asked, looking at his son with some incredulity.

“Nice work,” John said to Cory, leaning down to his level. “Whenever Daddy and Wade start doing that in front of you, you scream just like that until they stop, okay?”

Cory nodded, with a giggle.

“Well, we *did* get a little carried away there,” Wade said, sheepishly wiping her mouth with her hand.

Quinn gave her a wicked grin. “I guess we did.”

He turned to his son. “Say, is it bed time yet, little man?”

“He had a decent sized nap this afternoon, so he’ll be awake for a while,” Wade said, with a wistful sigh. She picked him up.

Quinn groaned. “What a pain.”

John looked at Cory, eyebrows raised. “Your Daddy’s a real piece of work, you know that?”

His gaze shifted towards Wade, as she placed the child on the living room floor. “You don’t have much in the way of positive role models ’round here, do you?”

He sighed, and sat himself on the floor.

“Well, I’ll keep you company for a while. How’s that sound?”

He held out a hand, which Cory attempted to grab, only for his hand to slip through the hologram. He found this extremely funny, and fell to the floor with giggles.

John wondered if any version of Sam Beckett across the multiverse got to have a normal family life like the one Nexus Quinn was squandering, or if they were all doomed to be isolated weirdos with no love life to speak of, like him, or lost in the sands of time, like his double from Sherri’s dimension.

Well, he figured, there were infinite possibilities. It must have happened somewhere.

\* \* \*

Arturo’s eyes scanned the four sliders, lingering on Quinn for a moment longer than the others. He then reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a familiar wand attachment. Quinn’s eyes lit up.

*The spacetime distortion detector...*

The Professor held out the wand, and started scanning the group.

“Kromagg cloaking has a remarkably similar signature to the leaper aura, so I adapted this old thing to detect their trickery,” he explained.

The detector gave no response until he brought it near Quinn’s fused form, when it started hammering with clicks. Arturo’s eyes popped open, and he took several steps back.

Quinn fought through a streak of pain in his head, as he stepped towards the Professor, who he knew, but was sure had died at some point.

“Professor... I...” was all he could vocalise out of the swirling, disjointed thoughts in his mind.

Arturo looked at him from under a creased brow. “Who is this gentleman?” His voice was laced with mistrust, and Quinn felt his heart ache at the lack of recognition.

“It’s me, Quinn,” he managed to say, as he let the desperation he felt in his gut bring out the words of the Quinn who knew this guy. “I was merged into a superposition of two parallel versions of myself. I think it’s the same process as what happened to Maggie, only it was an intentional act this time around.”

As pain shot through his head like a lightning strike, Maggie finished his thought.

“I hope you still have the machine, Professor. ’Cause I think Quinn’s progression is going faster than mine.”

Quinn felt the Professor’s eyes burning into him. He forced his own eyes open, and they made contact. Arturo looked troubled, but as he glared into Quinn’s eyes, his expression softened.

“We’ll need to make some adjustments, but I have the bones of the machine,” he said, as his defensive posture eased.

He stepped aside, allowing the group to see the large control room beyond.

“Welcome to *Project Long Jump*,” he said. “We were once quite a bustling little operation, but I’m afraid I’m the only one here now.”

He headed through the room, as everyone followed, and continued to explain.

“Doctor Beckett and I created this place with a greater purpose in mind: to prevent the Kromagg invasion.”

He paused, letting his shoulders drop. “As you can plainly see, we... were not successful.”

“Professor...” Quinn said as his head vibrated, “didn’t you... um, die?”

Arturo’s gaze dropped to the floor. “I’m afraid that must have been my ill-fated double.”

He looked towards Rembrandt. “I’m sure you must remember, Mister Brown. Two versions of me grappling, and only one made it into the wormhole.”

Quinn felt his heart skip a beat. They had the wrong one?

Rembrandt’s jaw dropped. “My god. We had no clue...”

“It proved of some benefit to me,” Arturo continued. “While I regret having put my double in harm’s way, it did allow me the time and resources to return back here, using the information I had committed to memory.”

“The notebook!” Colin cried, eyes lighting up. “Do you still have that?”

Arturo nodded. “It’s been hidden away here since we built this facility.”

Colin met Quinn's eye. "That may give us some answers," he said.

"Well, come along," Arturo said, beckoning to the group from a doorway. "There's much to discuss, but I suppose the matter of Mister Mallory should come first."

### 3.6 · APPLIED PHYSICS

Shoes went flying across the terraced home's entryway as Sherri arrived home, her feet aching. She was more than glad to be finished with the nursing shift that seemed to saddle her with the most humiliating of cleanup duties.

It was around two in the morning, and she was quite ready to sleep, but that was a privilege she had not yet earned.

"John?" She called out, scanning the darker areas of the house for signs of the observer.

Seeing nobody, she turned towards the living room, only to see John right beside her, having apparently just blinked in from another part of the house while she wasn't looking. He wasn't smiling this time, but looked slightly haunted.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't like these people very much," he said, shaking his head.

"Why, what did they do?"

"So many things. In so many places." He had a faraway look in his eyes, as he gestured towards the couch. "I'd, uh, get that steam cleaned if I were you."

He pressed his eyes shut and grimaced, as his shoulders shuddered. "There's a downside to a photographic memory, and I've just identified it."

"So Quinn's having an affair with Wade?" Sherri frowned.

*Poor Stephanie.*



John nodded. “Yeah, but I buried the lede a little.”

He began to pace, legs passing through the coffee table as he walked the length of the room, and lowered his head as he gestured. “I watched Quinn write up his notes on the world he visited, and it’s consistent with descriptions in the notebook, though they were second-hand. I think it *might* be the Kromagg exile world.”

Sherri’s heart jumped, and she fought to calm herself.

“Okay. Okay. That’s good news, right? That means we’re here in time.”

“Yeah. But we have to work fast.”

Sherri straightened, and turned toward the basement door.

“Okay. Meet you down there.”

As John blinked into the basement, Sherri walked briskly to the door, and was about to open it when John passed through in front of her, hands held out.

“Wait! Don’t go in. Quinn’s in there.”

*Dammit.*

“Hang on, how come you didn’t know that?” she whispered fiercely. “I thought you were watching him.”

She stepped away from the door. John huffed.

“Sherri, I’m not sure if I made it clear, but I didn’t want to be subjected to the X-rated adventures of an over-sexed Quinn!” he ranted. “I’m an *Observer*, not a *voyeur*.”

After taking a moment to calm himself, he added: “I’ve been keeping Cory company in the nursery.”

Sherri reminded herself of John’s history with Quinn. Their first meeting, in 1978, was of a Quinn about the same age as him.

Then, in 1984, he would meet the younger, child version of Quinn, after saving his Dad's life. As the child grew, and entered college at a young age, John had been something of a mentor figure and family friend.

It would only stand to reason that seeing this alternate Quinn engaging in unsavory activities would be a little too much to handle.

Sherri let out a breath. "Okay. Fair enough. Well, would you watch him while I sleep a while? Let me know as soon as he gets out of there."

*If only I wasn't so beat.*

She definitely would have preferred to stay alert for her chance, but that night of work had sucked her energy away.

"Yeah, no sweat," John said in a deflated way that suggested he, too, was pretty tired.

"We're gonna succeed," she told him, but it was as much an attempt to convince herself as it was to reassure him. "Okay?"

John gave her a tight-lipped smile. "That's *my* line, you know. Now go get some rest."

They gave one another an incorporeal fist bump, and she headed up the stairs.

\* \* \*

Sherri awoke to the feeling of Quinn getting gingerly into the bed beside her. At the end of the bed was the shadowy figure of John, holding a finger to his lips.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” he said in a low voice, as if anyone would hear him. “I just watched him copying a bunch of data to a box full of floppies. Wait for him to drift off, and get going, okay?”

She gave a tight nod in his direction, as he blinked away.

*Copying data...*

She had a sinking feeling that said data was the payload that was about to doom a whole lot of Earths.

She lay there, stiff and silent, for about half an hour, until she started to hear light snoring from the other side of the bed. Then she slowly pulled back her covers, and slipped out of the bed.

She tiptoed into the hall, and relaxed as she moved out of view of Quinn. But the relief didn’t last for long, as she heard a toilet flush in an illuminated bathroom by the stairs. The door swung open, and Wade stepped out, making startled eye contact with Sherri.

“Oh, hey,” she whispered, shaking her wet hands.

*It’s alright, just play it cool.*

Sherri nodded a greeting, and stepped past her. “My turn,” she said with a wink, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Upon closing the door, she breathed a nervous sigh. How could it be this difficult to creep through a house in the middle of the damn night?

After spending a standard amount of time in the bathroom, she flushed and peeked out of the door.

*Okay, the coast is clear.*

She took the opportunity to skitter to the stairs, and down them. A moment later, she was in the basement, her heart racing as if she’d never done something like this before.

John was waiting for her, and he beckoned her over.

“Here’s the disks,” he said, pointing down to a box by Quinn’s computer. “First thing, you need to corrupt the data on them.”

She opened the box, to see about twelve 3½ inch floppy disks. “Okay, what do I need to do?”

“Beckett, what are the four fundamental forces in physics?” John was using his best lecturer voice.

Sherri probed her memory banks. “Uh... gravity, strong and weak nuclear... and... uh, electromagnetism. Right?”

“Bingo.” John pointed to a cabinet across the room. “And what physicist’s home lab would be complete without a homemade electromagnet or two?”

Sherri opened the cabinet, and John pointed to a metal cube with a handle on it, and a switch on the side. It was about double the size of a lantern battery, which was, not coincidentally, about half of its bulk. Much of the rest contained some copper wire coiled tightly around something metal from top to bottom.

“That should do the trick,” John said. “Just fire it up, and pass the bottom of the coil over each disk a few times. Should scramble them up good.”

Sherri set to work, as John took ongoing readings of the strength of the electromagnetic force to make sure the battery wasn’t running out of juice. When they were done, he directed her to the computer.

“Okay, now we need to open up the chassis and do the same thing to the hard drive. It’s a shame to lose all the data on there, but the stakes are too high.”

Sherri nodded. “No going back now,” she said, as she pulled open the case, and disconnected the hard drive. She worked the

electromagnet over it until John confirmed that it was bricked, and she put it all back together.

“Okay, now put it back exactly as you found it,” John said.

She stared at him.

“Okay... and how *did* I find it, Mister Photographic Memory?”

He looked pensive for a moment, squinting at the scene before him.

“The disks were all silver-side down, leaning towards the back of the box, except for the one on the end, which was leaning the other way.” He gestured to the computer. “And the PC case was the tiniest bit angled toward the monitor, but otherwise flush with the edge of the desk.”

“Damn I wish I had that kind of brain,” Sherri mumbled as she followed his directions.

As Sherri left the basement and headed back to bed, she wondered if she had done enough. And if so... what was she still doing here?

### 3.7 · REMINISCING

The machine was a little rusty. Colin was inside the chamber, checking over the seals and integrity of the Faraday cage within, while a bespectacled Professor was pecking at the keyboard of the attached computer, brow furrowed and mouth curved downward. Quinn, for his part, was inspecting some circuitry on the outside, pushing through his unwell feelings with visible difficulty.

Maggie and Rembrandt watched them, unable to contribute anything of value to the restoration effort.

Maggie looked nervously at the timer, which was now at four hours and counting.

“All clear in here,” Colin called out, as he shimmied his way out of the chamber, and met Maggie’s eye. “Bit claustrophobic, huh?”

Maggie gave him a smirk. “I wouldn’t know. I was a little preoccupied with my molecules ripping apart to notice.”

Colin raised his eyebrows, conceding with a tilt of his head, before joining Quinn at the outer components.

“How’s it looking?” he asked his brother. Quinn was hesitant in replying, his expression of confusion evident.

“I, uh... I don’t know,” he said, turning away. “I knew what I was doing a minute ago, but I lost it.”

Colin’s crestfallen expression at this made Maggie’s heart break. He took a moment to compose himself, and put a hand on Quinn’s back.

“It’s alright. I’ll take over.”

Quinn nodded, and moved to the desk where Maggie and Rembrandt were sitting, joining them. He buried his head in his hands.

“I feel like an idiot,” he said, rubbing his forehead in a move that had become near-ubiquitous at this point.

“Welcome to the club, my man,” Rembrandt said, in an attempt at levity, and Quinn responded with a half-hearted chuckle.

Maggie put her arm around him. “Just a little longer. Hang in there.”

Across the room, Arturo lifted his head.

“The archaic Higgins interface has now been networked with my contemporary version, and the updated calculations for Mister Mallory’s atomic structure are being loaded. My educated guess is it will be half an hour before it’s ready.”

Colin grinned. “Great. Just a few more checks and repairs over here. Looks like Quinn already re-routed the Accelerator components back into the chamber. I’ll be done in no time.”

“I don’t even understand what he just said,” Quinn remarked to Maggie, his eyes closed.

Beside them, the Professor pulled up a seat.

“I suppose you’re wondering what became of this facility, and those who worked here,” he said, pulling his glasses off, and running a cloth over the lenses. “I’d like to know, myself. When I made it back to Earth Prime, the invasion was already ongoing, and nobody was left here.”

Maggie leaned in. “Who *did* work here? Did—”

“Your double, Ms. Beckett? Yes, which I’m sure you must have guessed when Higgins granted you access.” Arturo put his glasses

back on. “Doctor Beckett and Sherri were quite the team in their day.”

*Sherri...?*

Maggie laughed. “Wait, I think *I* gave her that name.”

Arturo stroked his bearded chin. “It was her chosen alias when she planted roots here.”

“What were you *doing* down here all this time, anyway?” Rembrandt asked.

The Professor folded his arms, looking nostalgic. “In order to prevent the invasion as described in Mister Mallory’s notes, we set about combining the future technologies in such a way that would allow us to generate leaps between parallel universes, as well as through time.”

Maggie looked at the others, speechless. Rembrandt looked flustered, and Quinn’s mouth was hanging open.

“Sherri underwent intense training over many years. In her preparation, she became something of a jack-of-all-trades. We first sent her on strictly regulated slides before working her up to leaping. Over time, she built up her recall and ability to adapt to new situations. All leading up to one crucial moment.”

Quinn straightened. “You were trying to stop my double from ever handing over the sliding tech to the Kromaggs...”

He had that sly half-grin on his face that appeared at moments of inspiration; though to Maggie, it was strange seeing it on the unfamiliar face.

Arturo gave him a slow nod. “That was the idea. However... the Kromagg presence here speaks volumes about the outcome of our endeavour, doesn’t it?”



He stood, forcing a smile. “Now, might I interest anyone in some absolutely *vile* powdered rations? I have enough to last twelve more years, and frankly if I must live on it for that long, I shall welcome the inevitable.”

\* \* \*

Quinn looked nervously out of the machine chamber. He couldn't hear a thing, but could see Colin and the Professor scurrying around him, making their final checks, and Maggie and Remy off to one side, looking back at him intensely.

He gave a shaky thumbs up at them.

*Hope this doesn't hurt.*

But then again, he was already at immense levels of pain. Could it get much worse?

In the profound silence, he had a moment of what might have been peace, had he not been so pained. One moment that might have spread out into two, had the machine not been activated at that point.

*Oh. The pain actually can get worse. So... so much worse.*

Far from just a headache now, the feeling of being torn in twain grew to encompass his entire body, as his eyes closed to block out the intense blue glow.

*Sorry*, he thought, though he wasn't sure who was saying sorry to whom.

All at once, he felt like he'd just hit the drop on a rollercoaster, before he felt the back of his head smack against the chamber.

And he was cold. Really cold. In fact, he felt his whole back was now against cold metal.

His vision faded into view, and he realised that above him was no longer the mesh of the Faraday cage in front of transparent tempered glass, but a dark metal panel that made him feel like he was in a coffin. The pain evaporated from his body, and his eyes were able to focus without effort for the first time in a while.

And he wasn't wearing any clothes.

*Wait, that means they did it. I'm in the bottom chamber.*

As the door at the end of the machine was thrust open, Quinn's hands instinctively moved to cover his exposure.

"You two okay in there?" Colin's voice called, as his head appeared at the opening.

"I feel like someone just ripped out my guts, but otherwise I'm good," came a voice from above.

*That must be the other Quinn. Wait, which one am I again?*

His face screwed up for a moment as he probed his newly blanked-out mind for memories. Finding a near empty void that he certainly hoped would be temporary, he finally answered Colin.

"I'm okay, but... I, uh, need clothes."

The upper Quinn was the first to be helped out, and Quinn could see it was the one with spiked hair. He was pretty sure that was the one who Doctor Geiger was experimenting on, which meant he, in all his nakedness, must have been the smart one. If only he could remember a little more than that.

Colin threw some kind of grey jumpsuit at him that made him think of a janitor's uniform.

“Welcome back, bro,” he said, relief written on his face. “You had me pretty worried, not gonna lie.”

*His speech still sounds wrong.*

He pulled on the jumpsuit as best he could in the cramped space, before crawling out ungracefully. As he climbed to his feet, he zipped up the front, and looked around the room at each emotional face.

*Okay. What do I know about these people?*

“Listen,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, “I don’t know what that thing did, but I’m blanking on a few things right now.”

The Professor regarded him with a contemplative stare. “The leaping element of the process may have interfered with your memory, which is a known effect of the Accelerator. I suspect it will be temporary. Anywhere between a minute and a day, if Sherri’s data is applicable to your situation.”

As Quinn listened to the verbose English affect, a string of memories surged into his mind, taking the breath out of his lungs.

“Oh my god,” he murmured, and pulled him into a hug. “Professor, I missed you... *and* your over-stuffed vocabulary.”

The grouchy older man was stiff at first, but after a moment, he reciprocated. “A minute it is,” he said, bewildered.

As he looked over Arturo’s shoulder, his eyes fell on Rembrandt, a man who’d travelled with him longer than anyone else. He hesitantly pulled away from the Professor and approached the singer.

“How you doing, Cryin’ Man?” he said with a grin. He held a hand up to Remy, who grasped it, and pulled him in with a pat on the back.

“A lot better now,” Remy replied. “Good to see your face again, Q-ball.”

He moved on to Maggie. “Had you worried, didn’t I?”

“Nah!” She gave a dismissive gesture, before running a hand over her glistening eyes, smearing tears across her face. “Well okay, maybe a little.”

She wrapped her arms around him, and he squeezed his eyes shut as memories continued to flow through his head.

He finally looked up at the two remaining men: the other Quinn, and his brother.

First, he held a hand out to the man he’d been combined with. They shook, and he watched his double look him up and down in appraisal.

“Nice to meet you, uh, properly?” the other Quinn said.

“Likewise,” Quinn said, feeling altogether uncomfortable with the interaction.

“Remy and I decided we’re going to call you ‘Mallory,’ okay?” Maggie said to the double. He looked back with a furrowed brow.

“Why do *I* have to have the nickname?” He pouted.

“Because to all of us, *he’s* Quinn,” she said.

Quinn gave him a shrug. “We’re a democracy,” he said sheepishly, “so ‘Mallory’ it is. Sorry.”

Mallory frowned, and plodded to a bench in the corner of the room, where he sat down and proceeded to stare at the wall.

Finally, Quinn met Colin’s eye, but the memories coming to him regarding his little brother just weren’t making sense.

“Colin, I...” he scratched his head. “When did we first meet again?”

Colin frowned. “Our birth Dad brought me to live with you in 1979.”

*So that explains one memory, but it sure doesn't explain the other one.*

“So why do I have a distinct memory of us meeting when you were an adult? And you were wearing old timey clothes.”

Colin's brows knitted. “How distinct are we talking?”

“It's crystal clear in my head. And yet I also remember waking up one day as a kid, and meeting my new brother.”

He crossed his arms. “What is going on...?”

“You kept talking before about how my speech patterns sounded weird,” Colin said, dragging a hand down his chin. Quinn nodded.

“Gentlemen,” Arturo interjected. “I may be able to clear this matter up.”

As Quinn and Colin looked at him expectantly, an ear-splitting alarm began to sound, and a light on the wall began to flash.

“Blast it all!” Arturo cried, balling his hands into fists. “Already?!”

“What is it?” Quinn asked, frantic.

“I suspected that the Kromaggs would detect the energy surge from the machine use, but it seems they've been more expedient than anticipated.”

He looked at them with regretful eyes. “I doubt it will be long before they find this place now.”

### 3.8 · MARITAL TENSION

The clinking of knives and forks on plates was the only sound for a while.

It was eight thirty in the morning, and Sherri was pretending this wasn't one of the most awkward breakfasts of her life. At the kitchen table, across from her, sat Wade and Quinn, each eating their eggs on toast with a practised nonchalance. Beside her, Cory was grabbing fists of scrambled eggs, and putting about a quarter of it in his mouth, while the rest dropped to various places on the table and floor. Sherri chewed on her eggs, deep in thought, as she evaded the eyes of the adulterers.

John hadn't shown up yet, and she figured he was getting some sleep. But she hoped he'd come back soon; her continued presence in this house threw up major red flags, and there must have been more left to do.

The problem with this whole leap was the lack of knowledge regarding the details of Nexus Quinn's actions leading up to the destruction of their world. With a historical record being sparse and virtually inaccessible for Higgins, combined with Quinn's secretive movements, there was so little data to go on.

*If wiping the drives hasn't fulfilled my mission, then there could be backups somewhere.*

She'd have to stay close to Quinn today.

Quinn stood, and moved to the coffee machine. He held up the pot, which had just finished brewing.

“Coffee, anybody?”

“Please,” Wade said, turning her head towards him.

“Black, please,” Sherri said, through a mouthful of toast.

“Really?” Quinn said, eyebrows raised. “I thought you hated it without creamer...”

She gave a dramatic shrug, moving her eyes to meet Wade’s. “I’m in the mood for something that gives it to me straight, you know? The naked, bitter reality. Even if it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

Wade had grown pale. Sherri winked, and brought a forkful of egg to her mouth.

Quinn poured the coffees, appearing mystified. “That’s, uh... poetic, Steph.”

He presented her black coffee with one eyebrow lowered, before sitting back in front of his meal.

Sherri sipped at it, relieved to be getting some caffeine into her tired system. She stared down into the dark brew.

“Magic Sam!” Cory’s delighted squeal almost made Sherri spill her coffee, and she glanced at him. He was pointing his egg-covered finger into the living room. John leaned into her line of vision, and beckoned.

“Magic Sam again?” Quinn shook his head, and looked to Sherri. “Who the heck is he talking about?”

“I think he’s just got an imaginary friend,” she said. “Lots of small children invent playmates that give them attention they might feel deprived of.”

She took a sip of her coffee, as two surprised faces looked back at her.

“I, uh... was assisting a child psychiatrist last night,” she explained, before turning to Cory.

“Hey, you wanna get down?”

Cory nodded.

“Okay, but we gotta get you cleaned up first.”

“I want Mommy to,” he said, giving her puppy dog eyes.

Sherri grabbed a tub of wipes from a shelf on the wall, pulling a couple out. “Okay, I’ll clean you up, sweetie...”

*Please don’t say it...*

“Not Pretend Mommy, *real* Mommy.”

*Damn. Just push through it...*

“Real Mommy at your service,” she said shakily, and started wiping his hands off.

Cory let out an ear-bleeding scream. “I want real Mommy,” he wailed. Sherri felt the eyes of Quinn and Wade on her, as John sidled up to Cory.

“Hey little man,” he said, “there’s no need to cry. I’m here, buddy! Remember I sang you to sleep last night?”

Cory continued his cries, and it seemed even ‘Magic Sam’ was powerless to stop him.

“Real Mommy?” Wade said, looking at Sherri with a screwed up face. “What’s got into his head now?”

Sherri shook her head. “I don’t know. Why don’t you try? Maybe he’ll respond to you... stepping into my role. You do it so well.”

As Wade bit her lip at the wording, John gave a low whistle.

“Boy, that’s manipulative, Sherri,” he remarked, fighting a grin. “Getting her off your scent by distracting her with her own guilty



conscience... I have to admit, I'm impressed. But, also appalled."

Sherri met his eye, and she could tell he was more amused than anything.

*I'm not proud of it. But then again, spending my life as a professional impostor is hardly an ethically sound vocation to begin with.*

As Wade started to wipe down the screaming child, Sherri collected the plates and brought them to the sink, before bringing her coffee mug into the living room.

John followed, and she sat at the bay window, silently sipping her coffee as she let him gesticulate.

"I scanned all through the basement for hidden storage disks, but there was nothing detected. That doesn't mean there was nothing there, but Higgins couldn't find it.

"I've been speaking with Stephanie back in the facility, but she hasn't been at all cooperative. Thinks we're some shady government types trying to steal Quinn's technology, so she's given up nothing on that front. I *did* find out that she knows about the affair, and she's been actively ignoring it for Cory's sake."

*She knows? The plot thickens...*

Sherri wasn't sure what would have been worse: being oblivious, or bearing the burden of knowing that your husband is unfaithful and staying quiet about it. Either way, it was a cruel fate.

John shook his head. "I don't think this situation is helping Cory at all, personally. But I guess that's beside the point."

Quinn strode into the room from the kitchen, giving Sherri a tight nod. "I'm gonna head down to work."

Sherri forced a smile. “Okie doke! Do some deals and make us rich, okay?” she said, the words tasting bitter in her mouth.

Quinn’s eyes twinkled as he headed in the direction of the basement, giving her a thumbs up. “Prepare the monocles and top hats for my triumphant return.”

As he turned away from her, Sherri gave John a nervous look. He nodded, picking up on her silent message.

“I’ll go shadow him. If he has backups somewhere, he’ll be reaching for them any minute now.”

He tapped on his handlink, and left her alone in the room.

\* \* \*

John waited at the bottom of the basement stairs as Nexus Quinn sat down in front of his computer, and switched it on, fiddling with his timer as it began to boot up.

“Where do you keep that timer, anyway?” John wondered, as he realised that it may have had internal storage. Quinn had just been holding it as he’d blinked in here. He wondered if he kept it on his person at all times, or if there was a specific hiding spot where he kept it.

“What the...” Quinn mumbled, as he noticed a disk error on the computer. “Well, shit.”

He flipped open the box of floppies, and attempted to boot off one.

“Sorry, kid,” John said, as the computer refused to recognise the disk.

Quinn cursed a few more times, at an ever-increasing volume.

“You kiss your babysitter with that mouth?” John remarked.

Quinn ran a frustrated hand through his hair, causing it to fall out of its neatly styled place, and stood, moving around to the various devices in the basement and inspecting them. John figured he must be checking for signs of damage or sabotage on them.

“No, we didn’t trash the rest of your stuff,” John said. “But, we will if it comes to that. Sorry.”

“What *happened*?” Quinn said under his breath, as sweat beaded on his forehead.

John, despite himself, felt bad for Quinn. After all, this poor guy had no idea what he was doing was going to cause a far-reaching catastrophe, beginning with his own home. That the inhuman creatures with whom he wished to barter were merely waiting for their opportunity to genocide and subjugate the *Homo sapiens* species across the multiverse.

*Maybe he could be reasoned with, if we told him the truth.*

John dismissed the thought. That was the last resort. There was too much risk involved with Sherri unmasking herself as a stranger who had infiltrated his home in the guise of his wife. That kind of thing tended to cause a lot more mistrust, and compromise the mission.

Sherri’s first training missions had her surreptitiously replacing her doubles, and assimilating into their lives for short periods of time, just to see if she could handle the situation. A few times, at the beginning, her deception was discovered, and it never went well.

From their years of experience together as leaper and observer, he could count on one hand the number of times when Sherri

revealing her identity was the right move, and it was nearly always when all other options were exhausted.

Still, the temptation was always there. Always the voice in the back of his head saying: ‘what if *this* time it’s the right choice?’ The constant struggle between hard data and gut feelings. He seemed to recall a similar conflict within the Sam he’d met in 1978.

Looking frazzled, Quinn headed up the stairs. John transported his projection to the living room, where Sherri and Wade were reading to Cory.

“Sherri, heads up...” he said, and she looked up at him. They exchanged looks, and John gestured to Quinn, who was now coming into the room.

“Something’s scrambled my magnetic storage,” he announced to the room, in a grave tone.

“Magnetic—? You mean, your hard drive?” Wade asked.

“Hard drive *and* floppy disks.”

Sherri put on her best concerned face. “Oh no! All your work!”

Quinn bowed his head. “It is a setback, but I haven’t lost my data. I can restore using the quartz storage system I acquired a few months ago. But I’ll need to pick up new disks.”

John gestured wildly to Sherri. “Quartz! Are you kidding me? I gotta find out how that works.”

Quinn pursed his lips. “But I really need to figure out what happened. Some of my equipment might be on the fritz. Last thing I need is something going wrong.”

Behind Quinn, Sherri noted John’s pacing form as he grappled with the idea of crystal data storage.

*His mind will be on that for a while, I’m sure.*

“Want me to pop down to Doppler for you?” Wade suggested. “I still know some of the guys there. Might be able to talk them into a discount, as long as Hurley’s not around to yell at them about it.”

Quinn smirked. “Sure, just don’t let them talk you into an extended warranty.”

“I would never,” she said, feigning being wounded.

“Anything I can do to help?” Sherri asked.

Quinn paused for a moment, thinking. “Actually, yeah.”

He turned to Wade. “When you go, could you take Cory with you? Stephanie’s going to assist me in the basement.”

### 3.9 · JUST A NORMAL FRIDAY

Colin followed the Professor through a large room of servers, with Quinn close at his heels.

“This place is a maze,” he mused, as they weaved through the steel racks, each lit up with rows of blue and green lights that flashed as the drives and processors were accessed, presumably by the Higgins mainframe.

“It’s daunting at first sight, certainly,” Arturo said. “But it’s laid out in a logical, well-labelled fashion. Like a library, in a way.”

“How do you expect us to take all of this with us?” Quinn asked.

“All of this is merely processing power and redundancy,” he explained. “The core Higgins modules are stored on a series of quartz crystals at the heart of the facility.”

“Quartz crystals?” Colin glanced at Quinn, who shrugged.

Arturo led them into a circular room, with about twenty finger-sized crystals set into receptacles around the perimeter of the room, illuminated from behind with blue light. A series of lasers on robotic arms intermittently moved over them, injecting red beams into the transparent hexagonal minerals.

“Yes, apparently Doctor Beckett integrated some quite advanced technology in my absence. He *did* leave me an extensive manual, however, which I will now pass on to you.”

“We’re really going to abandon this place?” Colin said, as he marvelled at the unbelievable advancements.

“I’m afraid it can’t be helped now,” the Professor lamented. “Higgins detected a Manta Ship scanning the location of the energy surge for geological anomalies, and a vast cavern six stories under a university in an earthquake-prone city is sure to raise their suspicions.”

*Well, when you put it that way...*

“It does seem like an odd choice,” Quinn said, looking upwards at the ceiling. “Weren’t you worried this place could cave in?”

Arturo nodded. “Yes, which is why approximately eighty per cent of Higgins’s early iterations involved complex geological data collection and modelling. He predicted the strata we built in would be structurally sound until at least 2029.”

He grinned, looking towards the centre of the room, where a dome protruded from the ceiling that blinked with multicoloured lights. “The marvellous thing actually predicted the earthquake of 1989, corroborating with the notes you left me. It allowed us to significantly mitigate the death toll, and allowed us some cover with the government to operate as an independent geological survey and earthquake detection system.”

Quinn grinned, his eyes shining with excitement. “This place blows me away,” he said, patting his one-time mentor on the shoulder.

“Yes, well, as much as I’d like to take the credit, it was a team effort,” he said with a modest shrug.

Colin wanted to share in the wonder, but all he could think about was the fact that this amazing place was now doomed because of them.

“But enough accolades and self-congratulations,” Arturo continued. “I brought you here because there is still a chance to

complete the mission that went awry, as long as you can escape here with the Higgins data.”

“Even if we take all this data, what’ll we do with it?” Colin asked, closely eyeing one of the crystals as a laser shone into it. He watched as the beam entered the crystal and began to move around within, in an intricate circuit board pattern, apparently writing data into the stone.

Arturo placed a hand on a panel, and his voice boomed. “Higgins, switch to secondary storage and eject crystalline components. Administrative authorisation: FP-454-029B.”

After a short hesitation from the computer, he added: “*Post-haste*, Higgins.”

“Ejecting data crystals,” Higgins said in his flat, mechanical tone. The robotic arms lifted away, and, one by one, the blue light behind each of the crystals went out, before the crystal popped out of its recess.

Arturo reached under a panel, pulling out a briefcase. He opened it up to reveal a numbered series of padded compartments. He walked around the room, taking a crystal and placing it carefully into its corresponding place.

“As I understand it, these crystals were a late stage implementation, and specifically designed so that our data could be taken with us in the event of an evacuation,” he said, as he closed the case. “Why they were left behind is part of the greater mystery of what occurred here, but now I’m relieved they were.”

He handed the case to Quinn.

“This briefcase is equipped with a series of compact discs that contain Doctor Beckett’s detailed manual on the use of this method of storage,” he said.



“You still haven’t answered my question,” Colin prodded.

Quinn looked down at the briefcase. “Well, what other place do we know has technology that has the chance of matching this?”

Colin let out a breath as it dawned on him. “That place where Maggie went in the future?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Quinn. “I think he called it *Project Quantum Leap*.”

“So we need to get back to the other Doc Beckett’s home turf, then,” Colin murmured, as his mind started to put things into place.

He had to admit that the thought of seeing that place excited him.

As they began to head out of the core, Colin felt the ground beneath him rumble, and his heart jumped.

“Uh, you said this strata was sound, right?” he said, looking at Arturo with wide eyes.

“That’s no earthquake,” the Professor replied, looking sadly at the little handheld device he’d been keeping in his pocket. “Our belligerent friends above have begun exploratory drilling. Higgins estimates twenty minutes until they breach the facility.”

“Well, shit,” Quinn muttered.

The Professor turned towards a door across from where they’d entered. “One moment,” he said, holding up a finger as he entered the room.

After exactly one moment, by Colin’s measure, the man returned, holding Quinn’s notebook, which was now yellowed and well-used. But the notebook wasn’t the only thing in his hands.

Arturo held out the contents of his hands to Colin. One notebook, and one small metal box with a latch. Upon taking

them, Colin turned the box over, studying it.

“What’s this?”

“Fascinating,” mused Arturo. “You don’t recall giving me that in 1978, Mister Mallory?”

Colin narrowed his eyes. “No. You’re sure *I* did?”

Arturo scratched his chin, regarding Colin with an enigmatic smile. “Changing one’s own history is an interesting thing, isn’t it?”

He gestured to the items Colin held. “These keepsakes have remained unchanged even as history was rewritten. Higgins has theories as to why, but I shall spare you the lecture. They are a window into a past that no longer exists, and I suspect they’ll contain some answers for your altered memories.”

He headed back the way they’d come, gesturing for the brothers to follow. “Come, I’ll show you and your friends to the evacuation chamber.”

\* \* \*

Quinn Mallory felt unwelcome.

It hadn’t been his fault that he had been the hapless guinea pig of a mad scientist and blended with someone else. He didn’t know squat about all this science stuff, which the other guy with his name seemed to, to a degree that rivalled Diana, and maybe even Doctor Geiger himself.

He was just a normal dude who only got caught up in all this because of a spinal injury that left him paralysed, until he was

approached by Geiger and miraculously healed with technology he would never understand in a million years.

And now he was in another world with some enemy he'd never heard of bearing down on him, among people who would rather he not be here, and wouldn't even call him by his name.

*Mallory.*

Sure, some people were referred to by their surname, and it was fine. But Mallory was a girl's name. They could have chosen anything else, but no.

He was sitting, arms crossed, and hunched over. He supposed he looked like he was sulking, and that's because he was.

The wordy man everyone called the Professor had taken the other Quinn and his brother further into the labs, leaving him with the gun lady, whose name was Maggie, and the singer, whose name was the same as a Dutch painter he'd heard of.

While he'd been fused, he'd felt an affinity towards these people, but now he just felt like he was among strangers.

*I just want to go home.*

In his periphery, he sensed Rembrandt approaching him.

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"Just wanted to see if you were doing okay," he said, taking a seat beside him on the bench.

"Besides being in a crazy post-apocalyptic wasteland? Yeah I'm doing great." He raised a cynical eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's a lot to handle, huh?" He chuckled, and leaned back against the wall. "I never asked to be on this ride, either."

Mallory's guarded facade faltered at this. "You didn't?"

“I was just driving past Q-ball’s house when my whole Caddy got pulled into that portal. And when I eventually got back to my home world, the damn maggots invaded three months later. So I know how you feel, man. Just a pawn in someone else’s chess game.”

Mallory frowned. “If Quinn did all this to you, why are you friends with the guy?”

“Oh, I wasn’t his biggest fan for a good while. But in the end, he was just a kid who made a mistake, and I think he beat himself up plenty without me joining in. And it’s hard to stay mad at someone with as good a heart as Q-ball. Maybe he’s motivated by his guilt, but he’s done a lotta good, helped a lot of people.”

Mallory processed this for a while. This group really did seem tight, even if it was borne of necessity.

A great rumble shook the room, and Mallory instinctively gripped his seat. The sound of metal creaking echoed off the walls.

“What the hell was that?” he cried.

“I’m thinkin’ it’s our cue to mosey on out of this death trap,” Rembrandt said, making eye contact with Maggie across the room.

“I’m not going to argue with that,” Mallory said, standing. “Where are the others?”

“They’ll be here,” Maggie said. “Just be ready to leave.”

Mallory looked up at the high ceilings. A crisscross of reinforced girders, supported by steel pillars. Thoughts of them crumpling and crashing down filled his mind, and he felt sick to his stomach.

“Let’s go, people!” Quinn’s voice boomed into the room, and Mallory merely caught his arm beckoning, as it continued past the

doorway.

The three of them followed, joining the three men, through a winding corridor. Mallory noted that Quinn was now carrying a black briefcase, and Colin had an old book.

Finally, they stopped at a large door. The Professor placed his hand on a panel, and it slid open to reveal a shallow room, no deeper than six feet.

“This is the evacuation chamber,” he explained. “Higgins will open up a wormhole against the far wall that *should* send you to a safe location on the surface.”

“Should...?” Quinn said, biting his lip.

“Well, we must trust that the focus beacon for the other end of the vortex is still operational,” he said, looking down at the little computer in his hand. “We *are* still receiving a signal from it, so I wouldn’t be too concerned.”

“What happens if it’s not working right?” Mallory’s voice wavered.

Arturo stroked his beard. “Best not to think about that.”

He exchanged a look with Quinn that Mallory couldn’t read.

*Why do I get the feeling this is just a normal Friday for these guys?*

“Higgins, execute evacuation procedure B92,” the Professor commanded.

“Evacuation gateway opening in three, two, one. Evacuation gateway engaging.”

Before them, the back wall of the room was replaced with a swirling blue, and another terrifying rumble began to shake the facility.

“Go now!” the Professor shouted.

Everyone else seemed to hesitate, so Mallory took the initiative, and jumped in.

*Just a normal Friday*, he thought as he was thrust through the tunnel, his stomach turning.

And then he was out, falling onto a dusty wooden floor. He pulled himself to his feet, leaning on what appeared to be a church pew. For a moment, he took in his surroundings. It was certainly a church; long abandoned, but largely untouched by the chaotic environment that other places he’d seen here seemed to have. It would almost be peaceful if he didn’t think about why he was here.

Behind him, he heard more bodies tumbling to the ground. Rembrandt was the first to sidle up to him.

“Well, thank you Jesus,” Rembrandt said, staring at the stained glass image of the religious figure behind the pulpit.

“Where are we now?” Maggie asked, joining them.

“Can’t be far, right?” said Rembrandt. “That was the shortest slide we’ve ever had.”

“I think I recognise this place,” Colin said, his arms still laden with the old notebook and some kind of box. “Then again, all churches look the same to me.”

“No, you’re right,” Quinn said, studying the architecture. “Our second cousin Gareth got married in this church. We’re in Los Altos.”

Mallory turned back, watching the vortex close. He furrowed his brow as he realised there was someone missing.

“Hey, didn’t the Professor follow you?”

He turned back to the others. Quinn’s head was bowed.

“No,” Quinn said shakily.

“But why?”

“Because he had to set the self-destruct. Can’t let the ‘maggs get their hands on time travel.”

“What?!” Maggie was looking at him with wild eyes.

“Can’t he come through here after he does that, same as us?” Rembrandt asked, frantic.

“He will... if the Kromaggs don’t get there first,” Colin said.

Maggie produced the timer from her pocket.

“Well, we have one hour and thirty-six minutes,” she said, voice breaking. “So let’s wait right here and hope he shows up.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Mallory probed.

Quinn clutched the briefcase with both hands. “Then we finish his life’s work.”

### 3.10 • TOOLS OF THE TRADE

“Can I get a quarter-inch flat-head, please?”

Sherri listlessly scanned the rack of screwdrivers, and plucked out the requested size. She handed it to Nexus Quinn, who was lying face up on the floor of the basement, head underneath one of the many large coils that were arranged along the wall. He unscrewed a hatch, and pointed a handheld device at it. The device was small, and had a numeric LCD screen similar to a timer, at which he was squinting.

“What is that thing?” she asked him.

He poked his head out, looking at her. “It’s just an EMF meter. I’m checking for possible leaks of electromagnetic energy that could have fried my drives. If it *was* one of my components that caused this, it could do damage to a lot more than some floppy disks if I don’t fix it.”

Sherri nodded, as he closed up the hatch, and shimmied along to the next coil. She looked across the room at John, who was captivated by the crystal storage device that Quinn had placed on the desk in preparation for the data restoration. It was a small machine with a single quartz crystal inside, and a series of lasers pointing towards it from several directions.

John had his handlink out and was scanning it from every angle; his enthusiastic demeanour was like a kid in a candy store.

“Steph, can you pass me a half inch spanner, please?”



Sherri selected the spanner. His hand was outstretched to receive it, though his meter device was already occupying it, so she carefully placed it on the floor beside. He grabbed it with the ends of his fingers.

“Thanks.”

After a moment of clanging, he slid along to the next coil, repeating his work.

“This thing is amazing...” she heard John mumble. “The data is carved into the crystal in microscopic detail. It can’t be erased, so that makes it perfect for long term storage... and this one quartz point, alone, has tens of terabytes of storage capacity. Incredible. I wonder if he’s got the schematics somewhere.”

“Can you pass me some needle-nose pliers, Steph?”

Sherri fought the urge to sigh, and leaned over to hand him the pliers.

“Here,” she said, placing them in his hand.

“Oh, here, put this back too...” he said, using his other hand to thrust the screwdriver at her. The pointed end went right into her hand, and she cried out.

“Oh, jeez, sorry!” Quinn said, crawling out from his position. “Are you okay?”

Sherri sucked on her new wound. “Well, it hurts, but it’s nothing serious,” she said. “Just... watch what you’re doing, Quinn.”

Quinn stood, and took her hand, looking at the puncture, which was beginning to ooze blood.

“Ugh. I’m such a jerk,” he said. “Come on, I’ll patch you up.”

He led her upstairs, and brought her into the kitchen, where he got a first aid kit out of the drawer.

Gingerly, he started cleaning her cut with an alcohol swab.

“Sorry,” he said. “I get a bit carried away when I’m focused on my work. Forget to notice things right in front of me.”

Sherri raised an eyebrow, and thought about what else that might apply to.

“We don’t get much time together, do we?” she asked. “Just the two of us, I mean.”

He looked up at her with an unreadable expression. “I guess not.”

“Seems like you and Wade get more time together than us,” she continued. He dropped his gaze back to her hand, and grabbed a band-aid, peeling it open.

“Do we? I guess I’m working so much I didn’t notice,” he lied, as he put the bandage on her.

Sherri kept a poker face. “I think she had a crush on you when you used to work together at the computer store.”

He looked up, studying her face. She wasn’t sure what was going on in his head, but his energy had changed, and it put her on edge.

“Yeah, maybe. But, I was already involved with you, so she knew to keep her distance.” His words came out slow and deliberate.

Sherri rubbed her hand, breaking eye contact. She felt like he was playing chess and she was playing checkers.

“I’m sure she did.”

He stood. “Why don’t you take a break? I’ll go finish up.”

And with that, he hurried out of the room, leaving Sherri with a nervous feeling.

John was intensely frustrated that he couldn't touch this storage device. He just wanted to open it up and figure it out. If he could integrate it into Higgins, it would improve efficiency by a substantial margin. He thought he had the gist of how it worked, but without at least some schematics, it would take him a lot of trial and error to build his own.

As he tried to stick his head into the middle of the device, in the hopes to see some of the circuitry, he realised Quinn was returning from upstairs. He glanced up, seeing that Sherri wasn't with him.

Curious, he watched Quinn bend over, picking up the tools that had been left on the floor.

He looked at the screwdriver's tip for a moment, before moving to his desk and rifling through a drawer. He pulled out some tweezers, and plucked off the stray fleck of Sherri's skin that clung to the tool.

John looked at him, a sinking feeling descending upon his stomach. "What are you doing...?"

Quinn inserted the sample into a small vial, and placed it under a lamp with a concentrated beam.

*That's more than just a lamp...*

As the sample was illuminated, a small LCD display on the size produced a string of text that John couldn't interpret.

"Huh..." Quinn said, biting his lip. Then he began to squint, as if he was looking at a bright light. He turned away, rubbing his eyes. "What... what is that?"

John stepped back, and quickly tapped at his handlink, re-centring himself at Sherri in the kitchen, who was sipping a glass of water. She looked up at his frantic face, and her eyes grew wide.

“Is something wrong?”

“Sherri, I think he’s on to you.” John put a nervous hand on his head, gripping his hair with his fingers.

“On to me? What do you mean? How?”

“He didn’t stab you with that flat-head by accident. He did it to get a... a sample of your cells. I don’t know what data he’s getting from it, but it’s clear he knows something’s off with you. When he was looking at your sample, he had a physiological reaction consistent with the *Sensory Aura Paradox*.”

Sherri had first described that phenomenon to him long ago, causing him to study it somewhat, and provide it with a name. The Quinn he had met in 1978 had first identified the SAP in a simple experiment that pierced the illusion of the Leaper Aura. It caused a visceral reaction to the brain attempting to parse contradictory stimuli, most often visual in nature.

“Oh boy,” Sherri sighed, standing. “So, I guess Plan B is go.”

“Yeah.” John nodded gravely. “Have I ever mentioned how much I hate Plan B?”

“Oh, I know...” Sherri gave him a sad look, as she opened the kitchen drawer and put the first aid kit back in its place.

“I hate it too,” she said, pulling out a claw hammer.

### 3.11 • ANSWERS

As the sliders reclined across the church pews, Quinn looked down at the notebook he'd filled up in 1978. Colin sat beside him, holding the little metal box that neither of them recognised.

“What do you remember writing in there?” Colin asked him.

Quinn tried to think back to what had only been a week ago at most, to his understanding, but it was frighteningly out of focus. Certainly, he recalled building the machine with Sam, and the Professor, and his Dad, and the other Sam. And Colin?

*Yeah, he was there.*

But the memories tapered off into a distorted mess as he tried to drill down into them.

“I know I wrote a whole lot of technical stuff in the front half,” he said, scratching his head. “The personal stuff though? Drawing a blank.”

He opened up the notebook, and flipped through the equations, diagrams, and instructions on the sliding machine. Nothing unusual there that stood out.

But when he hit the back end, the words surprised him.

“Dad died...”

He felt his head swim as he remembered a fractured memory of his Dad's funeral, pressing against contradictory memories of his Dad being alive and well after that point.

Colin's mouth curved upward. "In 1984, Doc Beckett pulled him out of the path of a car. That's how we first met him. I guess that's what happened in the *new* timeline, anyway."

Quinn let out a laugh, as he pieced together the new memories. Memories in which he grew up with Sam Beckett as a personal hero, and then as a teacher.

*This is wild.*

He flipped through more pages. No more tragedies ensued that he could see, just page after page of things that needed to happen to set him on the path to the current point. Then, he reached the part about the Professor's death, and he felt his heart ache as he realised that the Arturo of Earth Prime couldn't have prevented the death of his double. And now...

He continued paging through the notebook, until he hit the end, and felt a wave of confusion.

"There's nothing in here about you..." he said to Colin, feeling cold. "He... he said there would be answers..."

Colin looked pensive. "Maybe it's in here?" he said, holding up the box.

Quinn watched him twist the latch, and open it.

*A cocktail umbrella?*

Indeed, sitting solitary in the box was a single red paper umbrella; the kind that was used to decorate tropical cocktails.

A memory fired off in Quinn's mind:

*"Why does the drink have an umbrella in it?" asks Colin.*

*"Uh, I never really thought about it," Quinn replies, amused. "More decoration, I suppose."*

*Quinn begins to drink his beer.*

*“Maybe it’s important to protect your drinks from the elements?” Colin suggests, and Quinn almost chokes on his drink, as he stifles a laugh. He isn’t sure if that was a joke or an honest question, and Colin’s face remains straight.*

The memory made him smile, despite everything. He controlled the reaction, and looked up at Colin, who had a faraway look.

*Yeah. I definitely remember him being confused by everyday stuff, like flushing toilets. Why would that be?*

“Why in the world would you put *that* in a box for safe keeping?” Quinn asked.

Colin picked it up, and tried to avoid breaking apart the paper that had become brittle with age. He turned it over in his hands for a minute, brows knitted and face draining of colour.

And then, out of nowhere, he started laughing.

Quinn raised his eyebrows. “You alright, man?”

“I remember!” Colin, through his laughs, placed the umbrella back in the box, and on the pew beside him, before throwing his arms around a bewildered Quinn.

“It all makes sense now,” said Colin, squeezing Quinn to an uncomfortable point. “Originally, I never grew up with you at all.”

He finally let go, and pulled back, revealing tears in his eyes. “I *asked* our birth father to bring the young me to live with you.”

Quinn blinked. “You remembered all that from an umbrella?”

Quinn felt like all his confusion was finally starting to sort itself out. It must have been something to do with his fusion that had fractured his memory and allowed the old timeline to resurface.

“It wasn’t just any umbrella,” Colin said, and turned his gaze towards the stained glass Jesus. “But I’m... not sure I can

accurately describe just what happened to me when I acquired it.”

He pursed his lips as he tried to form words. “I... met this weird guy who knew a frightening amount about me, and Doc— I mean, *Sam* — told me he was some... I dunno, supernatural entity, for lack of a better term. The whole thing was nuts, but it was pivotal in my decision. And that umbrella is the only thing that proves it really happened to me.”

*More ‘higher power’ stuff?*

The two of them sat in silence for a moment, and Quinn felt like a veil had been lifted. His relief was palpable. He wasn’t going crazy, his mind wasn’t playing tricks. He just had to reconcile conflicting timelines. It wasn’t so different to his bubble universe lifetime. Just another layer of memories to add to his ever-expanding collection. As long as he knew what the current correct version of his memory was, he’d be alright.

It occurred to him that if they managed to succeed in stopping the Kromagg invasion, all of this could be purged from their memories, too. He gripped the notebook in his hand tightly; it was a vital document.

“I think you made the right choice, Colin.”

“Me too,” Colin agreed. “I don’t remember my original life, but I *do* remember how worried I was about that decision. And when I finally asked you about it, you said ‘go for it.’”

*I remember that, too...*

“Thanks, man,” he said.

Quinn gave him a light punch in the arm. “You weren’t a bad addition to the family, all things considered. For example, those times you did the dishes just so I could play Nintendo in my boxers. Truly selfless.”



Colin reciprocated the arm punch. “You just *had* to ruin a touching moment, huh?”

“Tell you what,” Quinn said, “next time we play, *I’ll* be Luigi and *you* can be Mario.”

As Colin gave him an amused eye roll, Quinn couldn’t help but smile, as he realised this kind of silly sibling banter wouldn’t have been possible before. It warmed his heart to think about all the fun times that one change had brought the two of them.

As his mind drifted to the hazy circumstances that led to Colin joining him in his sliding when he knew he had not been there in the beginning, someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind. He turned to find Maggie’s gaunt face, as she held the timer aloft.

Nine minutes remained.

“He’s... not coming, is he?” she said, her voice breaking.

Quinn felt his heart sink. “No.”

“He put his trust in us to finish what they started,” Colin said, leaning back to meet Maggie’s eye. “If we can prevent the invasion, we can undo all the deaths that have happened since.”

Quinn nodded, swallowing hard. “Including his.”

Maggie blinked back tears. “Yeah, you’re right. We have to do this.”

She handed Quinn the timer. “Can you get us back there?”

Quinn nodded, and began to program the timer with the coordinates to the world where they had first met Sam.

“One problem, though,” he said, as he pressed buttons. “We’ll have to stay there a while. Way longer than the timer will give us.”

Silence fell over the group.

“So, anyone who wants off the ride...” Quinn said, “I guess that will be your last chance; at least for a bit.”

The sound of a throat being cleared came from across the room, and they turned to Mallory, whose hand was raised.

“I’d like to go home, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Quinn gave him an understanding nod. “Alright. When we get there, I’ll set the timer to get you home, and I guess that’ll be the last we use of this thing.”

The group gathered under the stained glass window, as the timer reached zero, and Quinn opened a wormhole for the penultimate time.

### 3.12 • PLAN B

Plan B was on: to bust up the timer, and all of Nexus Quinn's stuff. The destruction of all his ingenuity. John's least favourite option, but it would get the job done.

As Sherri headed for the basement door, John centred himself on Quinn, who was sitting on his desk chair, holding his timer tightly. He was doing surprisingly little for someone who had just discovered something alarming, but his face definitely showed it.

"I know you can't hear me," John said, "but I'm sorry."

Atop the stairs, there was a thump on the door.

John watched Quinn's gaze fall on it as the knob turned back and forth. The door wasn't opening.

*Oh no, he locked it! So much for Plan B?*

The muffled voice of Sherri came from the other side of the door: "Quinn?"

Quinn stood from his seat, and moved to the base of the staircase.

"You told me to invest in a lock, right?" he called back, smirking.

"Why'd you lock me out, Quinn?" she probed.

"Because I don't think you're who you say you are." He walked up a few steps. "You're... not from here, are you?"

John moved his position to the top of the stairs, and leaned to the other side of the door. Sherri stood there, hammer in hand,

ready to bust through the door.

“He has his timer with him,” he told her. “We need to talk him down before he runs off through a wormhole.”

She lowered the hammer, cursing under her breath.

“No, I’m not,” she confessed. John moved back to the basement side of the door to see Quinn’s reaction.

He had taken a seat on a step, and looked troubled, but he still wore a smirk on his face.

“I *knew* it! After my drives were wiped, I knew something was going on, and there were several inconsistencies that raised a red flag for me.

“So I tested you: Stephanie and I were never dating when I worked with Wade, but *you* seemed to accept the premise. Then, my analysis of your skin cells confirmed a foreign origin. You’re a double.”

He clasped his hands together. “So, the question is: where is my wife?”

“She’s safe...”

“Not good enough. Where is she?”

“She’s back on my world.”

Quinn frowned, and John poked his head through the door back at Sherri.

*Last resort...*

“I guess we need to tell him the truth.”

He pulled back into the basement as Sherri began to speak.

“Quinn, I’ve come here because you’re about to make a terrible mistake. I’m... from the future.”

Quinn stared at the door, and let out a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, okay. That’s a new one.”

“I’m telling you the truth. Those people you’ve been planning to give your sliding tech to... they’re Kromaggs, aren’t they?”

John watched Quinn mull over her words with narrowed eyes.

Sherri continued: “Whatever they’ve promised you, whatever they said to you, it’s all lies. The first thing they’re gonna do when they get that tech is come here and kill your family.”

Quinn looked up at the door, incredulous. “And why would they do that?”

“Because they hate humans. They’re only buttering you up because they want your tech.”

Quinn shook his head, standing up from the step and heading further into the basement. He moved to the crystal storage device, and hit a button on the side, ejecting the quartz point.

“You’re losing him,” John called out, frantic, as he watched Quinn place the crystal in his pocket.

“Quinn, please. There’s so much at stake here!” Sherri cried.

“And I suppose kidnapping my wife, assuming her identity, and sabotaging my stuff was all because you really, really want to help me, right?” he scoffed.

He held out the timer.

“Mayday!” John shouted. “He’s gonna bail!”

“Quinn, you can’t trust them! Hundreds of worlds are at stake here! Yours, mine, and so many others! Please... let me in, and let’s talk it out, okay?”

But it was too late. The wormhole opened, as Sherri pounded on the door handle with the hammer, before kicking at the door.

John watched Quinn disappear into the vortex. Thinking fast, he held up his handlink, and scanned the wormhole for its destination.

Sherri kept kicking until the door finally burst open. She sprinted for the vortex, but it closed, leaving her sprawled over the desk behind it.

“No!” She slammed her fist on the desk. “That self-absorbed, unreasonable, two-timing *asshole!*”

*Yeah, that about sums it up.*

She and John shared a moment of defeat. John looked down at the handlink, sighing.

“I’ve traced the wormhole,” he said, “but because he had the only means to go off-world from here, we’re gonna have to leap you there. So we’ll need to perform a retrieval and then send you back out after we’ve regrouped.”

Sherri cursed. “Fine. Let’s get going.”

He hesitated, his eyes shifting to the device that had held the crystal.

*Would be a pity to let that go...*

“Just, do me *one* small favour before we pull you out. Open that thing up for me, would you?”

\* \* \*

The air was peaceful and fresh on Sam Beckett’s home world. It helped that they had landed somewhere outside a city, Rembrandt figured.

“So, where’d we end up this time?”

All around them grew rows and rows of trees. Remy didn't recognise what kind of tree, but it was definitely some kind of farm, given the layout.

"I think it's an almond farm," Maggie said, as she studied the foliage. "Guess that means we're in the sticks. What a pain."

"How we doing for money, Remy?" Q-ball asked, as he held the timer out, studying it.

Rembrandt felt around in his pockets. "Ain't got much."

Maggie groaned. "The sooner we can contact those guys in New Mexico, the better. If I have to work another waitressing job, I may go postal."

"About that..." Colin said, "how *are* we gonna contact them?"

Quinn stroked his chin. "Well, if I remember correctly, Sam called them from Sheriff Maggie's place. If we can find the phone records, we may be able to get that number."

Rembrandt grinned. It was good to have the old Q-ball back with his fast-moving brain.

The corners of Quinn's mouth turned up. "Hey, Maggie..."

Maggie frowned. "Not liking that look on your face, Quinn."

He held up his hands defensively. "I have a good idea, honest! We show up, heralding the miraculous return of Madera County Sheriff Maggie Beckett..."

He put an arm over her shoulder, and used the other to gesture dramatically. "First of all, they'll have to drop those murder charges against Billy, and we might have easy access to those records, right?"

Maggie's shoulders slumped. "Look, if I'm gonna do this I don't want to waste a single second playing small town cop, okay? You saw how the other me handled that."

Quinn chuckled. “I have a feeling once we get through to that secret government project and tell ’em what we know about it, they will want to whisk us away pretty fast.”

Rembrandt turned his attention to Mallory, who was standing apart from the group.

“Q-ball, what’s the clock say?”

Quinn held the timer up. “Five minutes.”

Rembrandt nodded, and approached the fifth slider, who was scuffing his shoe in the soil. “Hear that? You’ll be home in a few minutes!”

Mallory looked up, and gave him a weak smile. “Great. Thanks.”

“Cheer up, my man. I thought you wanted to go home?”

Mallory shrugged. “Yeah, I do.”

He kicked into the dirt again. “Just, now that I know all this stuff is out there, it’s gonna be a little difficult to just... go back, and forget about it.”

Quinn appeared beside Rembrandt.

“Well, in case we don’t do what we came here to do, maybe you can tell Diana everything about the Kromagg threat. And... this might help.”

He held the timer out to Mallory, who stared at it for a moment, then up at Quinn.

“Why would you give me that?” he asked, incredulous.

Quinn shrugged. “Look, it’ll be nothing but a paperweight if it stays here. It only operates from the coordinates of the last world it opened a wormhole to. So, it’s better off going with you.”

He took hold of Mallory’s hand and forced the timer into his palm.



“Take it,” he reiterated. “Let Diana tinker with it; she seems to understand the underlying physics.”

Mallory gingerly held the device up, studying it closely.

“You’ve definitely set it to take me *home*, right?”

Quinn chuckled, and nodded. “Just try not to collide with another me on your way back, okay?”

Rembrandt placed a hand on his shoulder, as the timer ticked down.

“It’s been real, man. If Doctor Frankenstein ever shows up again, give him a kick in the shins, will you?”

Mallory snorted. “That’s a promise.”

Colin and Maggie closed in, now. Colin reached to Mallory’s head and messed up his hair, causing Mallory to furrow his brow in protest, but Rembrandt could tell he was hiding a smile.

“Lose the hair gel, you look like a dork,” was Colin’s short-but-sweet parting advice, followed by a wink. Rembrandt couldn’t have put it better.

Mallory raised an eyebrow. “You know what? Just for that, I’m keeping this hair style.”

Maggie gave him a light hug. “Sorry for the girl’s name,” she said.

“Honestly, it’s starting to grow on me,” Mallory admitted.

Quinn held out a hand, and Mallory shook it. “I wish I could say our time together was pleasant, but...”

“Yeah,” Mallory finished, and held the timer up, with a nervous expression. “Which button do I press again?”

Quinn pointed to the correct button, and gave a sad sigh, as it touched down on zero, and Mallory pressed it.

“Take good care of the ol’ thing, okay?” he said, backing away as the vortex sprang to life.

Mallory nodded, and waved, before finally stepping into the gateway and disappearing, as fallen leaves swirled around them all.

As it closed up, Rembrandt felt suddenly empty, as he realised what they’d just given up.

He felt Q-ball’s hand on his shoulder.

“So I guess we really are stuck here, huh?” Remy said.

“If we do this right, I promise you’ll make it home, and the Kromaggs will be a distant memory.”

Despite everything, after being strung along by Q-ball, time after time, led around by the promise to get him home; somehow, this time, Rembrandt believed him.

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## **END OF PART 3**

# INTERQUEL

## THE RETURN OF SHERIFF BECKETT

As the Greyhound pulled into the Madera bus station, Maggie felt her stomach drop. She was wearing large sunglasses to mask her identity, but they were only a temporary solution.

The others had filled her in on everything that had gone on here a few weeks back, while she was nursing her boredom in the Waiting Room – getting on Al’s nerves, if she remembered correctly.

To her surprise, she seemed to remember the broad strokes of Sam’s actions, which came to her as Quinn described them. Treating Colin’s head wound, driving the Higgins patrol car, being handcuffed in Billy’s shed, and even some fragments of typing code for endless hours on a computer in Sheriff Maggie’s kitchen, though she had no idea what any of it meant.

It was a strange feeling, remembering those actions, because she knew it had not been her. It gave her the creeps. It made her wonder if there could be other people out there leaping, who had much looser morals than Uncle Sam. It had definitely been the right choice to destroy the facility and prevent the Kromaggs from knowing about such things, she decided.

The taxi ride from the bus station to the Sheriff’s headquarters was quiet, and Maggie realised that all three of her friends had

some unhappy memories of this town, too; Colin in particular, who'd been clocked over the head by someone who looked just like her. The mood was decidedly apprehensive.

And finally, there they were: standing before the building, with Maggie shrinking into the taller men around her.

"What do I even say?" she asked nobody in particular.

"You could just burst on in and say 'the Sheriff's back in town, boys' while giving finger guns," suggested Colin, prompting Maggie to raise an eyebrow.

"Any *useful* suggestions?"

"Look, it's like I said," Quinn explained, "just go in and say you were held captive by unknown assailants."

Maggie frowned. "I hate that. They're going to be so suspicious."

She shifted on her feet as her mind went over scenarios of the acting Sheriff putting her in an interrogation room.

Rembrandt stroked his chin. "What if you just tell 'em you had a breakdown? That *is* kinda what happened to the *real* Sheriff."

Maggie pursed her lips. "Well, I've gotta say, I hate that option the least."

"Whichever one you choose, someone's eventually gonna notice us... uh, *loitering*," Colin said, glancing around nervously.

"Yeah," Maggie agreed, and steeled herself. "Let's get this over with."

She marched into the headquarters, as the others waited just outside the doors.

Inside, a man Maggie didn't recognise sat behind a desk, reading a newspaper, feet hitched up on the desk. He looked around age 40, with jet black hair flecked with grey, and a thin

moustache. He was dressed in a brown uniform, similar to the one Maggie recalled Sam wearing. He glanced up at her, and his eyes widened with surprise, as he brought his feet down.

“Sheriff Beckett?! Oh my Lord, I thought you were dead!” he cried.

Maggie smiled at him, uneasy. It seemed like this guy knew the other version of her. But who was he? What was his position? Was he the acting Sheriff? She didn’t see a star, but there was a shield badge on his chest. Deputy, then? As she recalled, Higgins had been the ‘partner’ of Sheriff Maggie. She didn’t have any memories of this guy via Sam at all.

“Rumours of my death were, um, greatly exaggerated,” she said, with a sheepish look.

The man hurried over to her, and drew her into an uncomfortable hug.

“What happened to you, Ma’am?”

*‘Ma’am?’ Okay, so he isn’t overly familiar. Good.*

Maggie pulled herself from the show of affection. “Well, I... I lost it. Just had to go spend time away from my life, so I went off-grid. Sorry I didn’t tell anybody.”

The deputy gave her an anxious look. “Ma’am, we’ve gotta let everyone know. There’s an ongoing investigation into your disappearance.”

Maggie cringed. The last thing she needed was all the attention.

“Listen—” she started, and peered down at his uniform, spotting a name tag. “—Phil, can I ask a huge favour?”

She put an arm around him, leaning in. “Before you go telling everyone I’m back, I really need a copy of my house’s phone records from the last few days before I left. It’s really important.”

She ran a hand over his chest, hoping the vibes she had been picking up were accurate. “Please, Phil? For me?”

He was stiff under her sensual movements, but she could feel his heart rate picking up. He cleared his throat.

“Uh, yeah, I’ll see what I can do, Ma’am.”

“Just call me Maggie, okay?” she said, hoping to ingratiate herself to him further.

Phil headed for the Sheriff’s office, with Maggie following.

“So you’re deputy now?” she said, trying to get a grasp on what might have happened these past few weeks.

“Yeah,” Phil confirmed. “Captain Brigham took over as Acting Sheriff in your absence, M-Maggie. He appointed me deputy.”

He looked back at her, as he opened the door of the office. “There’s a new Higgins car being ordered, but now that you’re back I guess we won’t need it, right?”

“Uh, about that...” she said, rubbing her nose. “Higgins is gone.”

He squinted at her. “What do you mean ‘gone?’”

Maggie bit her lip, allowing him to progress further into the office. As he started rifling through a filing cabinet, she shifted from foot to foot in the doorway.

“I, um, smashed it up. It’s scrap metal,” she lied. There was no delicate way to say it was swallowed up by a portal to a parallel world, so this was the best she could do.

He stared at her, jaw slack. “That thing was worth a hundred grand!”

She grimaced. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I’ll accept whatever punishments are owed.”

*Hoping I’ll be out of here before that time comes.*

Phil pulled out a folder filled with papers. “We already collected the phone records in our missing persons investigation, let me just find ’em for you.”

He rifled through the loose pages. “What do you need these for, anyway?”

Maggie thought fast, trying to find a good reason. “Oh, I just got a creepy phone call, and I want to see if it was a number I recognise.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, cursing herself for coming up with such a flimsy explanation.

Phil pulled out a page, and eyed her. “I’ll make a copy,” he said, and Maggie could detect he was put off by this whole interaction.

*Don’t worry, I don’t plan on sticking around. Just forget I was ever here.*

Phil escorted her out of the office, and he headed for the photocopier, which was at the back of the main room of the headquarters, where his desk was.

“Where’s Brigham now?” she asked, looking at the front windows of the headquarters. She couldn’t see the others out there, but that was largely the point of where they had chosen to stand.

“Over at the city PD, as usual,” Phil said bitterly. “Just leaves me here to do the Sheriff stuff half the time.”

The photocopier hummed, and he pulled out the page, handing it to her.

“Thanks, Phil,” she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. She could see them starting to turn pink. “You’re a good guy.”

She turned to leave.

“Wait!” Phil said. “What do I tell the Captain?”

“Just say I swung by for a talk, and I’ll be awaiting his visit at home.”

She left the headquarters, hands clamped around the precious sheet of paper, and let out a breath as the door closed behind her.

Her friends were to her left, and she met Quinn’s gaze. “Got it. Let’s go find a payphone. Steer clear of Sheriff Maggie’s house, okay?”



# **PART FOUR: DOWNTIME**

## **SUMMARY**

As Sherri and John regroup, the sliders settle in for a long-term task.

In Project Quantum Leap's present, the holidays approach, and Sam returns to discover a few changes.

Meanwhile, a cosmic pinball converges on a remote roadhouse to unite a pair of travellers.

## 4.1 • RETRIEVALS

*Earth Prime*

*September 27, 1994*

John leaned against the wall just outside the lecture hall, busily tapping at his handlink. Around him, students walked the corridors, largely ignoring his presence. Beside him, on the floor, was a briefcase.

*Any minute now.*

He looked up from the device and folded his arms, scanning the faces in the crowd. A fascinated smile crept to his face as he spotted his target.

Quinn strode towards him, wearing a cocky grin. He was dressed smarter than John was used to. John pocketed the handlink, and looked away as the 21-year-old approached. His eyes fell on John for just a moment, before flicking away without a hint of recognition.

*Must be him.*

As Nexus Quinn entered the lecture hall, letting the door swing shut behind him, John picked up his briefcase and sidled up to the door. Inside the hall, he could hear Quinn making a scene in front of Professor Arturo.

He ventured a peek through the window in the door. The room was littered with students watching the volley of insults, with varying levels of disbelief.

Nexus Quinn was bold, loud, and assertive – attributes also belonging to Arturo, which he didn't appreciate having thrown back at him. John stifled a laugh. He couldn't quite hear what the guy was saying, but Quinn's account of what it may have been in the notebook was enough to know that the term 'pompous windbag' was used.

There was a short back-and-forth between Nexus Quinn and Arturo, and it sounded heated. Then, the door handle moved, and John manoeuvred himself into the doorway. Quinn walked right into him, and he let his briefcase slip from his hands, where it spilled out onto the floor.

"Oh! Sorry man," Quinn said, and leaned over to recover the bag and papers.

*Well, at least he's not a total jerk.*

John quickly passed the handlink over the distracted Quinn, until the display turned green. He pocketed the device, before Quinn handed him his briefcase. They exchanged eye contact for a moment, as Quinn seemed to be deciding whether or not he knew John, and then he strode away, towards the exit.

John leaned into the room, where Arturo met his eye, and he gave a quick wink. The red-faced Arturo's seething expression softened, and he nodded back.

It was difficult to let Nexus Quinn go, knowing what was to come, but the double was an important part of the first Quinn's origins, so there was little he could alter at this point. But now they at least had his unique quantum signature, and could use it to pinpoint his home dimension.

John hummed cheerfully as he entered his office, and sat down at his desk. He opened the top desk drawer and moved the false bottom out of it before placing a hand on the Higgins panel

within. It lit up, and the chalkboard on the wall ever-so-slightly protruded forward. After putting his desk back into place, he moved to the board and pulled on the chalkboard ledge. The board swung open, and he climbed inside, pulling it shut behind him.

The elevator descended, as John tapped against the wall, still humming. When he reached the facility, and the doors slid open, he burst out with a giddy grin.

“Morning!” he called out to the room of his esteemed colleagues, who seemed not nearly as excited as he.

Deflated, he wandered into the control room, where Will Arturo tapped at a keyboard. The thirty-year-old son of the Professor had thick, dark hair down to his shoulders, and stubble.

“It’s the big day, Will,” he prompted. Will looked up at him through dark-ringed eyes.

“The big day where my Dad jumps in a vortex and may never return, you mean?”

John frowned, and felt very suddenly guilty about his chipper mood. “Yeah, I guess it is, huh?”

Will sighed, changing the subject. “You got the scan?”

John nodded. “Already in the data banks.”

“Great,” Will replied, giving him a weak smile through his sad eyes, before turning back to his computer. “I’ll set up the triangulation. Gotta warn you, it may be months – or even years – before Higgins zeroes in on the right Earth.”

“Well, we’ve got four years, tops,” John said, and gave Will a pat on the back. “There are only a handful of people I would count on to do this, you know.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he mumbled, as he began entering commands.

In his pocket, he felt his handlink vibrate. He pulled it out, and glanced at the screen.

*Retrieval in 5 minutes.*

He broke away from Will. “Excuse me, I’ve gotta see Sherri.”

He hurried deeper into the facility, through the Higgins mainframe, and into the Imaging Chamber.

As he stepped through the door, the hologram came into view.

“*There* you are.” Sherri sat on the lid of a toilet, in a hotel bathroom, looking displeased. “There’s a sex-starved newlywed outside this room that I’d rather not have to reject.”

“Sorry,” John said, “I was getting the scan on Nexus Quinn.”

At this, her eyes lit up. “That’s today?”

John nodded. “That’s right. We’re pulling you out in a couple minutes, so just sit tight.”

Sherri nodded, giving him a sad smile. “I can’t believe this’ll be the last we see of them.”

“If we do our jobs, we’ll see them again,” said John, before looking down at the handlink to see the retrieval progress.

A few thumps came on the door.

“Amanda! What are you even doing in there?”

John chuckled. “Sorry for putting you in this situation, Sherri.”

Sherri rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Missus Amanda Fairchild will be happy to find herself already married. Do you think she’ll remember the ceremony?”

“According to our records, each leapee is usually able to recall the significant beats of your actions while replacing them, but not

the finer details. Though it appears to vary wildly from person to person.”

As Sherri tilted her head to consider this, John’s handlink chimed. He looked down at it.

“Okay, here we go.”

As Sherri began to crackle with electricity, the holographic projection winked out of John’s view, and he found himself back in the empty, all-white Imaging Chamber.

\* \* \*

*Earth Prime*  
*February 2, 1998*

Sherri tensed up as she found herself in a seated position, her mind cleared of whatever had been in it a moment ago.

Her racing heart relaxed as she glanced around. She was reclined on a leather sofa, in a room that had long been arranged to mimic a standard hotel suite. Their facility’s Waiting Room.

*Okay. Now. Where did I just come from?*

“Welcome back!” John called out.

As John hurried in the door, she stood to greet him. The pair hugged – it was a rare chance that they could do such a thing – and she noted the forlorn look in his eyes.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked, her mind struggling to figure it out for herself. John chuckled, patting her on the shoulder.

“Must be nice to clear your working memory like that,” he said bitterly, and straightened, giving a command: “Begin your Remembrance Protocol, Beckett.”

*Right.*

The ‘Remembrance Protocol for Post-Retrieval Amnesia’ was the counterpart to her ‘Leap-In Protocol,’ the checklist she ran through her mind at the beginning of each leap. After each retrieval, her leaps would fade like a dream, only to resurface days later in her long-term memory after something in her day-to-day that reminded her. It had been a tricky thing when she’d first started out. Of course, John was able to jog her memory a lot of the time, but they figured it was important to give her some exercises to jog her own memory, just in case. The trick was to hang on to one image through the retrieval process that would be an entry point into the buried memory, like bait on a fish hook into the pool of her subconscious.

***Point One:*** *Find the image.*

She reached into the emptiness for a fleeting image, and grasped it as it threatened to slip away. A small child. A young boy watching a purple dinosaur video tape, named Cory. A blonde woman in the mirror. A nanny, and...

*Right. I was Stephanie. The nanny was Wade, and she was having an affair with... Quinn.*

***Point Two:*** *What was the mission?*

She thought about the Quinn she had been married to. *Nexus Quinn*. Her heart jumped as she realised it had been *the* mission. The number one, all-important mission that was the primary reason behind this project in the first place.

***Point Three:*** *Was the mission successful?*

She ran through the leap in her mind, each moment dragging the next out of her memory banks. And she realised her failure. He’d been far more observant than the average person, and had pieced together things that most would have not even noticed, let

alone considered red flags. And it had led to him losing trust and fleeing to another Earth. She hoped it hadn't been the Kromagg world.

Her shoulders dropped as the weight of what happened fell upon her, and she slammed her fist into the couch seat.

John's lips formed a sympathetic frown, as he watched her recall.

"Dammit," she said. "What an unmitigated disaster. So what's the plan now?"

John turned to lead her out of the room.

"Well, first, we both get some rest," he said, rubbing his eyes as if to demonstrate his exhaustion. "We have a few months of wiggle room to send you back, but obviously we don't want to wait any longer than we need to, in case something *else* goes wrong."

Sherri nodded, as they traversed the aisles of computer cabinets.

"You're not going to leap me into Wade next, I hope."

John snorted. "No... I think two leaper versions of you meeting may cause a recursion error in the multiverse," he said.

"That sounds fake," Sherri laughed.

"Okay, I just made that up," he said, flashing her a playful grin. "But, I don't know *what* would happen, so we're just going to steer clear of that possibility. Besides, there's only so much control we have from here. We just send you with some coordinates and a frustratingly loose time window, and hope that you end up where you need to be."

"Yeah, I know," she sighed. "God or whatever, right?"

She looked at him with disdain, as he gave an affirmative tilt of his head.



“Well, that’s what my counterpart described to me. The ‘god of the gaps’ argument is not my favourite explanation for the unknowns of existence, of course. I’d love to identify what’s really doing it. You ever seen *Next Gen*?”

Sherri crossed her arms. “Where is this going?”

“Well, maybe it’s like Q,” he mused. “Something like that?”

“Saying it’s a powerful alien being doesn’t explain anything more than just saying ‘God,’ you know,” she said, exasperated, as the pair entered the control room.

Her eyes met Will, sitting at his terminal, and he gave her a wave. Since 1994, he’d become decidedly less hairy, opting for a shorter cut and clean-shaven face. But he still wore dark circles under his eyes. Sherri wasn’t sure if she’d ever seen him relax.

“Welcome back,” he said brightly, before turning subdued. “Sorry it didn’t go so well.”

“We’re not licked yet,” Sherri said, forcing a smile.

“That’s right,” John chimed in, and turned to address all the staff there. “Let’s take a few days break, and be back fresh next week. Need you all at the top of your game if we’re going to make this intercept. So wrap it up for now, everyone.”

He turned to Sherri. “Let’s go get some dinner, okay?”

Sherri, though tired, was decidedly more hungry than anything.

“Let’s.”

## 4.2 • LOVE AT FIRST BYTE

*Project Quantum Leap*

*December 4, 2002*

“Good morning, Ziggy,” Quinn said cheerfully, as he entered the mainframe room, and peered up at the glowing blue ball that stored the supercomputer’s consciousness. He carried in his arms a large, very heavy device that had taken way too long to build. The plans John had left him were extensive, but boy had it taken time to get right. A whole year, in fact. And that was even as he bounced ideas off Colin *and* Sammy Jo, who was a woman that had been assigned as his liaison between himself and the Project.

The group had not been permitted entrance into the Stallions Gate facility until after the Maggie of ’99 had already been an unwilling guest there in 2002. Ziggy’s orders.

But, now that Sam was on 1978 Earth Prime, and days from attempting his return, Ziggy had finally granted access to the Project. He’d spent the last few days familiarising himself with the hardware, under the watchful eyes of the little man named Gooshie and the high-voiced Tina. And now he was finally here to get Higgins hooked up.

“Good morning, Quinn. Have you come to... *rearrange my wires* today?”

Ziggy had some personality on her. He’d been floored at her greeting when he had first met her: “*Ah. Mister Quinn Mallory has ventured to slide into my mainframe. If you satisfy me, I’ll let you do it again.*”

Given what he knew about Sam, for him to have built so raunchy a computer was endlessly amusing to Quinn.

“I’m just preparing Higgins for interfacing,” he said, placing the device against the wall. He looked up at the glowing sphere, smirking. “I’m afraid he’s a little less... feisty... than you.”

“I don’t mind being the dominant one in a relationship,” Ziggy replied.

Quinn ignored the comment, and continued: “Now, you’re gonna find that Higgins has a lot of variations on your code that serve essentially the same function. I’m counting on you to decide which to assimilate and which to reject.”

He began arranging cables from Ziggy’s panels to what was essentially a reader for the quartz crystals.

“I’d recommend looking closely at the retrieval routines,” he said, fastening connections. “The other Doc Beckett seemed to put significant work into them, and they’re proven to work.”

“Quinn, you’re so gentle with my parallel buses.”

Quinn snorted. “Does this *whole* place just speak in innuendo all the time?”

“I believe Admiral Calavizzi throws in the occasional double entendre, too.”

Quinn shook his head, chuckling, as he approached the reader.

“Okay, Ziggy. Prepare to meet your counterpart.”

He turned the machine on, and it began to whirl. Ziggy’s orb grew in brilliance, as the blue lights under each crystal set into the reader started blinking rapidly.

“Oh, Higgins! Where have you been all my life?”

Quinn grinned. “I’ll leave you two to your... interfacing.”

He dusted off his hands, and wandered out into the Project lobby, where Colin was waiting with Al.

“Okay, Higgins is hooked up,” he confirmed. “Could be a day or two before Ziggy’s done integrating him into her systems.”

He exchanged a quick fist bump with Colin.

“It’s been a while,” he said, “But we finally did it.”

“Bang-up job, you two,” said Al. “With any luck, we can get a retrieval started when Sam comes through in a few days.”

Quinn nodded. “I have a good feeling about it.”

\* \* \*

### *Project Quantum Leap*

*December 7, 2002*

*(Immediately after the final scene of Quinntum Leap: Part 2)*

It was the hug Sam had been wishing for all these years. He and Al hadn’t been able to make any sort of physical contact, despite being in near constant communication, since he’d left over seven years ago. But now he was home, and the pair had their arms around each other so tight that he wasn’t sure if either of them dared to let go. It felt to Sam like if he let go, Al might slip away into a hologram again, and disappear into a glowing doorway.

“I had no idea what was going to happen there,” Sam told his friend. “You never told me you were trying a retrieval.”

The embrace loosened enough for the friends to make eye contact, though Sam still had a tight grasp on Al’s arms, making sure he was still corporeal.

“Sure we did,” said Al. “Our retrieval algorithms were part of the effort to get your new pals back to 1999. We just... took it a step further. Nabbed you mid-leap. We didn’t know if it’d work, but after what you told me, we thought it was the best possible chance we had.”

“What I told you... oh, that I needed a break?”

“Bingo.”

Sam wiped a tear from his eye.

*Yeah. This isn’t going to be forever.*

Something in his gut knew that his work wasn’t finished. But whatever time he had here, he was going to make the most of.

His attention moved to Colin, still peeking in the doorway. It was definitely him, but he was a little older, his hair was different; more of a modern style. He was grinning back with enthusiastic, shining eyes that matched those of his brother.

There must have been quite a story behind his presence, and he couldn’t wait to hear it. However, there was much to do first. Colin’s eyes flicked to the side, heralding the approach of more people to greet Sam.

First came Gooshie, then Tina, then Verbena, and just behind her appeared a face that made him stumble back, finally breaking his physical contact with Al.

“Donna...”

For a moment, he was frozen, seeing all these people he loved, and not knowing who to go to first, but as his memories returned, he knew he had to hold his wife.

Unlike the last reunion, when he was carrying a hefty chunk of Al’s libido, he didn’t go straight in for a kiss, but he did throw his arms around her, tears flowing freely as he admonished himself

for forgetting her again. Why did she have to be the only major person in his life who refused to stick in his brain?

“I missed you, Sam,” Donna murmured. Sam, in truth, couldn’t say the same; a realisation that broke his heart.

“I’m sorry,” was all he could find to say in reply.

## 4.3 • CALLING IN ON COLIN

*Earth Prime*

*February 2, 1998*

The diner was packed with kids. Or, at least, John viewed them as such. Being just a block from campus, it was generally one of the go-to establishments for students to dine, which usually was a reason for John to avoid going there. He wasn't sure why Sherri had directed the two of them here, but he felt like they stuck out among the late teens and twenty-somethings around them.

And since he'd taken permanent hiatus from his teaching to focus on his work at Project Long Jump, he hadn't so much as spent time around people of this undercooked age.

The two of them sat in a small booth towards the back. Sherri's eyes were on the door to the kitchen, just behind the counter, and they had barely looked away since they'd arrived.

"Okay," said John, lacing his fingers together, and leaning forward. "What's goin' on, Sherri?"

Her eyes moved to him for a moment, before turning back, and she gave him an enigmatic smile.

"It's probably time, I think," she said.

"Time for what?" He narrowed his eyes.

She nodded towards her eyeline, and he followed it. The door to the kitchen had opened, and Colin Mallory came out, wearing an apron and hairnet. John felt his jaw slacken at the sight of his old student.

“Colin’s original history has been altered. A *lot*,” said Sherri. “He needs a hand getting to the right place, at the right time.”

“There wasn’t anything in the notes about that,” John said, scratching the side of his neck. He watched Colin standing at a table, writing down an order on his notepad.

Sherri nodded. “I know. But do you remember I told you about that... experience... I had, when my brain was still entangled with the other Maggie?”

John gave her a look, amused that she would even have to ask. “Do I remember the whole reason you stayed here? Of *course* I do.”

“Of course you do,” she repeated, chuckling. “Stupid question.”

She leaned toward him, placing a hand on the table. “Anyway, it was in *this* diner.” She knocked on the table.

“I’d never seen this diner before, and I highly doubt the other Maggie had either. And we certainly hadn’t seen Colin looking like *that*.” She pointed a thumb at Colin, who was now at a milkshake mixer, holding a steel cup to it. “So when I came across this place after the vision, I knew it was significant. Lo and behold, Colin started working here back in ’93.”

John nodded slowly. “And you said you met a future version of yourself here?”

“She looked just like me, but twenty years older.” Sherri said, and passed a hand over her face. “Just like this.”

“Well, I don’t see the younger versions of you here,” John said, trying to work out where this conversation was headed.

“I don’t think I was in the *literal* future,” Sherri said, and gazed at the ceiling, squinting. “What were the words she used...? Something about... temporal flux points? Construct?”



John nodded slowly, his mind piecing things together. After a moment, he grabbed two napkins. He placed one on the table, and held the other up, tearing it *almost* in half.

“The machine pulled half of you through a wormhole while your atoms were converted temporarily into a fourth dimensional energy state, and then the separation process remained incomplete for those few hours afterwards.”

He waved a finger over the section of napkin that was still attached. “So your mind was a convergence point of two different universes, two different timelines. But because you were also displaced in time, your brain’s extra-temporal state was also trying to reconcile the changes that were happening around you in realtime, such as with Colin. Those would be the ‘temporal flux points,’ I assume.”

On the untouched napkin, he drew a line that diverged into numerous branches. “It’s possible that in that state, you were capable of seeing varied timelines branching from your current point, and your mind created a construct based on one of the possible outcomes.”

He met her eye. “Did that make sense?”

Sherri grinned. “I’ll take your word for it.”

He crumpled up the napkins, sharing a smile with her.

“Hey there, what can I get— *Doc Beckett?*”

John looked up to see Colin standing at the table, notepad and pen at the ready. His eyes were wide and eyebrows high, as he looked at his old professor.

“Colin, it’s been a while, huh?” John looked up at him with a bittersweet expression.

Colin's notepad drifted downward. "Where have you been all this time? I haven't seen you since... well, you know."

John scratched the back of his head. "It's... it's a long story. How are you doing, Colin?"

Colin's eyes fell to his feet. "Oh, you know. One day at a time. It's been years and I still feel like Quinn's gonna just show up some day. It's been especially hard on Mom."

*Poor kid.*

"Yeah, I know how it is. You wanna talk about it?"

Colin glanced at the clock on the wall.

"I finish up in ten minutes," he said.

"Well, when you do, take a seat with us, okay?"

Colin nodded. "Okay."

Colin looked at Sherri, seemingly noticing her presence for the first time. "Oh, hi. Are you two...?"

Sherri laughed. "No, no. I'm Sam's... cousin. Sherri." She held out a hand, and Colin shook it. "He's told me a lot about you and Quinn."

She leaned in, and whispered: "You're his favourite students." She winked, and gave him a broad grin. Colin responded with a bashful glance at John.

John gave him a confirming nod. "Don't let my other former students know, but... she's not wrong."

Colin's cheeks were going rosy, and he composed himself, lifting the notepad. "Anyway, what can I get you?"

"Just a couple of cheeseburgers and a bowl of fries will do us," John replied. "Hold the pickle on Sherri's."

He winked at her, and she nodded with approval.

Colin jotted down the order, nodded, and hurried away to fill out the remainder of his shift.

“So what do you think we need to do for him?” John asked.

Sherri rested her chin in her palms. “I’m not so sure of the exact original history, but I know that he needs to start travelling with Quinn and the others sometime after the invasion. We just need to get him in a position where that happens. He was originally on a different world until Quinn tracked him down. Maybe this time he needs to track *them* down.”

*Track them down.* John stroked his chin.

“I believe in a month or so, two of Quinn’s companions are due back on our Earth. Rembrandt and...” he chuckled. “Wade Welles.”

Sherri smirked as John brushed aside the images he now associated with that name and face.

“It’ll mark about three months until the invasion,” he continued. “In the event we – God forbid – fail, it might be a good idea to get them off-world, to Quinn, before they’re captured. And send Colin with them.”

He gave a resolute nod. “Okay, I think that’ll work. Higgins can generate a tracking algorithm for Quinn’s quantum signature, and I’ll retrofit his sliding tech to get Colin on his tail when the time comes.”

Sherri smiled. “I’m glad you stayed here with me, John.”

John placed an arm around her. “Can’t imagine anywhere I’d rather be.”

\* \* \*

*San Antonio, New Mexico*

*December 8, 2002*

Sam couldn't imagine anywhere he would rather have been, as he tickled the ivories at a cosy tavern, surrounded by his friends. It had been an overwhelming 24 hours, filled with heartfelt greetings, medical checkups, extensive debriefings, and a psychological assessment from Verbena. But now, he was finally able to just enjoy the company of the people he loved.

As his song came to a close, he leaned back, stretching.

"I remember you playing that in 1978," Colin said as he leaned on the piano, beer in hand. "Billy Joel, right?"

"Yeah," confirmed Sam, and stood to meet Colin's towering height. He looked curiously at the man. "Colin, you're... different."

Colin gave him an amused look. "You noticed that, huh? That's interesting."

He sipped his drink, thoughtful. "I altered my history kind of a lot, so the quirks I used to have in my speech were... overwritten, I guess is the word for it."

As it occurred to Sam what Colin meant by that, his mouth broke out in a grin. "So you really did it, huh?"

Colin peeked out over the rim of the beer glass, and nodded. He pulled it away from his mouth, setting it on the top of the piano.

"I guess that bartender was right: I am the same in here," he said, hand on heart. "At least, I think so?"

Sam gently put his own hand over Colin's heart. "Absolutely."

They shared a meaningful look, before a question came to Sam.

"What was that thing you were holding when I leaped in?" he mimed holding an eyeglass to his face.

Colin grinned. “Remember when Quinn was doing those tests on you, and then made the distortion detector?”

“Sure, how could I forget being poked and prodded?” Sam said wryly.

“Well, it was at that point that he got it into his head to develop a device that would let him see through the illusion... without the headache.”

He reached into his pocket, producing the telescopic gizmo. He pulled it open, and handed it to Sam.

“It’s called a Reality Lens.”

It had the hallmarks of Quinn’s ramshackle creations, made with scrap parts. It looked to have been adapted from an old monocular scope, with a small box attached full of circuitry, and the eye lens had been replaced by an advanced electronic display. Sam was impressed, once again, at the ingenuity.

“Quinn made this?” Sam asked.

“Nope! *I* did.” Colin was looking proudly at his creation. “Quinn had other things to do, which I’m sure he can’t wait to show you.”

“How did you configure it? I wasn’t around to test on.”

He handed the Reality Lens back to Colin, who folded it up and put it back in his pocket.

“We’ve been here three years, Doc,” he said. “We weren’t allowed into your facility for most of it, so Sammy Jo tested it out in the Waiting Room and helped me get a perfect picture.”

Sam’s breath caught. “Sa— did you say, ‘Sammy Jo?’”

“Yeah,” said Colin, “She was our main contact before we were allowed down there.”

*I guess Donna wasn’t the only one I forgot.*

Sam bit his lip. "I... need to see her."

"Well I don't know where she is now, but why don't you swing by our little operation tomorrow? It's just the nondescript warehouse-looking building about a mile south of here. Sign out the front says 'Holbrook Systems;' meaningless cover name. Sammy's due there in the morning."

Colin crossed his arms. "And... we can tell you all about why we ended up here. It's kind of a long story."

"I'll bet it is," mused Sam, as he made eye contact with Al across the room. Al beckoned him over, and Sam held up a finger in response.

He leaned towards Colin. "You see him there, right?"

"Who, Al?"

Sam gave him a sheepish look. "I have to get used to talking to him more openly, y'know? Now that he's... really there."

He almost felt sad that he'd only have to go to the bathroom to answer nature's call.

## 4.4 • REUNIONS

The roller door of the warehouse slowly ascended, revealing Sam's presence from the feet up. When it was finally high enough for the tall man to pass under it, Quinn leaned over, and met Sam's eye as he stepped inside.

"Good morning," he said, with a wide grin. Sam placed his hand on Quinn's shoulder.

"Good to see you again," he said, in a most sincere tone.

Quinn struggled to separate his recently altered memories of the Earth Prime version of Sam from what he could recall from his experience with this version. It wasn't easy; the new timeline had provided him with a long history with the double, starting from age eleven. But he knew that none of that had happened for this Sam, nor Quinn himself the last time they had seen one another, not technically.

*Boy, time travel is a headache. Hope that's the last I need to do of it.*

"Come on," he said, leading Sam through the plain-looking warehouse. "We're a little less fancy here than the Project, but there's only the four of us."

He glanced back. "Well, plus Sammy Jo, and the army guys monitoring the CCTV and audio."

"What have you been doing here?" Sam asked, looking around at the wooden crates and forklifts.

“On this level? Nothin’; this is all front. The Committee had this set up for us after we explained what we needed to do.”

“You had to deal with them too, huh?” Sam looked like he’d just smelled something rotten.

Quinn laughed. “Yeah, they’re a bundle of sunshine, huh? Put us through the wringer. But Senator Grady seemed to have our backs. You know him?”

Sam squinted. “No... but, it’s been seven years since I last had the ‘pleasure’ of seeing them. And I think my actions in the past changed the makeup of the committee at least once. So they could be anybody at this point.” He shook his head.

It occurred to Quinn that the ripple effects of changing history could have been quite dramatic. He sure hoped whatever, or whoever, had been assigning Sam to change things was doing it responsibly.

Quinn gestured to a large steel shipping container against the far wall. “Anyway, for the fun part, we gotta go in there.”

He flashed a grin at Sam, who was eyeing the setup with guarded interest. “Remember Higgins?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “What about him?”

Quinn felt like he was bursting with excitement to explain all of this to Sam, who’d last seen Higgins in his reverse-engineered state back in ’78.

“Just follow me,” he said, and waved a keycard over a door set into the shipping container, before pushing it open. Inside was a set of false crates, which opened up to reveal a staircase leading down.

He led Sam down, and used a fingerprint scanner to open the next door, at the base of the stairs. He held it open for Sam, who



entered the corridor lit with fluorescent lights.

“There’s not a whole lot to this place,” Quinn explained. “We have two labs and the rest is basically just where we live. We’re on kind of a tight leash.”

He stopped at a door labelled simply with the number 6, and swiped his keycard. The red light on the reader flipped to green, and he pushed the door open, leading Sam into a casually laid out room, with three couches and a TV, among some other leisurely comforts.

On the couches sat Colin, Maggie, and Rembrandt, who each turned their heads towards the doorway.

“This is the common room,” Quinn said, and stood holding the door as Sam entered. He smiled warmly at everyone, as Maggie sprung from her seat and ran to him.

“Hey, Uncle Sam,” she said, giving him a tight hug. “I’m so glad they could bring you back.”

Sam leaned into the embrace. “Me too, Maggie.”

Still wrapped in the hug, he held a hand out to Rembrandt, who gave it a shake.

“Great to see you again, brother. So, you really came straight from ’78 to here?”

Sam nodded.

“I last saw you all just a couple of days ago from my perspective.” He gestured to Colin. “And I saw *you* on both sides of my leap, which was a little disorienting, since you’d changed so much.”

Colin looked sheepish. “Yeah, I guess that must’ve been a head trip. But it was the first chance I had to try out the Reality Lens for myself.”

He chuckled, scratching his head. “Guess all it did was confirm that there wasn’t an illusion at all, because it was the real you there.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Sam laughed.

Quinn sat on the arm of one of the couches. “So, I’m sure you’re itching to know why we came here, and why we’ve been working here for three years.”

“Correct.”

Quinn glanced towards Colin, who nodded back. “Come with us to the labs.”

\* \* \*

There were two large rooms designated labs, which were well stocked with various electronic components and computers, but Sam was puzzled to see no particular work going on. Nothing was being built, nothing worked on.

After Quinn explained to him that he had just recently integrated Ziggy with a significantly advanced Higgins, he realised that their work in this place was more or less over with.

Quinn and Colin described what they had found when they had returned to Earth Prime; what his counterpart had built there. A project that could only possibly have come about after their visit in 1978. A combination of two technologies that wouldn’t have been developed for over fifteen more years if not for their interference.

His double’s life had certainly taken a different route to what it might have to begin with, and his niece; well, he was just glad she

had finally found her purpose. And it was as noble as a purpose could get: attempting to prevent a terrible future.

But, as Quinn had explained, something had gone wrong in 1998. She failed to prevent her Earth's destruction, and that's why Quinn and his friends had brought Higgins here: to finish the job.

And Sam now understood that, sooner or later, the person who'd be leaping off to help would be him.

And he was okay with that.

As the three of them entered the corridor, Sam paused as he noted two people entering the facility: one, an older looking gentleman in a suit and tie, neatly styled grey hair and the physique of someone who spent most of his days seated. The other was a woman. He guessed her age to be somewhere in her thirties, with brown hair, and her face was familiar to him.

As he gawked at her, she looked back with what Sam took to be an expression of wonder.

"Ah, here she is," said Colin.

"Sammy Jo?" Sam said, as a smile tickled at his lips.

"H-hi, Doctor Beckett," she replied, and held a hand out to him. "I'm humbled that you know my name."

Sam took her hand with both of his, and realised that he had no memories of her other than his brief time with her as a child, when she saw him as an old lawyer. And it seemed that she might not be aware that she was his biological daughter.

"Well, I've heard... good things about you," he said, with a warm smile and lingering eye contact.

The man beside her cleared his throat, and Sammy Jo stiffened.

"Oh, right," she said with a flustered breath, before gesturing to the man. "I'd like to introduce you to Senator Terrence Grady. He

heard that you'd returned, and insisted on meeting you."

The senator gave Sam a cheerful nod. "Doctor Beckett, I almost can't believe my eyes." His heavily accented voice reminded Sam of Foghorn Leghorn.

He offered his hand, which Sam accepted, and gave a forceful handshake.

"Have we met?" Sam asked through narrow eyes. He didn't recognise the man one bit.

"We have now," said Grady with a wink. "I was added to the Committee back in '99, and when I heard about your work you coulda knocked me down with a feather."

"Senator Grady has been our biggest advocate since then," Sammy Jo explained. "He's saved us from a few budget crunches."

Sam's discomfort gave way to gratitude. "Well, thank you, sir."

Grady gave a polite nod. "Now, while I'm here, I wouldn't mind speaking to the – what do you call yourselves? Sliders?"

"Us?" Quinn asked, surprised.

"Yes. I'd like to get a feel for how your work is going, if you need anything. I can always pull some strings to make your life easier."

The senator strolled to the bewildered Quinn, placing a chummy arm around him. "Please, do show me around, my boy. I want to know everything that goes on here."

Sam watched Quinn lead him back toward the labs. Colin gave a quick awkward glance before heading up the hall to join them, and Sam was left alone with Sammy Jo.

He looked at her, with facial features that combined Abigail's with his own. It was strange, and slightly disturbing, as he thought back to his time in Potterville. What had possessed him

to do such a thing, anyway? Because that was indeed how it had felt when he'd... conceived her. Like being possessed. Which held a certain irony.

All that was to say, he was unprepared for this reunion with his unlikely offspring, and he was lost for words.

“Uh... so...” he mumbled.

“So...” Sammy Jo repeated, which devolved into a nervous giggle. “I’m sorry. I’m not much of a conversationalist.”

Sam gave a weak snort. “Yeah... evidently, neither am I.”

*Jeez, this is a pathetic display. Ask her something about herself.*

“Uh, how did you come to work for the Project?”

*Okay, that works.*

“I was hired by Doctor Elesee back in '97,” she said, her face lighting up. “Just after I published a paper on residual temporal anomalies that I subsequently learned were caused by your leaps. I had to retract the paper for national security purposes, which was a shame.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sam said. Had he inadvertently sabotaged her career?

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “Really. Being privy to the most amazing secret ever is *way* cooler than some academic credentials.”

*Apparently you’re not in on all of the secrets.*

Sam’s heart weighed heavy. He didn’t know whether it was a good idea to come clean. There was a lot to talk over with Al, Donna, and perhaps Ziggy, too.

“I’d like to hear more about your paper,” he said. “Wanna grab a coffee or somethin’?”

Sammy Jo nodded. “Sure,” she said, with a bubbling excitement that Sam found endearing.

As she turned to open room 6, Sam’s smile faded as he tried to decide what to do about all this.

*I’m going to be saying goodbye to her before long. Doesn’t she deserve the truth? But then, I’ll be abandoning her all over again, won’t I?*

## 4.5 • LIGHTING A CIGAR AS THE WORLD BURNS

*Earth Prime*

*February 6, 1998*

It was a busy Friday night at the bar downtown. The noise levels were at the point that even the most sensitive information spoken would have been swallowed up by the ambience before reaching the ears of a stranger.

Sherri leaned against a wall, watching the Men's Room door. She sipped at a glass of red wine.

"Waiting for someone?" a voice emerged from the clamour. Sherri turned her head toward it, and gave a fond smile to its owner.

"John's in the... uh, john," she said. "Good to see you, Al."

Earth Prime's Al Calavicci took his place against the wall, beside her, an unlit cigar between his fingers. He was dressed in a vibrant blue suit, with a matching set of tinted shades, and his tie was hot pink, which complemented his similarly coloured shoes.

"Trying to impress someone with that suit?" she asked, though she knew he dressed like this almost every day.

Al flashed her a suggestive look. "Would you have preferred my birthday suit?"

Sherri gave him a playful elbow in the side. "I see nothing's changed with you."

“Sure it has,” he said, waving around the cigar. “Since I last saw you, I had myself another beautiful, transcendent wedding, and then... bitter, contentious divorce.”

“How many’s that now?” Sherri grimaced in anticipation of the response.

“Five— wait... no, six. Think that means I get the next one free.”

Given what Sherri knew about Al, the joke was less funny than it was sad, but she gave him a token laugh all the same, just to make him feel better.

“Jeez, Al. Why even bother marrying?” She hadn’t meant to sound so blunt, but it was a question in the minds of everyone who knew the man.

“Always seems like a great idea at the time. It’s the womanly wiles. Robs me of my higher reasoning.”

Sherri made eye contact with Al. “Is that what brought you here? You want a rebound fling with me?”

“Sherri, I’m hurt that you’d suggest I’d come here just for that.” He gestured to the room around them. “There are plenty of *other* ladies here to have a rebound fling with.”

Sherri placed a hand on her hip. “But, I’m the only one who you know for sure won’t end up your seventh wife. No strings, no drama, no weirdness.”

Al raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’re making a pitch, Sherri.”

Sherri gave him a noncommittal shrug, before finishing her wine.

Finally, John emerged from the bathroom door. His eyes were immediately drawn to the conspicuous Al, and his face lit up. He



crossed to the former Admiral, giving him a pat on the arm in greeting.

“Al, I didn’t know you were coming to town.”

Al gave him a tight shrug. “After the message Will sent me, thought it might be a good time to see a couple of old friends for maybe the last time.”

“Don’t say that,” John said, frowning. “We still have a chance.”

Al pressed his cigar to his lips, before realising that it wasn’t lit. He made a face.

“Damn non-smoking bars,” he grumbled. “I’m goin’ outside.”

Sherri and John followed him out onto the street, where Al lit up and took a long drag, before continuing the conversation.

“It’s not that I don’t have faith in you two,” he said, “but you know as well as I do it’s a long shot. What kind of odds did that computer of yours give it?”

Sherri exchanged a look with John. “Thirty-one per cent,” she admitted.

“Far be it for me to bet against Team Beckett, but this ain’t the Superbowl we’re talking about. The stakes are a little too life-or-death to be enjoying my retirement. So I came to offer, you know, moral support.” He leaned towards Sherri. “And *maybe* have a rebound fling before the world goes caca.”

John stared at the sidewalk. “You look so much like him these days.”

“Like who?” asked Al, a plume of smoke rolling past his lips.

John scuffed his foot. “You remember all the crazy stuff I said when we first met, right?”

“That bananas story you expected me to believe about parallel versions of us from the future?”

“That’s the one. He came out of a bright white door in the middle of a lecture about TCP. Loud shirt, bright yellow pants. Carrying a cigar just like that. Even the same ring on his finger. Face about the same age.”

“Sounds like a stylish kinda guy,” Al said.

John laughed. “He scared the living daylights outta me.”

Sherri smiled, recalling John receiving a job offer some time around 1984. He was going to return to sender, until he saw the name attached. He then proceeded to call up Al Calavicci, sharing his very strange story. Most people would have written John off as a nutcase, but Al wasn’t most people.

“I’d say if you’re gonna be a hologram from the future, you might as well *look* like a hologram from the future,” Al said sagely.

Sherri turned an eye to John. “See, I told you. Bright colours make you stand out so I can see you better.”

“But it’s so tacky,” John whined. “I like my jeans and neutral tone shirts.”

“Listen, Sam,” Al prodded, “let *me* pick your wardrobe for the next one. Just this once.”

Sherri grinned. “Seconded.”

John groaned. “I’ll only wear it if it’s not going to put me off my game, okay?”

He leaned towards Sherri. “Or *yours*.”

Sherri held a hand to her heart. “Sir, I am a professional.”

She grinned at Al. “Make sure there’s big blocks of fire engine red.”

“You got it.”

“Oh boy,” John sighed with resignation, rubbing his temples.

\* \* \*

The weekend passed quickly, as John and Sherri tried to relax as best they could, knowing what was to come.

John didn’t know whether Sherri and Al slept together, and it wasn’t his business. They were two mature adults, both older than him, and they could do what they wanted, as far as he was concerned. It had been something of an unspoken agreement between the three of them for a long time that they need not discuss anything that happened between those two.

But of course, he knew it had happened at least a few times in their long history. Sherri’s divorce long ago had erased what desire she’d had to settle down with a guy, and Al’s frequent bachelorhood had brought them together on occasion, but it had never spilled out of the bedroom. Somehow, it seemed like the healthiest relationship Al had had since Beth. Whatever Sherri did with him, their friendship never soured.

It was Sunday when Al took John shopping for an outfit. He was miserable the whole time, of course, as Al picked out some of the most flamboyant pieces.

And now, on Monday morning, he emerged from the elevator with slumped shoulders, as those who had arrived earlier gawked at him.

Al had given him a vibrant vermillion blazer, and rainbow striped pants. His shirt was blue on one side and yellow on the other, to match his shoes and fedora respectively.

“Yes, yes, I look like a clown,” he said, as numerous pairs of eyes followed him across the control room. “Soak it in while you can.”

Head lowered, he entered the break room, where a grinning Sherri and Al awaited his arrival.

“Chin up, Sam,” Al said. “The difference between being a schlub and being a trend setter is *confidence*. If you look embarrassed, people will take the cue to laugh at you.”

Sherri, as if to demonstrate, was clearly holding back laughter. She produced a camera, and started snapping photos, as he glared at her.

“Sherri...” he mumbled, covering his eyes. “This is a serious mission. I don’t think this is gonna work.”

Sherri stood, and pulled down his hand so she could look him in the eye.

“John... *Sam*. I don’t know what’s going to happen when I leap today. It’s the Kromaggs, you know? I could die. I don’t care if you look like an extra from *Beetlejuice*, or a gay Willy Wonka. If anything, it might keep my spirits high.”

She adjusted his tie. “Let’s finish this, okay?”

John sighed. “Okay.”

*Gay Willy Wonka?*

\* \* \*

Sherri placed a hand on Will Arturo's shoulder, as he worked at his terminal. He jumped at the contact, and glanced up at her.

"Oh, hey," he said distractedly.

"Come on, take a break with me," she said, gesturing for the break room. "I'm due out in a half hour."

"Oh... okay."

He got up, and a few minutes later they were sharing a quiet moment by the coffee maker.

Sherri took a swig of her black coffee, and moved an eye over the Professor's son. He looked dishevelled and nervous, hunched over his earl grey tea, grasping the mug like it was a lifeline.

"Doesn't look like the week off helped you one bit," she observed.

Will moved his sunken eyes up to meet hers. "I guess I'm not very good at relaxing."

"So I've noticed," Sherri said. "I can't help but think... you're miserable here."

"N-no, not at all," he countered. "I support the cause, I love everyone here. There's no reason I'd be miserable."

Sherri searched his tired eyes. "And yet, lately it feels like you're only half here. I know it can't be easy, with your Dad and all."

Will fixed his gaze in the ripples of his tea. "It's not that. I mean, yeah, I've had to deal with that for a while, and it's hard... but, moreover it's the pressure that comes with this line of work. I've had pretty bad insomnia for a while now."

"Have you talked to John about this? Maybe he can help."

Will shrugged. "You know he overworks himself, too. I don't want to be another hassle."

“Will...” Maggie reached out a hand and rested it on his wrist. “We’re a team. We all support each other. Don’t ever feel like you’d be a hassle asking for help.”

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the forehead. “Your Dad was real proud of you, you know?”

A ghost of a smile passed over Will’s face. “We used to absolutely hate each other.” He let out a bitter laugh.

Sherri pursed her lips. “I don’t think he ever hated you, Will. He just had to readjust his parental expectations.”

Will snorted. “Nah, he definitely hated me after the time I stole three hundred bucks out of his wallet when I was fourteen. He specifically said the words: *‘I despise you, you theftuous simplician.’*” He spoke the quotation with the blustery voice of his father.

“Theftuous?” Now it was Sherri’s turn to laugh. “I just know he made up some of those words he came out with.”

“It’s actually a real word; I looked it up,” Will said, and began to chuckle with her. The two of them laughed a moment longer, before descending into a contemplative silence.

Finally, Sherri broke the silence. “Listen, if something happens to me, I want you and John to take good care of each other. Promise me?”

Will went pale. “I promise,” he said, “but please come back, okay? I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“That’s something I *can’t* promise, but I’ll do my best. Count on it.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sherri stepped into the Interdimensional Accelerator, and vanished.

## 4.6 • HOLIDAY SURPRISE

*Project Quantum Leap – December 21, 2002*

The facility was quiet. Quieter than it had been in many years, Al realised. A handful of essential staff remained, with the rest given Christmas and New Years off. Sam was off with Donna, packing for a trip to Hawaii to see his family. Al, Beth, and a couple of his daughters were set to join them. But, for now, Al wandered the empty corridors, wondering what was to come.

As he poked a head in to Ziggy's mainframe, he spotted a crouched figure by the gizmo that Quinn had connected to Ziggy a few weeks back. But it wasn't Quinn – the person was much shorter, and wore a grey suit.

“Wha–” Al stuttered, prompting the figure to turn. “Senator Grady? The heck?”

The senator looked startled for a moment, before he stood, composing himself and flashing Al a winning smile.

“Admiral, how lovely to see you,” he said.

Al narrowed his eyes at the man. He'd been stuck to the whole operation like glue of late, and it had been rubbing him the wrong way.

“I didn't know you had clearance to be in here,” Al tested.

Grady held out a hand. “Now, now, I have full clearance for this facility. Doctor Beckett granted me a pass.”

*That doesn't sound like something Sam would do.*

Al leaned over to inspect the machine the Senator had been hunched over. “This whole room’s full of mucho sensitive tech, Senator. Wouldn’t want it being put outta whack, you know?”

“Oh, I’d never dream of touching this equipment, Admiral,” Grady said. “I had just heard so much about this contraption from your slider friends, I wanted to see it for myself. Quite a marvel.”

“Yeah, it’s swell,” Al said, with rising suspicion. “Look, I think it’s better if you only come in here supervised, Senator. This room ain’t your ordinary server room.”

Grady bowed his head. “I understand. I apologise for any breach of protocol of which I might be guilty. Do escort me out, my good man.”

He left the room, still smiling, as Al carefully followed him to the elevator that led back to the surface.

“Merry Christmas, Admiral,” he said, waving as the door closed on him.

Al frowned, and spun around, returning to the mainframe.

“Ziggy, gimme a full report on Grady and what he’s been doing here lately,” he called up to Ziggy’s orb, as he took a close look at the crystal storage device.

He was not particularly versed in how this thing worked, but he could see that all the quartz receptacles were filled with a crystal. Still, that didn’t mean it hadn’t somehow been tampered with.

“Certainly, Al,” Ziggy said. “Printing a full report now. The Senator has not interfered with my systems, I’m pleased to report. However, I have observed a significant number of probing questions he has asked staff members.”

“Probing...?” Al tilted his head. “Like what?”



“I calculate a 66.2 per cent probability that his line of questioning was an attempt to learn details of my security features.”

Al balled his hands into fists. “That little weasel. Ziggy, revoke his access to the building.”

“I do love a good revocation,” Ziggy murmured. “The Senator’s access rights have now been purged.”

Al sighed with relief. “Good. Now, was it *really* Sam who gave him the all-access pass?”

“My records indicate that Senator Grady did not have mainframe access privileges.”

Al stared at the glowing orb, incredulous. “Then how the hell’d he get in here?”

Ziggy was quiet for a little too long.

“Ziggy?”

“It appears I have a gap in my records, Admiral.” Ziggy’s voice was almost shaky.

“You *just* said he didn’t interfere!”

“Yes, I’m afraid that was an error on my part; I was unaware of the change until I attempted to access the record. It seems I may have experienced some form of undetectable glitch that suspended my processes. Running diagnostics.”

Al glared at the orb, then pulled his handlink from his pocket, waving it around. “You contact me directly as soon as you have answers, Ziggy. And keep checking for any other... gaps.”

“I already am, Admiral.”

As Al hurried out of the room, bound for his office, Ziggy added: “I’m sorry.”

Sam stood, staring blankly into the closet. Musty clothes hung on the rail, stuff he obviously hadn't touched in seven long years.

"Can you tell me if any of this stuff is out of style?" he said to Donna, who was behind him, loading things into their suitcase.

"I don't think anyone will care if it is," she said, giving him a lopsided smile.

He pursed his lips as he looked the button-ups, pants, and occasional t-shirt. "Guess I never was on the cutting edge of style, was I?"

It seemed ironic to Sam that he was used to the fashion style of every decade but his own.

He pulled out a few plain, inconspicuous shirts, and threw them on the bed. The only present-day fashion he'd seen for all those years was Al, and he was hardly the norm at the best of times. But, he figured, he couldn't really go wrong with a smart, neutral toned shirt and some jeans or khakis, and a pair of leather lace-up shoes. Those stood the test of time. He wouldn't have looked out of place in any leap with something along those lines. He was in the business of not looking out of place, after all.

"We can get you a nice Hawaiian shirt when we get there," Donna suggested, peering down at the shirts. "Might look a little more vacation-y than these... *safe*... choices."

"Yeah, okay," he said, inspecting a dusty coat. "It doesn't get very cold in Hawaii, does it?"

Donna snorted. "Winter temperatures are known to occasionally reach a positively *frigid* sixty degrees. Most you'll

need is a windbreaker, I'd guess."

"Good, good," he muttered, as he lost the will to continue, and flopped onto the edge of the bed. Donna looked at him with concern.

"Sam, are you doing okay?" She took a seat beside him.

"It's nothing," he said, but he knew she knew that was a lie. She looked him in the eye.

"Come on, talk to me, would you? No sense bottling everything up."

Sam rubbed his eyes. "I was just hoping to have a nice vacation with family, and *then* I'd worry about everything on my mind. Can't we do that?"

Donna frowned. "Looks like you're already worrying about it now. So all it's gonna do is *spoil* the nice vacation with family because you'll be in your own head the whole time. Just get it off your chest now, Sam."

She was right, of course. She was always right. He pulled his legs up onto the bed, and leaned back on the pillow. He unceremoniously pushed off the shirts, which fell to the floor in a pile, before patting the bed next to him for Donna to join him. She did so as he stared up to the ceiling, taking a deep breath.

"So, uh... Sammy Jo," he said, looking at Donna to gauge her reaction. Her face remained expressionless.

"Sammy Jo," she echoed, through a sigh.

"I take it you know..."

She nodded. "Of course I do."

"Yeah. I figured as much."

He felt Donna's hand grasp his. "But she doesn't."

“Figured that, too.”

“We all agreed you’d be the one to tell her, if you ever came home.” Donna squeezed his hand. “I realise it won’t be an easy thing to do.”

*You can say that again.*

“That’s not the only thing I’m struggling with right now,” Sam admitted. “Though, it’s top of the list.”

He turned to meet her eye. “You know I love you more than anything, right?”

Donna nodded, but her glistening eyes betrayed her apparent knowledge of where this was going.

“I suppose Al has already told you, then.”

“You’re gonna leap away again,” she choked out. “Yeah, I know...”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Donna said, wiping her eyes with her free hand. “I understand. You have a... calling. It’s something you need to do. Don’t let me stand in the way, Sam.”

“It’s *not* alright, though,” he said, biting his lip and looking upward again. “Did... did you know that we’re only together because of a leap?”

Donna nodded. “I did.”

“At the time I had no idea I’d be leaping for so long, so I didn’t think twice. But now I realise what a complete jackass I was to help heal your fear of abandonment, only to abandon you. Who in their right mind would *do* something like that?”

“I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. So if you want to... you know... divorce... that’s okay. You can build a life with

someone else, and—”

Donna took a hold of his cheeks and turned his head to face hers.

“Sam, I’ve had more time than you to deal with this reality. I have memories of you leaving that only exist because you left to begin with, which is not the easiest thing to wrap my mind around.

“Until recently, I thought of myself as just like Beth, waiting for a husband missing in action to return home. Then you had that conversation with Al, and I realised that standing in your way of leaping was going to be futile.”

She drew in a long, shaky breath, and let it out.

“I realise these may be the final days of us being together. And that’s okay. If you really want to ‘set me free’ by divorcing me, I’ll sign the papers. But I’ll never think of you as anything but my husband, even if you’re off in time romancing some woman. Even if you don’t remember me.”

It was Sam’s turn to be choked up. “I’ve put you through enough pain, haven’t I?”

Donna smiled through her tears. “Why don’t you make it up to me now?”

She kissed him, and moved in close. Sam was a little emotionally wrung out to make love, but he reciprocated as best he could.

Then Donna’s cell phone started ringing.

The lovers looked at one another for a moment, before Donna sighed, and looked at the caller ID.

“Al’s calling from his office,” she said, her expression turning serious. “Should I answer?”

Sam furrowed his brow, wondering why he might be calling from there. “Yeah, you’d better.”

*Blip.* “Hi Al, what’s up?”

Sam watched the colour drain from her face. “I see. I’ll put Sam on.” She shakily passed him the phone.

“Al, what’s goin’ on?”

“Hate to interrupt the vacation, pal, but we got a great big politician-shaped problem on our hands. I’m callin’ an emergency meeting.”

*Oh boy.*

## 4.7 • EYES PEELED

Sherri's eyes snapped open, only to squint from the visual onslaught of a harsh overhead light.

*Okay. Mind blank, don't know where I am. Guess I must have leaped.*

She was lying on a hard surface, a wall to her right. Around her was a series of cramped, uncomfortable cell bunks. Twelve total, by her count.

*I'm in a prison?*

Occupying each bed were people of varying ages and genders. Most were sleeping, while others just seemed to be staring into space. Sherri sat up, and had to lean forward to stop her head from hitting a bunk above her. She silently gave another scan of this apparent cell.

*No bars?*

The cell opened up into a corridor at one end, but there appeared to be some kind of energy field over the exit. She stood, and started moving towards it slowly, hoping not to disturb anyone around her.

She felt eyes on her as she lifted a hand to the blue glow. As she made contact with it, a diffuse pattern passed over the field, and she received a sharp electric shock.

“Not time yet,” came a voice. “Ain't had the signal.”

Sherri turned toward the voice, coming from a top bunk just beside her. It was a man who looked about thirty, with tired grey

eyes that looked quite a bit older.

“Uh, yeah,” she said, cautious. “I was just... checking to see if it was still... uh, working. You know, in case there was a chance of getting out of here.”

The man chuckled. “And here I was thinkin’ your will was already broken like the rest of these wretches. Colour me impressed.”

“Oh, I’m pretty wilful,” Sherri said, smirking.

“Janet, right?” said the man, sitting up, and taking a hold of her hand.

*Janet.*

“I guess...” she said as he gave it a shake.

“I’m Tim. Nice to finally have a conversation in here. It’s been a lonely week.”

“A week, huh?” Sherri wondered how long the rest of the people had been here. Including whoever it was she had leaped into.

He leaned in, his voice lowering to a whisper. “Yeah, finally got shipped here when I started playing along with the brainwashing. But it never did take for real.”

Sherri nodded slowly.

*Brainwashing...?*

What had she got herself into this time?

“You must’ve resisted a little longer than me, by the looks of you,” he said, studying her face.

*What does that mean?*

The sound of footsteps began to echo down the corridor, and Tim’s eyes moved to the door.



“You’d better get back in your bunk,” he whispered, giving her a nudge. She nodded and quietly returned to the place where she’d awoken, as two figures appeared at the doorway.

Sherri studied them carefully: Bald, prominent brow, jagged teeth. Mean-looking.

*Are they...?*

The energy field dissipated as one of them passed some kind of card through it.

“Slave Unit 47-G, you are required on level 78 for cleaning duties,” announced one of the creatures.

All at once, the people around her sprang to life, climbing off their beds to stand at attention. Sherri followed suit.

As all of the prisoners – or, she supposed, enslaved people – assembled, they spoke in unison: “We are honoured to serve the Dynasty.”

*‘Dynasty.’ Yeah, that confirms it. Those things are Kromaggs alright. Crap.*

Sherri hoped they hadn’t seen her unmoving lips.

As the group moved together, she felt someone grasp her hand. She looked beside her to see an older woman, who was staring straight ahead. Nobody else was holding hands, and Sherri wondered why this woman had done this. Did they know each other? Were they friends? She certainly wasn’t betraying any emotion at present. Nobody was.

As they entered some kind of industrial sized elevator with large reflective metal panels, Sherri was finally able to glimpse her reflection.

*Oh.*

The person in the reflection was an elderly woman, with near white hair. She was thin, gaunt, and hunched over. But, the most obvious feature was that she had empty, sewn-up eye sockets.

As her own, entirely existent, eyes scanned the crowded elevator, she realised that this gave her a certain advantage. Nobody would catch her staring at them, and who'd suspect someone with no eyes of snooping around?

But, at the same time, her lack of eyes meant she may incur more supervision. And how exactly was she meant to get any alone time?

“Boy... now I *really* feel overdressed,” came John’s voice, as he emerged from the wall of the elevator, dressed in his colourful suit, which contrasted wildly to the grey jumpsuits of the slaves, and military fatigues of the Kromagg soldiers. His head swivelled as he took in his surroundings, eyes squinting. Sherri gave him a silent pleading look, then turned an eye to her reflection.

He looked into the metal pane, and shot her a grimace.

“Yeah. I have a feeling I know where those eyeballs went.”

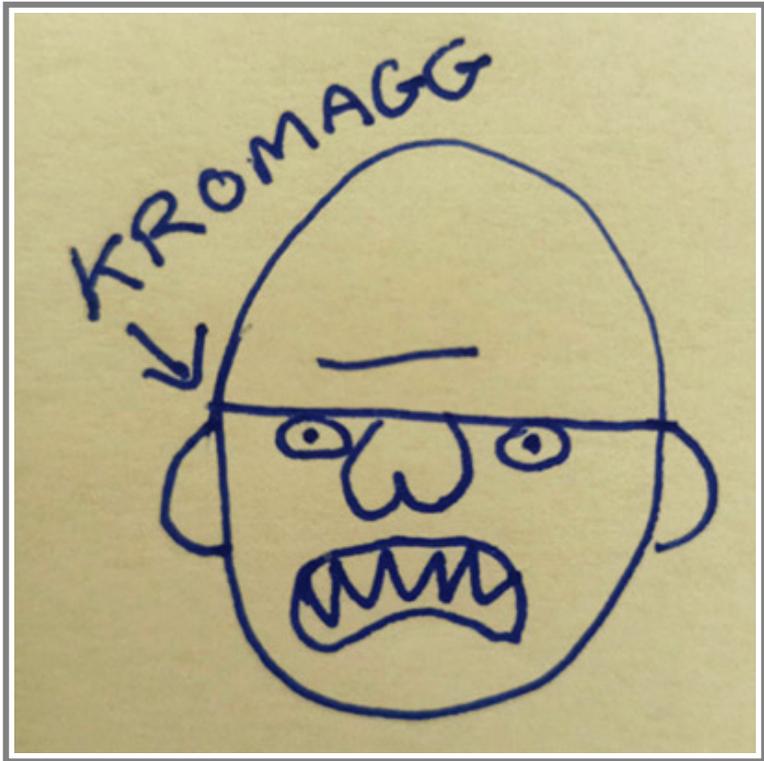
He pointed a thumb at the Kromaggs.

“So *this* is a Kromagg, huh?” he said, turning to study the ugly faces of the two soldiers. He reached over to his invisible shelf, and produced Quinn’s notebook, flipping through the pages.

“Quinn drew one of these guys in here,” he said, before identifying the page, and turning it to show Sherri. “Think it matches?”

The drawing looked like it had been made by a child. A circular face with a big line over the beady eyes, and a frowning, gaping mouth with spiked teeth. It wasn’t an *inaccurate* depiction, but it

was certainly... rudimentary. Sherri gave John a split-second smile, before forcing her face to go blank again.



“So, you remember what you’ve got to do? We’re here for Nexus Quinn. We just have to locate him.”

Sherri responded with a barely perceptible nod in his direction.  
*Jeez it’s tough communicating like this.*

“You play along here while I see if I can trace his signature,” he said, staring down at his handlink. “I sure hope he’s nearby. If he’s not, we might just be spinning our wheels.”

He moved close to her, phasing through a number of people in the process. “Keep your eyes peeled,” he said, before wincing.

“Okay, poor choice of words.”

Sherri was finding it harder to conceal a smile, despite the dire situation. John had a way of keeping her from being immersed in the horrors of what could sometimes be happening around her.

She recalled one time, on a world full of cavernous tunnels below the Earth’s scorched surface, she had spent eighteen days alone in a cramped cave that had been cut off from the rest by a cave-in. Her only task at that point was to survive, and wait for an eventual rescue. The isolation would have caused severe trauma to the leapee. But Sherri wasn’t alone; John had kept her company for fifteen hours a day, every day. Each day he’d brought in something different to occupy her mind. Some days he’d bring in an instrument and sing songs with her, some days he’d read her books. While the experience was harrowing, he’d made sure it was bearable, even when she was forced to start eating bugs in the last few days.

“Back soon, Sherri. Sit tight, don’t draw attention. Good luck.”

As he disappeared, the elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened. Before them was a sprawling room, well-furnished. It looked like some kind of grand marketplace. Sherri was surprised to see a place like this in the same building as the prison she’d come from. But, then, slave quarters generally were in close vicinity to the rich, she thought bitterly.

She caught a glimpse of a large window to her left, and her breath caught as she saw a vast forest of thick, enormous trees, through which flying ships were weaving.

*Those must be the Manta ships.*

The trees had windows built into them – it was as if, instead of building a city of skyscrapers, they had simply used the trees as their buildings. Sherri figured it was entirely possible that she was

inside one of the trees. This room did seem to have a rounded quality to it that would be consistent with a hollow tree trunk.

*No wonder Nexus Quinn was excited about this place. I choose to believe he was unaware of the slavery.*

She felt a tug on her hand from the woman whose duty it seemed to be to act as her eyes, and realised the group was on the move.

As the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Kromaggs around them went about their business, all Sherri could think about was how she could possibly find Quinn when she was one of the most subjugated, tightly scrutinised beings on this whole Earth.

## 4.8 • MOTORCYCLE BUILT FOR 2

Rembrandt wasn't sure why he was here. Sure, this was some kind of all-hands-on-deck emergency, but what use was he in such a situation? All he'd really been doing for the past few years was hanging around and catching up on TV as he watched Quinn and Colin build stuff, and Maggie get progressively more agitated about being cooped up.

Hell, he had never missed an episode of *Passions* since he got here, even though he hated the damn show. That was a testament to how slow and rudderless his life had become.

Around him, at the conference table, sat Q-ball, Colin, Maggie, Sammy Jo, Al, Sam, and then several other people he'd never met, one of whom had rotten breath.

"Awright, everyone," Al said, standing up. The light murmurs at the table died as everybody looked to him. "So it seems that the Kentucky fried Senator who's been hanging round like a bad smell lately may be trying to get a hold of sensitive data."

*Grady?*

The faces around him became grave.

"That rotten snake!" cried the high-pitched voice of the woman who sat next to the bad breath guy. "You kicked him outta here, right Al?"

"Yeah, Tina. He won't be allowed back in here. But we got more problems than that." Al sighed, leaning on the table. "Ziggy's compromised."

“Compromised how?” asked a wide-eyed Sam.

Al picked up a stack of papers from his place at the table, and handed them to Sam. “Here’s her diagnostic report. See for yourself.”

Sam skimmed through the pages, and sweat began beading on his face. He looked back up at Al.

“Six separate instances...”

“Ziggy has been... hanging,” the hallitosis man piped up, seeming to have already read the report. “Freezing for short periods, then resuming function as if no time had passed.”

Al continued: “She didn’t even realise it was happening ’til I told her to look up how the slimeball got into her mainframe without the proper access.”

Quinn leaned forward. “So you think that somehow, Grady’s been disrupting Ziggy? So – what, he can go places he’s not meant to?”

“Sure looks that way,” Al concurred. “And you won’t like what I found him looking at.”

Quinn swallowed. “Higgins?”

Al nodded grimly.

“So has this been a long game?” Sammy Jo asked quietly. “All these years he’s been helping us, and making himself out to be our best friend in the Committee – could it all have been an act so he could hang around here without suspicion?”

“But what does he *want*?” asked the lady to Sam’s left, who was sitting as close to him as she could get. “Who’s he working for? Who would go to all this trouble?”

“There’s a lot of things powerful people can do with both sliding and time travel technology,” Maggie said, frowning. “The

Professor died to keep Higgins out of the hands of Kromaggs.”

“Yeah...” Colin said, with regret passing over his face. “And Grady was gung-ho on finding out all about Higgins from us, which has the data for both purposes. I’ll bet he’s gunning for those quartz crystals.”

“*And* the way to read them,” added Quinn, scratching his chin.

Al exchanged a look with Sam.

“Okay,” Sam said quietly, “let’s shut down Ziggy until we formulate a plan of action.”

An uneasy silence fell over the table, as if he’d just suggested pulling the life support on a loved one.

Al put a hand on Sam’s slumped shoulder. “It’s for the best.”

Sam addressed the table: “Once Ziggy’s offline, she can’t be reactivated unless she has three layers of security unlocked from both Al and I. The first layer is a physical key, the second is a hand print, and the third is a unique pass phrase using our vocal signatures.”

“There’s a secondary failsafe that involves Gooshie and Donna,” Al added, “in case something happens to one of us.”

*Okay, so the high voice lady is Tina, and Donna must be the other lady, and I guess that makes Stink-Bomb Breath ‘Gooshie.’*

“What about Higgins?” Quinn asked. “Without Ziggy’s security features in the building, the crystals will be sitting ducks for a break-in, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Sam said, pensive.

“It might be a good idea to separate the crystals,” Maggie suggested. “Distribute them among everyone here. That way, there’s no way Grady will get them all. We just have to make sure they’re each put somewhere safe and secure.”



“Alright, all in favour of this plan, say aye,” announced Al.

“Aye,” replied every other voice in the room.

Al and Sam looked at one another.

“Okay guys, looks like the vacation’s still on,” Sam said, smiling. “Just make sure your crystal’s secure. I’ll think on what to do about Ziggy.”

As the meeting adjourned, and Quinn distributed Higgins crystals to everyone, Rembrandt was still wondering what use he’d been. He hadn’t said a single word during that entire meeting, other than ‘aye.’

\* \* \*

“How you doing, Ziggy?” Sam called up to the orb, as he prepared for her shutdown. Beside him stood Al, while Gooshie, Tina, and Donna waited across the room, looking tense.

“You needn’t coddle me, Doctor Beckett,” Ziggy said, though Sam could tell she wasn’t completely unaffected. “Please proceed.”

“You’ll be back online in no time, got it?” Al reassured the computer, as he pressed a sequence of buttons.

“Yes, I am quite aware. *Please proceed.*”

Sam exchanged a look with Al. Ziggy may have been a computer, but she had an ego, and egos had a tendency towards self-preservation.

“Proceeding, then,” Sam said, pressing his own sequence into the controls. “Good night, Ziggy.”

Each of those present followed suit, prompting Ziggy to give them a small chuckle.

“If you expect me to start singing *Daisy Bell*, I’m sorry to disappoint,” Ziggy said, as her glow began to dim. “I’m confident my period of dormancy will be short, so... farewell for now. Please enjoy your holiday period.”

Despite her reassurances, her voice slowly became less spirited as she spoke. The orb, and the coloured panels around the room, faded to nothing, leaving the group in an eerie, silent darkness.

Gooshie reached over to the wall, and flipped on a light switch, illuminating the room with a cool white light from a plain fluorescent tube.

Even though Sam knew this was temporary, he still felt a sense of loss, and he could tell the others also felt it. Ziggy had been a constant for all of them for a long time, and it felt really strange to see her deactivated.

“Okay... let’s go,” Sam said. “No sense mourning, right?”

“Right...” Al said, and patted Ziggy’s main control panel. “We’ll be back defragging these drives in no time.”

And they left.

\* \* \*

*Somewhere in Topeka, Kansas*

*December 23, 2002*

The lonely woman cast a weary eye at the clock by her bed.

*Midnight...*

So, another day over. Another day wasted waiting for the stupid machine to pick something up.

She buried her head in her pillow. How many days was that, now? How many months? Years? She was sure it was calibrated correctly. She'd run the calculations again and again. It was the right signature, she was sure of it. It came from her own blood.

Maybe, she figured, she'd overestimated the scale of the operation. Maybe it was smaller than she'd given it credit for. Maybe her defection had forced it to shut down.

*No, not a chance.*

She'd once thought this was a good plan. And then the waiting began. Now she just felt like there was a whole lot she could be doing if only she wasn't stuck here.

As she settled down to get some sleep, she tried to ignore the feeling in her gut that everything around her was *wrong*.

Blip.

The woman's eyes shot open, and her gaze flickered to the machine on the floor.

*Please tell me that wasn't my mind playing tricks.*

Blip.

She shot out of bed, grabbing the small device, which had a small dish on the front and a display at the back. Slowly, she turned around, trying to isolate the direction of the signal.

Blip. Blip. Blip.

*Southwest, or thereabouts.*

She let out a giddy cry, and began feverishly putting warm clothes on, before hurrying out into the frigid winter air,

strapping her helmet on. Her motorcycle sprang to life, and she sped off into the night.

*Sorry I doubted you, Moirai, she prayed to the Fates.*

## 4.9 • TIGHT SECURITY

John rubbed his eyes as the hologram shifted around him, causing some disorientation.

“Almost got it,” came Will’s voice through the handlink.

“Thanks, buddy,” John said, as images blurred past his eyes. “Wish it was a little simpler than this, I gotta be honest.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Will. “Higgins has no idea how to parse the Kromagg brain waves, so they’re interfering with our search a little. But we’re closing in. Just a minute.”

“Okay, I’ll just shut my eyes until the image stabilises,” John said.

“Ugh, not now...” Will muttered, at a barely perceptible volume.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, it’s nothing to do with the search. It’s just our detectors just triggered at the anomaly site.”

“Of all times...” lamented John. “Is there someone available to go scope it out?”

“Well, the only one around here not working on something important right now is...”

John grimaced. “Al?”

“Yeah.”

John scratched the back of his head. “S’pose you could ask him. He might not know what to do when he gets there, though.”

“Okay, I’ll see wh— *yes!* We have a lock. Finally.”

John opened his eyes cautiously, and relaxed when he saw a stable image of a small room around him, with a neatly made bed and a large window overlooking the tree city of the Kromagg world. As the audio of the environment came in, he heard a light tapping behind him, and he turned around.

Nexus Quinn was sitting at a cramped desk, with a laptop computer, typing up what John recognised to be sliding algorithms.

“Dammit, don’t do it, kid,” John pleaded, though he knew that was pointless. He needed to get Sherri to him right away.

Quinn let out a frustrated groan, as a box came up on the computer written in an unknown language.

“Come on...” Quinn mumbled, hitting a key.

John squinted at the strange text, and suddenly wished he’d gone on to complete his degree in ancient languages. Some of the symbols looked familiar, but he couldn’t recognise any pattern to them.

*Phoenician alphabet, maybe. But not quite.*

Quinn’s key pressing eventually cleared the dialogue, and he sighed, before reaching into his pocket and looking at the quartz crystal that John recognised all too well.

“Please, Quinn, don’t give that to them...”

The sound of a knock at the door startled both of them, and John watched Quinn frantically put the crystal back into his pocket before standing to open the door.

On the other side of the door stood, surprisingly, a human being. The man wore a military uniform just like the guys guarding Sherri, and John eyed the guy sceptically.

*Is he using that cloaking ability?*

Quinn's notebook had described a Kromagg's advanced mental abilities that allowed them to look like whatever they wanted others to see.

*Reality distortion, like the leaper aura.*

"The commander summons you, sir," said the man. Nexus Quinn stretched, acting casual.

"Does he now? Tell him I'm busy." He moved to close the door, and the soldier placed his foot in the way.

"It wasn't a request, sir," he said, making cold eye contact with Quinn. The self-assured Quinn didn't flinch.

"That's no way to treat a guest," said Quinn, raising an eyebrow. "He *did* say I was a guest, did he not?"

The soldier stared him in the eye for a moment.

"I'll go tell him you're busy," the man said, eyes narrowed, before turning and closing the door.

John followed him out, and as he walked down the corridor, he watched the soldier's illusion dissipate, revealing the unmistakable head of a Kromagg.

*Called it.*

He followed the soldier to the end of the corridor, where he produced some sort of wireless keycard that he waved over a scanner. It accepted his pass, and he shot a quick glance in John's direction before opening the door and entering.

*He didn't... sense me?*

John continued to the door and peeked his head inside.

The room was a large, mostly empty office, with a floor-to-ceiling window stretching across the far side. The soldier approached a large desk, at which a Kromagg of a higher rank sat.

“Commander, the human has refused your summons.”

“I see.” The commander was silent for a moment, thinking. Then, he stood, turning toward the window.

“Continue to accommodate his insolence for the time being. He must complete his work, at all costs. We need those equations.”

John pursed his lips as he wondered why Quinn just hadn’t handed over the crystal to them. Their civilisation seemed more than advanced enough to retrieve the data from it.

*He wants to keep the crystal for his own purposes, I guess.*

“Yes, sir,” the soldier said.

The commander turned back around, and his eyes hovered at the door, near John, for just a moment, before resting on the soldier.

“Dismissed.”

John pulled back into the corridor, tapping into his handlink.

“Higgins, take me to Sherri.”

The hologram around him shifted immediately to a small bathroom, where several enslaved people were cleaning various surfaces in silence. Sherri, with some irony to the poor eyeless woman whose aura she was wearing, was wiping the mirror.

John, who wasn’t visible in the mirror, cleared his throat, prompting her to turn and give a relieved sigh. She looked around at the other toiling slaves momentarily, before meeting John’s eye.

“Hey.”

“You... good to talk?” John said, noticing with interest that none of the others in the bathroom had so much as looked up. “Higgins



isn't detecting any listening devices in range, but I see you have... company."

Sherri pulled her rag away from the mirror, balling it up.

"I think these guys are used to just tuning out weird stuff happening around 'em. Have enough Kromagg mind games done to you and I guess this is the result." She dumped the rag in the bucket on the floor next to her. "Did you find him?"

"I did," he said, peering at his handlink, where Higgins had generated a 3D map of the immediate area. He turned it so she could see, and pointed at a red dot. "Okay, this is you."

He zoomed out, revealing the forest city. Another red dot glowed in a tree nearby to the one Sherri was in. "Quinn's in this building... uh, tree. Level fifty-three. He's under pretty heavy guard. still thinks he holds all the cards, though."

"How many thousands of 'maggs do you think stand between me and him?" Sherri moaned, cradling her temple. "This is a nightmare."

John frowned. "Yeah, it's... not great. I'll get Higgins to run through some escape scenarios. Tracking changes to the original history is going to be a challenge, though."

"Of course it is," Sherri rolled her eyes. "What is it *this* time?"

"Well, Higgins receives the information by probing the parallel Earth in our present. He opens a wormhole there and scans for traces of internet and news wire. But in the Kromagg world; well, we don't want them to trace the wormhole and expedite the invasion, do we?"

"Isn't there anything Higgins can do to mask the trail?"

John pulled up Higgins's report on the handlink, studying it closely. "He *can* reroute the probe through one or more layers of

known barren parallel Earths to mask the trail. It'll lag on our updates, though. So we need to be careful and not rush things."

He wiped sweat from his brow. "But there are still obstacles. Namely, their written language is different to ours, and all of the pertinent info could be locked up in classified files."

Sherri looked at him with a deflated frown. "Tell me you have some *good* news, too."

"You could say the fact Quinn hasn't handed over the data yet counts as good news. But we don't have long."

Sherri looked at the elderly lady's sorry visage in the mirror. "In that case, get Higgins to hurry up on those scenarios."

John gave another glance around the room. A middle-aged lady, mopping the floor. A teenage girl, scrubbing a toilet. A short woman with a long scar down her face, wiping a sink. Each had a listless, tired expression, like they had all faced such hardship that they could no longer allow themselves to feel anything.

The reality of this wretched world descended on him, and he felt sick to his stomach.

*Is there nothing we can do for these people?*

"Are they *all* like this?" he said, voice wavering.

Sherri leaned on a sink, looking down. "Almost. There was one guy who actually talked to me. Tim. Said he's only been here a week."

She pointed a thumb towards the mirror. "He's with the men, cleaning the bathroom next door."

John bit his lip as he considered the possibility of Sherri having an ally. "That's a variable we may be able to work with. I'll ask Higgins to factor him in on his scenarios."

Sherri nodded. “Okay. How much do you think I should reveal to him?”

“Only as much as you have to. Who knows what kinda surveillance they’ve got around here. In your cell.”

Sherri gave him a hint of a nod, as she considered. “Alright. While Higgins is figuring things out, I need you to keep a close watch on Quinn.”

“Okay,” he said, swallowing hard. “You be strong, okay? Use all your senses and take mental notes.”

“Always,” she said, and held out her fist. John placed his against hers, and they momentarily passed through each other.

Then, with a tap of the handlink, he was back in Nexus Quinn’s little ‘guest room,’ overlooking the troublesome double, still typing away.

John found himself longing for the innocent days of Plan B.

## 4.10 • WIBBLY WOBBLY

The woman had been riding her motorcycle all night, and she was chilled down to her bones. Even the morning sun hadn't helped thaw her. She supposed it was time she pulled into a roadhouse.

*Where am I?*

She had crossed into New Mexico a while back, and was seeing signs for Albuquerque more than a hundred miles ahead. So, she figured, she was just somewhere between a desert expanse and an empty wasteland. But, thankfully, there was a lonely roadside tavern coming up fast.

She pulled up, and pumped some gas into her bike, before entering, while rifling through her wallet. The first thing that hit her as she entered was the pungent aroma of cigar smoke. As she pulled out a twenty, she glanced up and froze.

Standing at the bar were three men, who all looked dishevelled. On the right, a thirty-something man leaning on the bar, with a gaunt face and stubble. On the left, an older man wearing a gaudy silver blazer. He was evidently the source of the cigar smell, given the smouldering stogie between his fingers. But it was the tall man in the middle that actually caught her eye.

“Sam?!”

The man, who she *knew* was definitely Sam Beckett, looked back at her without recognition, but he was clearly spooked to hear his name.

He looked for a moment at the bartender, before stepping towards her.

“Do... do you know me?”

“Yes...” she said, and frowned. “You must be... swiss-cheesed, right? You don’t remember me.”

His eyes widened. “Swiss-cheesed... huh.” He looked at the bartender once again. The grey-haired man shrugged back at him, a strange smile playing at his lips.

Sam took another step toward her. “I think you must have met a different Sam...”

The woman frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Sam gave her an exhausted smile. “Welcome to the migraine that is this bar,” he said, and gestured around the otherwise empty tavern. “What’s your name?”

She moved to a bar stool, and took a perplexed seat on it.

“...Alia.”

Sam nodded, and gestured to the men on either side of him. “This is Al, and Will. We’re, uh... a little displaced from our homes right now.”

*Al, like Sam’s hologram?*

She looked at the man, tapping ash into a tray on the bar. He winked at her. “How you doin’, gorgeous?”

“Al, this really isn’t the time...” Sam said, shooting him a warning look.

Alia sat in a daze for a moment, attempting to comprehend this surreal predicament, before the bartender spoke up.

“You plan on paying for that gas, little lady?”

She realised she was still holding the bill, and she handed it to him.

“Appreciate it,” he said, and opened his register. “Staying for a meal? Soup of the day is chunky mushroom. Three fifty.”

He pulled out a few smaller bills, and handed them back, as she continued looking at Sam and his companions.

“Yeah. Guess I will.”

She picked up a menu, but couldn’t concentrate on the words. Her gaze kept drifting up to Sam.

“I...” she began, but wasn’t able to find more words. He looked back at her awkwardly.

“Listen, you should know...” he said, glancing between his friends a moment, before looking back to her. “This place we’re in right now is an unstable anomaly in spacetime.”

Alia glared at him. “What?”

“Well that’s no way to speak about my fine establishment,” said the bartender, hands on hips. “If you don’t like the way I pull a beer, you should just say so.”

Sam gave the man a flat, sardonic look. “Enough with the theatrics, already.”

He looked back at Alia with some concern. “Look, Al walked in here four months ago, and disappeared. Then when Will and I tracked the anomaly again, we came in here and only an hour had passed for him. And then we got stuck here too. Every time we open that door, it leads somewhere different.”

He turned an accusing eye to the bartender. “This guy’s got us trapped here, bouncing around across time and dimensions.”

Alia crinkled her nose. “The bartender?”

“It’s true,” said Will, who finally looked up at her. “What year is it for you?”

“Two thousand two...” she said, brow furrowed. Will and Sam exchanged a look of horror.

“When we came in here it was 1998,” Sam muttered, rubbing a hand on his forehead. “My watch says it’s been an hour and fifteen.”

“Fellas,” the bartender said, trying to break the tension, “Time tends to fly when you’re spending quality time with your friends. Long as you’re home in time for Christmas, right?”

It was Al’s turn to snap at the bartender. “Would you shut up already?”

He stamped out his cigar. “I’ve had it up to here with this nozzle beating around the damn bush all day. What do you want with us?”

The bartender chuckled.

“Just your patronage.” He gestured to the door. “You can leave any time.”

“Can we, though?” Sam asked, his face deadpan. “How do we know if we go out there it won’t be straight into a Kromagg apocalypse?”

*A what apocalypse?*

Alia stood. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I think maybe *I* should go. I have something important I’m doing, and...”

Sam looked at her, anxious. “Wait, let me go out with you... just in case.”

He looked at his friends. “I’ll be back.”

The bartender looked Sam up and down, before reaching under the bar, and throwing a big coat to him. “Here. It’s chilly out.”

Sam put a light hand on Alia’s shoulder, guiding her to the door.

*He really doesn’t know me at all, does he?*

She still had no clue what the meaning of any of this was, but it was no coincidence that Sam was here. Even if he didn’t recognise her.

The pair stepped out of the tavern, into the cool air. Her motorcycle was still where she left it and she moved to it, checking her device.

*Still tracing. Good.*

“I thought you said this place changes every time you open the door?” she asked.

Sam looked off into the desert, uneasy. “It... it normally does.”

He looked back at the door, and grabbed the handle. It didn’t budge.

“Huh...?”

Alia watched him struggle with the door. He then cupped his hands over one of the small windows. A moment later, he took a step backwards, and stood frozen, mouth hanging open.

“He wouldn’t just...” He slowly turned to her. “I can’t believe it. The anomaly bounced out of here. They’re... they’re all gone.”

Alia rushed to see into the window, and he was right: the roadhouse was closed up, dark, and seemingly abandoned.

Alia met Sam’s troubled gaze.

“Did... did he want me to go with you?” he asked, looking down at the coat that was still hanging over his forearm. “Was this his plan all along?”



Alia fought back tears. “You can come with me if you like, Sam...”

*Please come with me.*

Sam looked into her moist eyes, and nodded. He put the coat on. “I’m not the Sam you know, so... call me John, okay?”

## 4.11 • TIMEY WIMEY

“So, Alia, what’s your story?”

John wasn’t about to get on a motorcycle – without a helmet – with a girl for whom he knew only the name. Which Sam did she know, and how? And, perhaps more importantly, what was that beeping device attached to her handlebars, anyway?

Alia laughed. “We *really* don’t have time to go into all that,” she said. “Maybe after we get where I’m going, I can fill you in.”

“You gotta give me *somehthin’*,” he retorted. “I don’t know anything about you. Where are we even going?”

She sighed. “Okay, I’m tracing something.” She waved a hand towards the device.

“An energy burst, consistent with...” she hesitated. “What do you know about leaping? You must know something if you knew about swiss-cheesing.”

John crossed his arms, smug. “I know as much as anyone about my own work, thank you very much. Just, in *my* reality I wasn’t the one who did the field work. I ran everything else.”

“Okay, we’ll have to circle back to what you mean by ‘your reality,’” she said, her brow furrowed. “Anyway, this device detects the leap energy from Lothos, which is an advanced computer that used to control my leaps.”

*She’s a leaper?*

John took a troubled look down at the dusty ground. This had been a frustrating day to say the least. And now there was yet

*another leaper program?*

“You’re on the trail of someone?”

Her face had grown pale, and her eyes had a far off look. “I guess you could say that,” she murmured. “The surge could have been a leap in, or a leap out. I can’t tell. When we reach the epicentre of the surge, we could find either an active leaper, or just someone whose life was already ruined.”

“Ruined?” John tilted his head.

“Not all leapers have good intentions.” Alia’s mouth straightened, her eyes rimmed with red.

Then, she shook away the grave look, and met his eye.

“You... uh, I mean the Sam I know, helped me escape from them. I don’t know how, but I woke up in 1999. Since then, I’ve been waiting for my chance to get a hit on the tracker.”

John stroked his chin, pacing.

*If there’s a Q, maybe there’s a Q with a goatee with his own agenda? Oh great. Which all-powerful being doomed Sherri, anyway?*

“I wish I knew what world this was,” he lamented aloud. He hoped if he vocalised his thoughts, he could make better sense of what was happening. “It’s definitely not mine, if there wasn’t an invasion and it’s 2002. But that bartender in there, he just kept saying something about friends showing up, and...”

He looked at Alia. “Two thousand two was the other me’s contemporary year. Maybe...”

He squinted. “The Sam you know, he’s obviously a leaper. Can you describe more about him?”

She had just been watching him pace and gesticulate with a curious look. But now her expression grew warm.

“Okay... well, he was always on a mission to help people. Even me. He had a hologram who was named Al – maybe the same as your friend? And his computer, I think it was called Ziggy.”

*That certainly lines up. Maybe Q’s in my corner after all?*

“I once met an older version of myself,” he said. “It may be the one you know; and if it is, then I think I owe that bartender my gratitude.”

He stopped, and made a beeline for the motorcycle.

“Okay, let’s do this.”

\* \* \*

*Four Months Earlier*  
*(Relative to John)*

The day’s slaving had come to a close, and Sherri’s ‘unit’ was sent back to their sardine can quarters. Sherri hadn’t seen John for a while, and was getting nervous.

As silence descended on the cell, and most of its occupants had either gone to sleep, or were doing whatever escapism they engaged in, Sherri sat with the sinking feeling in her stomach that had been with her all day.

“Psst,” a voice whispered, and Tim crept to her bunk. “D’you wanna talk?”

Sherri nodded, patting the space beside her. Tim sat down, smiling.

“How come you ain’t been talking ’til now, anyway?” he asked quietly. She responded with a vague shrug.

“Guess I had to be shaken out of my... uh, status quo... a bit first,” she said cautiously, running fingers through her unruly hair.

Tim looked at her with a quizzical expression, before turning his gaze towards the door.

“Did the zap you got do all that?”

Sherri chuckled. “Sure, that must have been it.”

She reached out, touching his arm with her fingertips. In an effort to stay in character, she let her fingers trace a path to his shoulder, which they settled on.

“Listen, if I... if I told you I had a way for us to get out of here, would you believe me?” She held her breath as a look of sheer incredulity passed over his face.

“Well no, I wouldn’t,” he said plainly. “Since you have no eyes, maybe you can’t see just how impossible the situation really is, darlin’. We’re in it deep.”

He snorted. “And even if we did get out of this treehouse, where’d we go from there? Ain’t nowhere to hide.”

*As predicted.*

She leaned in, speaking in the lowest whisper she could, in case of surveillance. “I happen to know there’s a man a block or two from here who has a device that can get us away from the ’maggs for good. We just have to get to him.”

“And how would you know that?”

Sherri took a breath.

*Time for the gambit.*

“The ’maggs aren’t the only ones with... abilities.”

The *'Psychic Gambit'* was the protocol reserved for times when Sherri would need to provide knowledge her host would never know, without giving away too much. She would claim to have powers such as premonition, remote viewing, mind-reading, or the ability to see and speak to John-shaped ghosts.

It only worked on those occasions where those she told believed in the existence of psychic powers. But in this case, the Kromaggs really did have certain mental powers, so it was hardly a stretch.

“I may not have eyes, but I have... other ways to see.”

Tim looked troubled. “I’d like to believe you, darlin’, but I’ve had my hopes up before, and it never did work out for anybody. Seen good friends die that way.”

Sherri closed her eyes and nodded. “I get it. If you change your mind, give me a shoulder tap, okay?”

He stood off the bed, and she looked up at him. “You look cute with stubble.”

He furrowed his brow as she gave him a knowing smirk.

As he climbed back to his bunk, a new sound came from the hall.

“My god, this place is a maze,” came John’s voice as he wandered, looking into each of the slave quarters. “Sherri, where are you?”

Sherri peered out of her bunk quietly, waving towards the door as he passed. He spotted her, and stopped at the electric field that separated the room from the corridor. He put a finger out to it, and both he and Sherri were startled to see the field respond to his touch. It didn’t shock him, but the diffuse pattern Sherri’s touch had caused in the field earlier was echoed in John’s touch.

He looked at her with concern, before skirting around the field, and passing instead through the walls.

“Well, this is... all pretty damn terrible, huh?” he said, glancing around at all the despondent people in the bunks. Sherri nodded.

“Just checking in. You doin’ okay?”

She nodded again.

*Given the circumstances...*

“Okay. Good.” He looked at her with deep concern, and she realised it might not be for her.

‘*What?*’ she mouthed.

He rubbed his chin. “I don’t want to concern you with what just happened back home. You need to concentrate on the mission, right?”

Sherri glared. The look had its intended effect, as John flinched.

“Okay, if you *must* know... remember how I told you about that anomaly Higgins picked up before?”

Sherri raised her eyebrows, nodding once.

*What about it?*

John bit his lip. “Well it happened again earlier, and I had Will send Al to check it out, since he was free. But the thing is, he never came back, and his cell phone’s out of range, and Higgins can’t even find him.”

Sherri’s mouth dropped open.

*He was right, he shouldn’t have told me.*

She stared down at the floor, heart racing.

“Our best guess is that whatever that anomaly is, it somehow took him to wherever it went next. Or *whenever.*”

She brushed a tear from her eye, and bitterly wondered what she looked like to those around her, to be crying with sewn-up eyes.

“I’m sorry,” John said, crouching to meet her eye level. “I didn’t want to upset you.”

Sherri stood, and crossed to the back of the room, where toileting facilities – a grate in the floor and a faucet – were available behind a frosted partition. Once out of the eyeline of the others, she leaned against the wall and tried to bring herself out of her emotional state with breathing exercises.

“If it helps at all,” said John, following, “Higgins has got three escape scenarios lined up that have over fifty per cent odds.”

As Sherri breathed, she made a rotating motion with her hand, prompting further information.

“The first one is 76.1 per cent,” said John. “It involves your friend feigning a medical emergency, and you slip away after they deactivate the field.”

She pursed her lips.

*Not only would that put Tim in danger once they see I’m gone, he wouldn’t even be able to escape.*

“What else?” she whispered.

“Well, this one’s chances drop to 64.3 per cent. It involves beating up your guards during escort. You gotta liberate their particle weapons and make sure they don’t call for backup.”

“Third option?”

“Well, it’s only 52.8 per cent,” he said with a frown. “You can take your friend with you, but he’ll need to stick close and do everything you tell him.”

Sherri didn’t like any of these choices one bit.



“Thanks. I’ll sleep on it,” she murmured.

Her heart was heavy, as John flicked away to continue his vigil over Nexus Quinn, and she returned to her bunk. She knew she had to put thoughts of Al aside; he wasn’t any use thinking about while she was in this predicament. It was a distraction she just didn’t need.

And as for her choices: well, none of them were ideal. But, at least if she escaped on her own, she wouldn’t put anyone else in further danger. As much as she wished she could help all of these people, there was a lot more at stake.

As she drifted off to sleep, she realised that her decision was made.

## 4.12 • STUFF

*San Antonio, NM*

*December 31, 2002*

Quinn finished his second beer of the evening, and placed his feet on the opposite seat of the booth.

There was a light crowd at the tavern to ring in the new year. Quinn, Colin, Maggie, and Rembrandt sat in the corner, a spread of food and drink on the table. On the jukebox, a song by Eminem was playing.

Maggie frowned at the shoes now right beside her on the seat, and gave Quinn a bothered look. He pretended not to notice, as he popped a Dorito in his mouth.

This was the fourth New Year's Eve they'd spent here in this tavern, which was one of the few places they could go according to the rules of the government. For any larger a place, such as Albuquerque, they were forced to apply for special permission, unless it was a medical emergency.

Colin was speaking, animatedly, to Remy about something, but Quinn hadn't been tuned in to the conversation for a few minutes. Instead, he had been fingering the quartz crystal sewn into his jeans pocket, thinking about Sherri and John, and the mission that had brought him to this point.

Everything had been looking up, right until the whole thing with the Senator. Now Ziggy was shut down and Higgins was scattered.

Time had been on their side, but with their most vocal advocate in the Senate turning out to be some kind of spy, who knew what would happen to the Project's funding now?

"Quinn, you have that look again."

Quinn blinked, his gaze falling on Maggie. She had a tilted head and raised eyebrows.

"What look?"

"That deep, brooding look. You've been getting it all week whenever you go quiet." She took a sip of her mulled wine.

"I'm just thinking."

"Come on, loosen up for tonight," she said, poking at his ankles beside her on the seat. "How many more of those beers do I need to supply you with before you *relax*?"

Quinn looked down at his empty glass. "Four, maybe five."

He shrugged, figuring maybe it was for the best if he *did* 'relax' a little. He'd been wound up a great deal over all this. He'd spent Christmas writing security algorithms that he thought could be integrated into Ziggy.

"Well, I'm gonna go get you another," she said, jumping to her feet and heading to the bar. At the jukebox, AC/DC started blasting one of their familiar riffs.

Quinn shook his head, and turned his attention to the conversation happening beside him.

"Wait, so Timmy is a doll?" Colin looked perplexed.

"Yeah," explained Rembrandt, "but he's brought to life with Tabitha's witchcraft. Or, *was*. Kid's dead now."

"Wait, the character or the actor?"

"Both."

“Really? The little guy? That’s so sad...” Colin frowned.

“Yeah, but he only *looked* like a little kid. Think he was 20 when he died.”

“That’s still really young to die, so I stand by my previous assessment,” Colin replied, before taking a swig of his own beer.

“You guys talking about *Passions* again?” Quinn asked, amused.

Rembrandt placed an embarrassed hand on his cheek. “Yeah. Stupid damn show, but I can’t stop watchin’, man. I need a new hobby.”

Quinn felt for Rembrandt, and similarly Maggie, who didn’t have a great deal to do with their lives in recent years, not with the government leash.

While Rembrandt lived and breathed soap operas and daytime television, Maggie spent her days working out and reading romance novels. It was safe to say that neither was fulfilled.

Remy’s only outlet was music, but the lack of a piano at their facility meant he could only really play when they were here at the tavern. The government had denied their requests for such ‘frivolities.’ And there was certainly no reviving his (or his double’s, as the case may be) career; not while the government had any say in the matter.

“Hopefully we won’t be stuck here much longer,” Quinn said, with an optimistic smile.

Rembrandt bit into a cracker, and chewed thoughtfully.

A jug of beer with a glass appeared in front of Quinn as Maggie returned to her seat, pushing his feet down in the process.

“Bottoms up,” she said, with a teasing grin. “I wanna see a big ol’ hangover tomorrow, got it?”

Quinn chuckled. “Only if you promise to keep up. I’m not suffering alone.”

“Deal,” said Maggie, and extended her hand. They shook, exchanging an amused look.

\* \* \*

It was 11pm, and Colin cast an amused eye at Quinn and Maggie, drunkenly dancing near the jukebox, among a handful of other local revellers.

“Those two really let loose, huh?” Rembrandt said, following his gaze. It wasn’t that the two of them were stone cold sober; on the contrary. They had merely paced themselves, and were chilling instead of partying.

“They might be regretting this tomorrow,” Colin mused. “Still, it’s good to see Quinn having a bit of fun. He’s been... distracted lately.”

“Lot going on. It’s to be expected,” Rembrandt said, thoughtful. “He’s been carrying those burdens all this time. Now that it’s nearly crunch time, maybe it’s finally sinkin’ in just how heavy they are.”

Colin’s eyes moved down to the dissipating foam of his half-drunk beer. “Yeah, guess he’s not the only one feeling that.”

“What is this song?” Rembrandt said, suddenly distracted by the loud pop-punk coming out of the jukebox. Colin slumped against the table with a chuckle.

“I don’t think *speaking* the name will do it justice,” he said, producing a pen from his pocket, and scribbling the title ‘*Sk8er*

*Boi'* on a napkin. He handed it to Rembrandt, who cringed.

“Who’s picking the tracks ’round here, anyway?” he stood and looked over at the machine. Colin glanced in the same direction, to see a couple of women who were questionably of drinking age, hunched over the large CD-based jukebox, scrolling through songs.

“I’m gonna go salvage our night from bad taste,” Remy proclaimed, and headed over there, leaving Colin alone with his beverage.

As he turned his attention away from the dancing crowd, he noticed a woman coming into the tavern, a motorcycle helmet under her arm. She slowly scanned around the room, until her eyes made contact with his. Instinctively, he flicked his eyes away from her, and down at his drink.

Nonetheless, his peripheral vision told him she was coming toward him.

“Excuse me,” she said as she reached the booth, “This is going to sound weird, but have you noticed anybody around here acting... *strangely* recently? Out of character?”

Colin furrowed his brow. “I... no, I don’t think so. W-why?”

The woman shook her head silently, and moved on to another table.

*Who is that?*

He stood, and was about to pursue her, but something else caught his eye first: a man entering the tavern who Colin was pretty sure was supposed to be in Hawaii.

“Hey...?” he called across the room, catching the attention of Sam, whose eyes, upon spotting Colin, shot wider than he’d ever seen them.

Sam picked up his pace and closed the distance between them.

“Oh my god, Colin? I can’t believe it...”

Colin bit his lip. “I thought you were visiting your family? Is something wrong?”

A look of cautious confusion passed over Sam’s face. “My family?” Then something seemed to dawn on him. “Wait, did the other me find his way back?! That’s great!”

It seemed to Colin like this conversation wasn’t quite progressing in a normal fashion. “Okay, wait, let’s rewind,” he said. “Are you telling me you’re a different Doc Beckett?”

The Sam in front of him nodded. “Yeah... are you the Colin that grew up on Earth Prime?”

*No way...*

“I... I am. So does that mean you’re...”

Doc Beckett... or ‘John,’ as they’d dubbed him more recently, nodded, before drawing Colin into a hug.

“Wait, you *know* this guy?”

Colin broke away from the embrace to see the woman from before staring at the two of them. John was nodding to her.

“I thought you said this wasn’t your Earth?” she asked him.

“It’s not, but this is my former student, Colin. He’s one of the sliders I told you about.” He turned to Colin. “But I don’t know how you managed to join your brother in the end; I didn’t finish rebuilding Quinn’s machine for you before I got caught up in... long story.”

“Yeah, I know,” Colin lamented. “You gave me quite the basis, though. I managed to finish it myself. *Eventually.*”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said, and spotted Maggie and Quinn, absorbed in their dancing, with Rembrandt looking down at the jukebox behind them, tapping buttons. His mouth drifted open, and rose into a smile after a moment.

“She looks so young,” he murmured, and an old memory triggered in Colin, of Doc Beckett’s ‘cousin’ at the diner.

*Sherri... she was Sheriff Maggie in her forties.*

He thought about the convoluted, twisted timelines of their lives, and had to cringe. What a mess.

“How did you end up here?” he asked.

“I could ask the same of you, but somehow I think maybe it’s for the same reason,” John said, smiling enigmatically.

He gestured to the woman.

“This is Alia. I think she... knows the other me. You said he’s visiting family?”

“Hawaii,” Colin confirmed. John pursed his lips.

“Don’t suppose you have a number for him?”

Colin bobbed his head towards Quinn. “He’ll have it.”

Even after all this, Quinn hadn’t noticed John’s presence. He and Maggie were off in their own little world.

*Wouldn’t be the first time.*

Colin watched John tap Quinn on the shoulder, and the look of dazed confusion pass over both his and Maggie’s faces, until John explained, at which point Quinn let out an excited cry. He and Maggie both wrapped their arms around John with drunken abandon, faces beaming.

Colin turned to the woman, ‘Alia,’ and extended a hand.



“So you’re from *his* Earth, huh?” she asked, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake.

“I am,” Colin said, studying her face. “And you say you know Sam?”

“I do,” she replied, uneasy. “I also don’t know who to trust around here, so you’ll have to bear with me.”

“There’s a bit of that going around,” Colin muttered.

“Oh?”

Colin gave her a tight-lipped smirk. “Classified. Sorry.”

Alia snorted. “Of course. I’m sure Sam will fill me in if he thinks it’s safe to.”

“Want a drink?” Colin suggested. She shook her head.

“I like to keep a clear head,” she said simply.

\* \* \*

The warm orange glow of the bonfire reflected off the surface of Sam’s Piña Colada as he reclined on the beach blanket, looking up at the clear night sky.

He pointed up at one of the larger points of light in the sky.

“That’ll be Saturn, right there,” he said to Donna, whose head was nestled under his arm. “If you look *real* close you can make out the shape of the rings.”

“I don’t have good enough eyes for that,” she replied, with a laugh. “And you probably don’t either.”

Sam grinned. “Yeah, okay. You’re right. I just see a dot. But our imagination can fill in the rest.”

He looked up at it, wistful. “A mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.”

“That’s beautiful,” came the voice of Katie, who had wandered up behind him, aiming a camera at him and Donna. Sam squinted as it flashed.

“It’s a quote from Carl Sagan,” said Donna, breaking the poetic illusion.

“Of course it is,” Katie said, grinning, as she sat beside them. She held up her watch. “Midnight’s in just a minute.”

Sam nodded, sitting up. He looked through the flames of the fire to Al and Beth, who were whispering to each other, with broad smiles on their faces.

Beth noticed him looking, and pointed, saying something to her husband. He turned his head, and gave a quick wave back at Sam, before the two of them stood, and joined them on the blanket.

Sam’s mother, and Katie’s husband joined them from behind. As the midnight fireworks began, accompanied by the crashing waves of the Pacific, they all watched together on one large beach blanket.

*I could get used to this,* he thought, before catching himself.

*I can’t get used to this. There’s still work to be done.*

No sooner did those thoughts pass through his head, than the cell phone in his pocket began to vibrate.

And when he scrambled away from his loving family to answer, he became weak at the knees when he heard his own voice on the other end.

## 4.13 · MISTAKES WERE MADE

Quinn's head was swimming, but John's arrival had given him a jolt of adrenalin that provided a counterbalance to the alcohol's sleep-inducing effects.

He had been sitting here, catching up with John, for a decent while – he didn't know for sure, as he had lost track of the time somewhere around his fifth beer. He didn't quite recall midnight striking, but he figured it must have happened at some point, since the tavern's patronage had thinned to only a few people.

“So you're tellin' us you got here by riding some kind of cosmic pinball?” Rembrandt was looking at John with wide, bewildered eyes. Next to him, Maggie had the opposite look, leaning back into the corner of the booth, head lolling. Her eyes were almost shut, and expression vacant. She was checked out for the night.

“Uh, if you want to picture it like that, then sure,” John replied, a curious finger on his lower lip. “But it was less of a pinball and more of a... bar? Kinda like this one, I guess.”

“A bar that can travel back an' forth in time and, and to other Earths?” Quinn squinted at John, his eyes struggling to focus. “Wait, Colin... didn't...”

Colin leaned in, and Quinn gestured towards him, ceding the conversation to the more articulate brother.

“Um, was there a bartender there, who talked all cryptic like?” A smile tickled at Colin's lips, and his eyes shone.

John and Alia exchanged a surprised look. “You’ve been there?!”

“Yeah, back in ’78 I stumbled on the bar,” Colin explained to a speechless John. “The guy didn’t take me anywhere, but it was like he expected me to swing by. And then he told me to say ‘hi’ to Sam as I left. So I asked Sam about it and found out *he* has a history with the guy, too.”

John looked like he had the wind knocked out of him. “He’s gotta be Q...”

“Q?” Colin and Quinn asked in unison.

John chuckled, his cheeks flushing. “Oh, it’s just what I’ve been calling the higher power the other me was always talking about.”

“Oh, like from TNG,” Quinn said, with understanding.

He yawned, and took a sip of the beer in front of him. He didn’t remember having got it, nor did he know how many that had been. But, it was in front of him, so he drank.

The jukebox was playing some slow song, and it was making him tired. He wondered for a moment who would put such music on in the small hours when it would send people to sleep, and it occurred to him that they might be hinting for everyone to clear out.

Rubbing his eyes, Quinn turned his head towards his brother’s seat, and noticed that he wasn’t there. And, across the booth, neither was Maggie.

He glanced around the tavern. The lights had dimmed, and they were the only people left.

“Hey, where’d Colin and Maggie go?” he wondered aloud, prompting a laugh from Rembrandt.

“Man, they left twenty minutes ago,” he explained. “Maggie got too sleepy, so he escorted her back. You *said* goodbye to ‘em.”

“I did?” he mumbled. “Wow, I musta blacked out.”

He sunk his head into his hands, giving an embarrassed grin. “Of all times to see my old professor, huh...”

John regarded him with a warm smile. “You think I’ve never seen one of my *college students* like this? Don’t sweat it.”

Quinn watched Alia lean over to John’s ear and whisper something, before standing.

“I’m heading out,” she announced, picking up her helmet. “Lovely to meet you all.”

John nodded. “I’ll make sure these two get home okay, and I’ll meet you back at the motel.”

“Ah, you don’t have to do that,” Quinn said, waving a hand at him. “We’ll be fine. This is our turf, we’ll be fine.”

Rembrandt folded his arms. “We *will* be fine, but not ‘cause of him.” He gave an appraising look over Quinn. “Reckon if *you* tried to walk it on your own, you might wake up in a ditch with a scorpion on your face.”

Quinn stuck his tongue out at Remy, though he didn’t argue the point.

*He may be right.* The thought made him laugh.

John smiled again, but it was more of a paternal look this time. “Quinn... just let me help you, okay?”

Quinn sighed, and his heavy head rolled back to the padded seat. “Man, all you Sams are the same...” he moaned, closing his eyes. “Such a goody two-shoes...”

And that was the last thing he remembered about that night.

The last time Quinn had been wasted like that, it was on the gunslinger world. But he was about eight years younger then, and his hangover had been manageable. Today, not so much.

*Ugh. Being nearly 30 sucks.*

He rolled over, blearily checking the time on the clock by his bed. Apparently, it was after midday. He noted that he was still in his jeans and t-shirt, and hadn't removed his shoes. His jacket was in a pile on the floor.

He groaned as he climbed to his feet, and a dizzy feeling overtook his head. He stumbled into his ensuite, and ran the tap, taking handfuls of water to guzzle.

As he quenched his thirst, he ran through what he recalled about the previous night.

*I didn't just dream that John showed up, did I?*

No, he remembered too much for it to have been his imagination. Excitement rose in his stomach once more as he thought about the unexpected encounter. They hadn't known what happened to John and Sherri, but now they had a chance to fill in the missing pieces. They could have a full original history to work off now.

After swallowing some aspirin, Quinn headed out of his quarters, eyes squinting in pain at the harsh fluorescent lighting of the corridor.

He entered the common room, and was surprised to see it full. Rembrandt, Colin and Maggie sat on one couch, and John and Alia sat on the other. Maggie was wearing a pair of sunglasses.

*Not a bad idea.*

“Morning, sunshine,” Colin said with a grin. “How you feeling? Bad?”

Quinn glared at him a moment, before heading to the kitchen to get some coffee.

“What brings you guys here?” he asked John.

John looked at him with a serious expression. “Well, I had a long talk with Sam, and we agreed you needed to know what’s going on.”

“Oh great, you sound serious,” Quinn lamented, switching on the coffee machine, and returning to the group. He flopped down onto an armchair, and cradled his head. “What misfortune have we been gifted this time?”

Alia leaned forward. “This area may have been visited by a leaper without the... purest of intentions. Either *recently*, or *currently*.”

Colin looked at Quinn, awaiting a reaction. It was clear that the others had already had this told to them.

“Without the... what?” he closed his eyes, attempting to make sense of her words.

“Yeah, seems like someone’s been an impostor,” Rembrandt attempted to explain. “Someone trying to get a hold of some hush-hush information, maybe?”

“You don’t think it’s Grady?” Quinn asked nobody in particular.

“I narrowed the radius of the energy trace to San Antonio,” Alia said, “That means whoever was the... victim of the leap was in town when they either leaped out or in, early on the 23rd.”

“I don’t know where Grady was then,” Quinn muttered. “He was last seen snooping around on the 21st.”

“And the unknowns are the major issue, here,” explained John. “There’s always the possibility it *wasn’t* him, and there’s a traitor in our midst as we speak.”

“Like, *midst* midst?” Colin asked, suddenly on edge.

“Anybody,” Alia said. “That’s why I was asking around about people acting out of character.”

Quinn looked, wide-eyed, at his friends. *Had* any of them been acting odd? Not that he could think of. But the thought chilled him.

“Well, that’s not a problem,” Colin said, a large grin on his face. “I have just the thing!”

John cocked his head. “You do?”

“The Reality Lens,” Quinn said, exchanging a proud look with his brother. “It’ll reveal any leaper, easy!”

Alia’s anxious expression softened with hope. “You really have something that can do that?”

Colin sprang to his feet. “I’ll go get it.”

Quinn returned to the coffee pot, which was nearing its filling.

As he waited the last moments, he found his hand instinctively moving to his pocket, to make contact with the crystal.

But it wasn’t there.

*Oh, shit.*

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## END OF PART 4



# **PART FIVE: SUSPICIONS**

## **SUMMARY**

Sherrí begins a daring escape from the Kromaggs, but, as John explains, it's never quite that easy.

There's a traitor among the New Mexico crew, but nobody knows who.

Meanwhile, a team of road-trippers seek answers from a rogue Senator, but on the way are blindsided by someone unexpected.

## 5.1 • JAILBREAK

“Hey, wake up...”

An entirely-awake Sherri turned over on the bed, towards John’s voice, and glared at him.

*Do I look like I could sleep at all on this thing?*

“Oh, you look terrible,” John said, grimacing. Sherri simply huffed, and headed for the faucet, where she splashed her face with the questionable water.

She looked John up and down. He was still wearing the outfit Al had put together for him. Her questioning face was enough for him to reply: “Yeah, I know. It felt wrong to choose anything else. So, you’re stuck with Gay Willy Wonka, I guess.”

He chuckled. “And you had a point, before. Bright colours can only help you when you’re following me to get out of here, right?”

Sherri smiled, giving an affirmative thumbs up.

“You made your choice?”

Sherri nodded, adjusting the hand gesture to show two fingers.

“Alone?” John looked disappointed, and Sherri understood. She responded with a sad shrug and another nod.

“Alright. Lemme just give Higgins the heads up...” he tapped away on the handlink for a moment, as Sherri returned to her bunk, and sat down. “Okay... I’ll head out to the corridors and scan for Kromagg brainwaves.”

He phased through the wall beside the electric field, and moved his handlink around like he was trying to get a phone signal.

“Looks like there’s a couple headed this way,” he called out.

Sure enough, what Sherri guessed to be the guards from the previous day appeared at the doorway.

“Attention. Slave Unit 47-G is instructed to report to the showers for personal hygiene.”

As before, the room sprang to life, as the compliant people around her climbed to the floor and stood at attention. Sherri silently followed suit, as she made eye contact with John, who was hovering behind the soldiers.

The field was deactivated, and Sherri felt a hand grasp hers, once again, as the prisoners filed out two-by-two. Sherri hung back to the end of the pack, leaving her immediately in front of the soldier that watched the rear of the group. As she reached John, he began to walk beside her.

“Alright, you want to time it so that you’re between the elevator and the staircase,” he said, looking closely at the blueprints on his screen. “We’re two levels below ground here, so you just have to climb a couple staircases and um... hurt some guys.”

He grimaced. “You need to take their weapons, and if any of ’em sound the alarm before you get out, you’re toast. Higgins thinks it might be necessary to... well, you know.” He ran a finger across his throat.

“I’m just glad it’s you, and not me.”

Sherri shot him a look.

“Alright, I’ll leave this part to you,” he said, as the group turned the corner into a corridor that ended in the elevator doors, with the stairwell entrance towards the other end.

Sherri swallowed her fear.

*Okay, it's now or never.*

In one quick, smooth motion, she snatched the particle weapon from the rear Kromagg's unsuspecting grasp, and shot the front guard in the head. It was a risky shot, given the number of people between her and him, but the perfectly symmetrical nature of the formation allowed her a straight shot past the human heads and into the Kromagg head that was squarely in the centre.

Before the soldier behind her had a chance to react, she elbowed him in the jaw, stunning him long enough to shoot him as well.

"That was great, Sherri," John said. "Now, get the bodies in the stairwell to buy some time. You'll need their keycards, too."

Sherri nodded, and looted the keycard from the Kromagg beside her, along with a large knife, before dragging him by the arms towards the stairwell door.

The other prisoners were standing silently, not knowing what to do; all except for Tim, whose mouth was gaping as he stared at her.

"How did you..."

Sherri gave him a distracted smile. "Get the others back into their cell," she instructed. "Make sure the 'maggs know none of them had anything to do with this, okay?"

Tim nodded, looking at her with a speechless awe.

She opened the door, and dragged the first guard in, before returning to the other one, and taking his weapon and keycard, and repeating the process. Meanwhile, Tim had begun shepherding the others back toward their quarters.

As she piled the second body atop the first, she closed the stairwell door, and began sprinting up the stairs. John was waiting at the exit to the ground level, holding up a hand. As she reached him, she stopped, and caught her breath.

“There are two more just on the other side of the door,” John said. “Higgins says you should lure them in.”

Sherri took a deep breath, calming her nerves.

*Steady heart, steady aim.*

She glanced around, trying to formulate a plan of attack.

*Two guards. Swinging door. Stairs up, stairs down. Two particle guns, one knife.*

Positioning herself on the hinge side of the door, she gave a light knock on the door. A moment later, it opened, and a Kromagg emerged, looking in the opposite direction from Sherri’s position. She took her opening, and held the knife to his throat, pulling him towards her. He cried out, and the alarmed second guard jumped in the door, looking around frantically. It was unfortunate for him that he had moved directly into Sherri’s line of fire. She pulled the trigger, and he collapsed, falling down the stairs.

“I don’t want to kill another one of you,” she whispered to her hostage, “so you can either help me get out of here and live, or end up like the other three I’ve already killed. What do you say?”

He raised his hands. “I... I’ll cooperate...”

“Risky move,” John commented. “Be careful.”

“Throw your weapons down the stairs, and walk me out of here.”

She released him from her grip, and he turned, seeing her face for the first time. His mouth dropped open.

“Yeah, you got hoodwinked by a blind lady, congratulations. Weapons down.”

He stepped back a few paces, and pulled out his particle gun. He squinted at Sherri’s eyes, before looking down at the gun. Slowly, he rose it towards her.

“Sherri, watch it!” John said, frantic. “He thinks you can’t see what he’s doing.”

To Sherri’s surprise, the Kromagg’s head turned towards John, giving Sherri an opening. She shot the soldier, and he fell to the ground in a heap.

“Did he just *look* at you?” she hissed at John.

John nodded. “I’ve been... getting that a bit,” he explained, biting his lip. “I don’t think they can see or hear me, not exactly. Just sort of sense something in my general vicinity.”

“Well that could come in handy,” she said, before creeping to the door. “How’s my path looking now?”

He poked a head through the door. “Coast is clear on the next leg.”

Sherri quietly opened the door, and looked to either side, before hurrying out. John followed, and took the lead as he guided her down a series of corridors, before giving a ‘stop’ gesture at a three-way intersection. She hugged the wall, awaiting his next instruction.

“Okay, Higgins has two options for getting out of this tree. One involves shimmying out a tight window. Higher odds of escape, as long as you can fit through. That’s where the aura distortion may be a problem.”

“What do you mean?” Sherri whispered.

“Well, if the window conforms to your aura’s size, you won’t fit. If it doesn’t, you’ll go through easily.”

Sherri cringed. “Do we know which one is more likely?”

John tapped a few times on the handlink. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Great,” she said, frowning. “So what’s the other option?”

“Sneaking through the main lobby,” John said, his brow furrowed. “It’s gonna be pretty tricky. I’ll have to spot you extremely carefully.”

*Crap.*

“If the window’s too tight, will I know *before* I get stuck?”

“Uh... probably?”

“Okay,” Sherri pinched the bridge of her nose. “Give me the odds of each option, taking all of that into account.”

John entered the data into his handlink, and gave a pensive look at the results. “Looks like the window is now 39 per cent, and the lobby is 46 per cent.”

“Yikes,” Sherri said, a sinking feeling in her chest. A sinking feeling that descended much further when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Spinning around, her heart skipped a beat as she came face-to-face with Tim.

“You told me to tap your shoulder if I changed my mind, right?”

## 5.2 • DEBRIEFING

*Holbrook Systems Warehouse*

*January 3, 2003*

No sooner did Al's sports car pull into the parking lot of the inconspicuous warehouse, than Colin burst through a door, his focus trained on the eyepiece of the Reality Lens.

Sam stepped out of the vehicle first, and received Colin's close scrutiny, followed by Al, Donna, and Gooshie.

"Okay, you're all clean," he announced, as he gave a thumbs up towards the door, where Quinn emerged, followed closely by John and Alia.

Al nodded to John, who grinned back. "Hey, it's my favourite hallucination! As garish as ever, I see."

Al merely raised an eyebrow at this, as Sam extended a hand to his Earth Prime double, who accepted the handshake.

"Been a long time, Sam," said John. "Well, not for you, I guess."

After a pause, he glanced down at Sam's arm and added: "Wow, strong handshake."

Sam gave a snort, noting how much his double had aged into a carbon copy of himself – except that he had notably lower muscle tone throughout his body.

"I guess I have a more... physical vocation," he said, feeling self-conscious.



As John poked a curious finger into Sam's firm bicep, Sam's gaze fell upon Alia's melancholy, glistening eyes, and he felt a wave of emotion come over him.

"It's really you..." he said, as she wrapped her arms around him. "I... never thought I'd see you again. I'm glad you're okay."

She gazed up at him. "Likewise."

He felt eyes on him from behind, and he turned his head to see Donna giving Alia a terse look. Sam pulled out of the embrace, sheepish.

"So, Alia, this is my *wife*, Donna." He gestured to her, then back to Alia. "Donna... this is Alia."

"I know who she is," Donna said, arms crossed. "How do we know we can trust *her*?"

"She's got a point, Sam," added Al. "She could still be working for... whoever the heck was leaping her before. Bizarro Ziggy and the bad guy crew."

"That would make a sweet band name," Colin said, elbowing Quinn.

Sam frowned at his friend. "We *freed* her, Al. Those days are behind her. She's one of us."

"Who's to say they didn't catch up with her?" Al said, lighting up a cigar, and waving it around, leaving trails of smoke in streaks around him. "They forced her to work for them once; they could do it again."

John furrowed his brow. "Hey, come on. The both of us are only here now by the, uh, grace of that bartender. So..."

Sam gestured to John, while meeting Al's eye. "Yes, exactly! She's clearly here for a reason."

Al took a long drag on the cigar, staring at Alia with his eyes narrowed. Alia withered under his gaze, but stepped towards him warily, pleading with her eyes.

“Look, I know you have no reason to trust me,” Alia said, voice wavering. “But I want to take down Lothos more than anyone, you know? I want nothing more than to burn that place to the ground.”

She shivered. “But it doesn’t exist yet. At least, I don’t think so. I’m actually from the year 2023.”

Silence followed, as everyone present took in this surprising information.

*That isn’t so much of a shock, thought Sam. I’ve spent my life thinking fourth dimensionally.*

He met the eye of John, and knew he was thinking the same thing.

*It does pose questions about how she leaped as far back as ’56. She only looks thirty-something.*

His mind raced at the notion that Lothos could potentially be leaping people well outside the bounds of their lifetime. Either that, or skin care technology took its own quantum leap in the ensuing twenty years.

Another car appeared on the horizon, heading their way.

“That’ll be the rest of the team,” Sam said, pointing towards it. “When they get here, we can start the debrief proper.”

He turned back to Alia. “Now, that detection device you were using to pick up on the Lothos leap signature... can I see it?”

Alia smiled, and pointed to the motorcycle parked by the door. She walked him over to it, and pried the small gadget from her handlebars.

As Sam looked down at it, he felt breath on his neck. He turned to see an excited John looking over his shoulder.

“Little close for comfort there, buddy,” he said with a nervous laugh. John took a step back, echoing his laugh.

“Sorry. Alia walked me through it a few days ago, and it’s just... really neat. I wanted to help explain it.” His face curled into a bashful grin, and his cheeks flushed. “Oh boy. Being next to you makes me feel like I’m twenty-five again.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up, and he let out a laugh.

“John, I saw what Higgins could do,” he said, with a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “You perfected retrieval. That alone is incredible, let alone having to calibrate on the fly for the parallel worlds. It’s obvious you spent every one of those twenty years well.”

John straightened his back. “Yeah, I guess I *am* pretty great,” he said, adjusting his shirt collar. “But you’re amazing too. Helping so many people like you do. I’ve seen what leaping is like, and frankly it was tough enough being an observer. I’m not sure I could deal with the kind of frenetic pressure you did.”

“Sure you could. You’re me, aren’t you?” Sam grinned. As the two Sams looked into one another’s eyes, Sam felt an immense kinship with his double.

“If you two are quite done inflating your collective ego,” Alia said, eyes twinkling, “maybe you can actually look at the thing you asked me to show you, huh?”

Sam and John’s gaze moved back to her, both smiling in what Sam assumed was an identical way, given her bemused expression, before they turned their attention back to her device.

“So,” said Sammy Jo, “the Reality Lens has picked up no distortion?”

The team was assembled in the front company warehouse, among the dummy crates. It was agreed upon as neutral ground that had a degree of separation away from the most sensitive areas, in case there really had been an impostor among them.

Quinn, Colin, Rembrandt, and Maggie stood on one side. On the other stood Sam, Al, Donna, Gooshie, Tina, and Verbena. Between them stood Sammy Jo, Alia, and John – who was eyeing Sam’s companions with curiosity.

Quinn gave an affirmative nod. “Everyone’s themselves.”

“At least everyone we’ve managed to get in front of us,” Colin added. “Senator Grady notwithstanding.”

Sam stroked his chin. “And you haven’t found your Higgins crystal, Quinn?”

Quinn let out a breath.

*I should have found a different place to stash the thing. Somewhere nobody could get to it.*

“There was a clean cut in my jeans exactly where the crystal was sewn into them. Someone took it deliberately on New Year’s.”

“And who was with you on New Year’s?” Donna asked, glaring at Alia.

“Lots of people came and went to the tavern that night,” Maggie said, glumly cradling her chin, and meeting Quinn’s eye. “I’m sorry, Quinn, this is my fault. I shouldn’t have encouraged you to drink like that.”

Quinn shook his head. “It was my choice. You’re not to blame.”

“Look, forget about playing the blame game,” John interjected. “This is our biggest red flag that there really is a traitor. Whoever took the crystal, that’s who we can blame. We just need to figure out who it could have been, right?”

“And how the heck do we do that?” asked Rembrandt.

“We keep checking people with the Reality Lens to start with,” said Colin. “Everyone in town.”

“And Grady,” added Al. “We gotta find that little weasel. I just know he’s got something to do with all this.”

“Word is that he’s home in Virginia for the holidays,” said Sammy Jo. “I did some digging and he *was*, in fact, staying in a motel in San Antonio at the time of the leap detection.”

“If it was him, would that mean someone leaped *out* of him then?” Quinn asked.

“Not necessarily,” said Alia. “But if he *was* snooping around, then it seems likely. However...”

“You should have detected a leap in some time before that, right?” Sam finished.

Alia nodded. “Yes, unless whoever leaped into the guy was in there for years, dating back to before I built the detector.”

“This is a head trip,” said Rembrandt. “So the Grady we all knew and trusted coulda been some leaper all the time we knew him?”

“That’s one possibility,” Alia confirmed. “Otherwise, it could have been someone else leaping in, maybe even to assist him.”

Quinn felt his mind racing as he tried to make sense of all these data points.

“If whoever stole my crystal was a leaper working with Grady, then they must have seen you at the tavern, right?” he asked Alia. “They know you’re here.”

Alia looked down at her hands, fidgeting nervously. “Yeah.”

“You could be in danger, then.”

“Yeah.”

“They probably want revenge on you, huh?”

Alia glared at him. “What are you getting at?”

Quinn ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think they’d be able to resist the chance to get their hands on you?”

“We’re *not* using Alia as bait, Quinn,” Sam chided.

Alia tapped a finger to her lip. “Well, he *may* be onto something.”

She made eye contact with Quinn. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Not yet,” Quinn admitted, “but let me think about it.”

After a moment of silent consideration, Colin piped up to change the subject.

“Listen, Doc,” he said to John, “Since we’re all here, maybe it’s time to explain what happened with Sherri. All we know is you tried to stop the Kromaggs from getting the sliding tech, but it didn’t work, and then the Professor got back to Earth Prime to find an empty facility.”

“The Professor’s alive?” John’s jaw dropped.

Quinn winced. “He... he *was*.”

John slowly closed his mouth again. “I see.”

“All the more reason to finish what Sherri started,” Maggie said, banging a fist on the crate against which she leaned.

“Okay,” John said. “Let me explain what happened.”

He took a few steps into the middle of the group, his gaze wandering from face to face around him.

“Sherri leaped into the wife of Quinn’s double. The year was 1996, and at first it all seemed like things were going to plan. Quinn – who we were calling ‘Nexus Quinn’ due to his pivotal role on countless Earths – had just returned from his first encounter with the Kromaggs.

“He seemed really excited about their technology, and it seemed that they hid their intentions from him incredibly well. I think they had offered him an exchange of technology. He wanted his hands on their biotech ships and anti-gravity engines, and they wanted his sliding tech.”

Quinn huffed. “Yeah, so he gave it up and the minute they got it, they turned on him and invaded his Earth, right?”

“Well, yes, but...” John hesitated, shaking his head. “I’ll get to that.”

Animatedly, John continued to recount the tale of Sherri’s final two leaps.

“So, we had to make a decision: try to squeeze out a window that may have been distorted too small due to the leap aura, or sneak through a public lobby. But then, Sherri’s buddy Tim shows up out of nowhere, wanting to come too. That dropped the odds of escape to the teens, but we pressed on.”

## 5.3 · I KNOW WHY THE GIFT HORSE SINGS

John watched Sherri take in the unexpected presence of Tim. She bit her lip as he looked down each of the three corridors nervously, but maintaining a wide smile on his face.

John looked down at his handlink, expanding the list of projections he'd received from Higgins.

*He definitely didn't predict this...*

"I don't know how you did any of what you've done, but it's amazing," Tim gushed, taking a hold of Sherri's hand. "You've gone and given me hope, Janet."

Sherri's apprehensive expression melted as the two looked at one another.

"I'm glad," she said, and stole a glance at John, who grimaced at her, before frantically entering the new data points into the handlink. "Listen, you're gonna have to do exactly what I tell you if we're gonna get out of here alive, okay?"

John drew a sharp breath as he studied the results Higgins was giving him. "Sherri, he's brought our odds down to sixteen percent. And the window's out of the question now; he won't fit."

Sherri took a deep breath as she met his eye, and nodded resolutely. John knew what her steely expression represented, and he gestured to the right-hand corridor, which led towards the lobby.

"Come on," she said to Tim, as she strode ahead.



John re-centred himself at the end of the corridor, by a door that led through a security office. He checked inside, spotting a Kromagg watching a series of CCTV displays.

He re-emerged to meet Sherri as she reached him.

“There’s one guy in there,” he explained. “He’s watching security footage. So taking him out will let you slip through without being watched on camera.”

Sherri nodded, thinking a moment, and turned to Tim.

“I need you to stand on this side of the door,” she said in a low voice, pointing to the hinged side of the door, “and await my signal. Got it?”

He nodded, his smile turning to a serious look. “If we get out of this, you gotta tell me how you can see,” he whispered, before flattening himself against the wall beside the door.

“If we get out of this, I’ll explain everything,” she said with a wink.

John snorted. “He wouldn’t have seen that wink, you know.”

Sherri shot him a smirk, before swiping the keycard. John moved through the wall, to see the Kromagg turning at the sound of the door opening.

“Hey, over here!” John shouted, waving his arms. The security guard’s head snapped towards him, a split second before a nasty wound opened up in his temple; a result of Sherri’s trigger finger. He flopped off his chair onto the floor, as Sherri entered, beckoning Tim.

John wiped sweat off his forehead. “I hate this so much,” he said, heart pounding.

“Yeah, me too,” muttered Sherri as she studied the monitors in the room.

John pointed to the lower right hand area of the grid. “These are of the lobby,” he explained. He waved his finger at one of the monitors that showed a security gate. “This is our biggest concern, right here.”

“You really look like you’re lookin’ at these TVs,” Tim said, staring at Sherri with eyes like saucers.

“I am,” she replied simply, before looking up at John. “Do you think you could distract *all* these ‘maggs?”

John was about to answer, but was pre-empted by Tim.

“What?” he exclaimed. “That’d be suicide!”

Sherri glanced at him, mouth open. “Uh, I wasn’t talking to you.”

Tim’s head tilted in confusion, and she shrugged. “I have a friend on the, uh... astral plane. He’s helping me.”

Tim grappled with her words for a moment. “Like a ghost friend?”

“Sure, close enough,” Sherri said. “The Kromaggs can sense him when he makes a ruckus, and so he might be of use getting us past all these ones without a bloodbath.”

John nodded. “Right, that could work, but you’ll need to be extra vigilant without me to spot you.”

He gestured at the monitors. “But make sure you take in every place you can duck into to hide.” He brought up the Kromagg brainwave sensor map on his handlink. “Do it fast. I’ll watch for ‘maggs heading this way.”

As John kept his eyes on the handlink, his periphery told him that Sherri was leaning in to the monitors, and he knew she would be formulating the most efficient route to take.

“Tim,” she said, gesturing for him to join her. “You need to stick close behind me when we make our break for it. Here’s where we’ll be coming out. We need to duck straight behind this planter box here...”

As she explained, he poked a head out the door on the opposite side of the room where they’d entered, which opened directly into the lobby.

At his initial glimpse, he counted sixteen Kromaggs. Six were some form of security or military, while the others seemed to be civilians going about their day.

The tree they were currently in seemed multi-purpose, like a full town confined within the trunk of the massive tree. In fact, with the data he’d gathered since he’d been here, it seemed like most of the enormous trees served as their own communities, with little going on in the open air. There were paved roads and cars, but everything seemed much more vertical than sprawled across great distances – at least in this forest city.

He’d taken stock of the tree that Nexus Quinn was inside of, and it seemed like the exception to the rule; it was a dedicated military facility. It was no doubt the Kromagg culture was militaristic; their soldiers were everywhere, doing all manner of duties. Primarily, John assumed, to keep the dwindling human population under strict control.

He pulled back into the security room, and Sherri looked up at him.

“We’re ready. On your signal.”

“Aye-aye,” John said, feeling butterflies swarm in his stomach. He stepped out into the lobby, and made a beeline to the Kromaggs who stood in the immediate vicinity of the door: one in a security uniform just like the one who’d been watching the

CCTV monitors, and the other, what John surmised to be a female Kromagg – a rare sight, since a great deal of them had died off in the aftermath of the war, according to Quinn’s notes on the matter. She wore a smart suit and was conversing with the guard. John wondered if she was someone important.

Moving past them, in the direction of the middle of the lobby, he stomped, and waved his arms.

“Hey!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Look, everybody, it’s a distraction! Everyone look at the distraction!”

To his great relief, the eyes of all the Kromaggs he could see were diverted towards him.

*Please keep looking.*

He continued his barrage of noise, doing jumping jacks as he watched the security room door open, and the two fugitives creep behind the large planter box nearby.

*What else can I do to keep this up?*

Taking an idea from his outfit, he began to sing.

“*Who can take a sunrise...*” he crooned, “*Sprinkle it with dew...*”

“*Cover it in chocolate and a miracle or two...*” He dropped to one knee, spreading out his arms. “*The candyman! The candyman can...*”

\* \* \*

“You don’t have to *actually* perform this for us,” said Quinn, laughing, as John sang his heart out in the middle of the warehouse.

John went silent, scratching his head as he climbed to his feet. “Yeah, you’re right. I got a bit carried away there.”

“Huh, I don’t have a half bad singing voice, now that I’m hearing it from someone else,” Sam commented, with an approving nod.

“I think it adds flavour,” said Rembrandt. “I say let him finish.”

“As much as I love to hear those dulcet tones,” Donna said, “We don’t really have time. Please, John... continue your story.”

John’s cheeks burned as he complied with his double’s wife’s request. “Right, right. Where was I? So, my distraction did a surprisingly adequate job, and they were able to slip past the checkpoint. Thing is, it was almost *too* easy.

“We didn’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth, of course, but... you know... sometimes you’re the city of Troy and the gift horse in question contains the Greek army.”

## 5.4 · FRESH AIR AND SHADOW

Sherri closed the side entrance door before ducking into a bush beside Tim; one of many large shrubs, bushes and grasses that grew wild among the roots of the tree. On an elevated platform, about fifteen feet above her, ran a road sat on concrete and steel pillars. Underneath, Sherri surmised that the growth of roots made it an unsteady surface to pave, which explained the roads overhead. They looked as though they would provide a convenient cover for her movements as she made her way to Quinn’s location.

The vast canopy above set the whole city in an eerie liminal state between day and night, like a shadow-borne twilight. Beneath the roads, among the columns and scrub, it was pitch dark.

After the intense situation, all Sherri could think to do now was laugh – so she did. It was a deep, cathartic laugh.

“I can’t believe that worked,” said John, who was pacing and looking at his handlink with a nervous energy. “I mean... they just looked right past the both of you.”

“Wasn’t that the idea?” Sherri asked. “Your performance was riveting. But you should know that Willy Wonka didn’t sing that song.”

John glared at her. “I know who sang the damn song,” he snapped, before looking up the enormous tree trunk that rose into the clouds. “I just... have this knot in my stomach that won’t go away.”

Sherri took a deep breath of the remarkably clean air. “We’d better keep moving,” she said to both her companions, as she hurried towards the cover of darkness.

John followed, using his handlink to increase his perceived brightness. He stuck out like a beacon in the darkness. Even moreso as he tapped on the handlink a few more times, and a 3D mesh of the ground topography was projected in a radius around him of about six feet.

Sherri kept close behind him. She grabbed Tim’s hand as she walked.

“You can see in the *dark*, too?” he asked as she guided him over bulging roots and around imperceptible structures.

“Enough,” she replied, stepping over a shrub. “Watch your step there.”

Tim stumbled over the plant with a grunt. “So where’re we going next?”

Sherri paused. “My ghost friend is showing me the way to a man named Quinn,” she said, looking back into the blackness where she knew he was standing. He gave her hand a squeeze.

“Quinn? Who’s that?”

“You could say we were married once,” she joked, and knew that in at least one reality, that had been true – for a hot second, anyway. “But he’s here to make a really big mistake, and I need to get to him before he does. Then, the three of us can get out of here.”

She began walking again, tugging his hand.

“And go where?”

“Another world,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Like outer space or somethin’?” His uneven steps echoed against the concrete.

Sherri chuckled. “No, another Earth. Parallel to this one.”

He was silent for several more steps, before piping up again. “Is that where *they* came from? Another Earth?”

“Who, the Kromaggs?”

“Yeah.”

Sherri stopped again. “Yeah, they aren’t originally from here, are they? Would have all shown up in the mid-seventies, right?”

“You’re sayin’ that like you weren’t there...”

Sherri sighed. “Janet was. But I wasn’t.” She started edging forward again, but Tim pulled back against her tugs.

“What... what does that mean? You’re not Janet?”

“Look, we don’t have time to get into that. Come on.”

“Uh-uh,” he said, yanking his hand out of hers. “I ain’t going any further ’til you tell me who the heck you are.”

His voice was shaky, but resolute.

John moved between them, giving Sherri an apprehensive look. “I don’t know about this, Sherri.”

Sherri licked her lips.

“It’s pretty out there, Tim,” she said. “You might not believe me.”

“Yer talking to a ghost, seeing without eyes, and talkin’ about another Earth,” he spat. “Feel like anything could be true at this point.”

John’s face was crinkled with worry. “Try and avoid specifics, would you? If he ends up caught... think of what he could tell ’em. They can’t know about time travel.”



*Good point. Come up with something different.*

“Okay, fine,” she said, mind racing as she tried to think of a way to obfuscate the truth while still giving a satisfactory answer. “So, you know how the Kromaggs use their cloaking ability to look like someone else? You could say I have a version of that.”

In the darkness, she couldn’t make out Tim’s expression, and thus had to rely on audio clues as to his reactions. She heard him click his tongue.

“I’ve never heard of a human havin’ that,” he said, and drew a sharp breath. “You’re *not* human!”

His voice was accusing.

“I *am* human, Tim,” she said calmly. “I don’t have any innate powers; it’s all technology.”

He took a shaky breath. “Where is the real Janet? When did you take her place? And *why*?”

“I don’t choose whose place I take, it’s an automatic process,” she said, hoping this explanation would suffice.

She didn’t have to go into the theories John and the Professor had long been toying with – besides the ideas around divine intervention, they had theorised that the leaper may be drawn to someone deemed most ‘compatible’ – whether that be by brain waves, or even some kind subconscious willingness to accept help.

She recalled the Professor’s attempt at an explanation to her, long ago:

*“Imagine, if you will, being in mortal danger. You make a desperate, final plea to your deity of choice, but you know, deep in your proverbial bones, the point in time when things began to go pear-shaped.*

*“So this ‘prayer’ is more than merely a split-second result of facing one’s demise. Instead, the brain creates a temporal bridge with itself, back to that prior moment. The moment where decisions were made that could have prevented this outcome. And it is precisely that moment that may provide an opening for a leaper to slip in. In some strange way, it is a cry for help that we are able to answer.*

*“Additionally, such openings may also occur in those around the misadventurous soul, borne of profound regret. Perhaps multiple moments in each person’s lifetime, there may be these openings. The responsibility of the leaper, therefore, is burdensome. Such moments are highly exploitable by the wrong kinds of people.”*

“Janet is safe,” Sherri added. “Probably safer than she’s been in a long time.”

John affirmed this with a nod. “She’s not exactly chatty, but she seems pretty calm. She’s had a few nice meals, and a hot shower. More than I can say for you, huh?”

Sherri, who’d been doing her best to ignore her hunger pains, snorted.

She felt a hand touch her arm.

“Technology, huh?” he mused. “Even stuff the ‘maggs don’t got? You must be pretty smart.”

“Ah, all the brains are with my ghost friend,” she said. “I’m not gonna go into how he works, but suffice to say, he isn’t a ghost. He’s a real person helping me out remotely. Think of it like an advanced comms system.”

“Amazing,” Tim breathed. “Um... hello... um... what do I call him?”

“John,” she said. “And... my name’s Sherri.”

“Sherri,” he echoed. “You know, now we’re in the dark and I can’t see Janet’s face, it finally feels like I’ve met you for real.”

Sherri felt his hand move down her arm and grasp her hand.

“I used to have a girlfriend,” he confessed, his voice thick with emotion. “Name were Belinda. She got taken for the breedin’ camps nine years ago. Since then I ain’t made nice with another woman in case it happened again.”

Sherri placed her other hand on top of his. “I’m sorry,” she said, as Tim let out an uneven sigh.

“I miss her so much. An’ I wish I knew where to find her. I wish I could bust her out or somethin’. But I wouldn’t even know where to start.” He shuddered. “Can I just... leave her behind? Ain’t seem right.”

His voice began to break, and Sherri moved forward, bringing him into a hug as he sobbed into her shoulder.

*We have to pick our battles, but...*

“Maybe there could be a way to find her,” she murmured, causing him to stiffen in her arms.

“You serious?”

“I don’t know. Maybe John can find something. Maybe we can figure out some way to help her.”

John looked at her with wide eyes. “Sherri, don’t go writing checks you can’t cash. You know I’d love to help these people, but we have to be realistic.”

Sherri pulled out of the hug. “I can’t promise anything,” she said, “except that we’ll do what we can, *if* we can.”

John bit his lip. “*If* we can, yes. Good. Nice and noncommittal.”

Sherri pulled on Tim's arm. "We should get going."

## 5.5 • BEST LAID PLANS

“Well, here it is,” John said, gesturing as Sherri and Tim emerged from the darkness. “A heavily fortified Kromagg military base with about...”

He checked his handlink. “Six thousand soldiers inside, top to bottom.”

Before them rose another tree, like the rest; except that it was swarming with guards and sentries, dotted with security cameras, and fenced off with razor wire.

Sherri looked at it, feeling her heart sink. “Dear god, how are we getting in *there*?”

Tim sidled up to her. “I thought you had a plan.”

Sherri winced. “John has the plan; I do the improv.”

John was busily tapping away at his touchscreen as Sherri led Tim to the cover of a bush. Together, they studied what they could see of the facility.

“I’m sure he’s figured something out,” she said, glaring at John. “Right?”

John glanced up for a second, before returning to his concentration. “Yeah, just hang on a sec,” he mumbled.

Sherri watched as he tapped, then looked up at the tree, then back down, tapped some more, and scratched his head.

“John, this isn’t instilling much confidence,” she called out.

Finally, he looked to her. “Patience, jeez. Don’t worry, I have it all figured out based on scans I took yesterday. Just... wait here, let me check something.”

He blinked away, leaving Sherri to huff with frustration.

“What is it?” asked Tim.

“We have to wait here, hopefully not for long.” She took a seat on a tree root, crossing her arms. Tim sat beside her.

“This guy we’re after is in there, huh?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “They’re treating him like a guest ’til they get what they want out of him. Then they’ll turn on him like they do every other human.”

Tim swallowed hard. “What do they want from him?”

Sherri’s hands clasped tightly. “These Kromaggs were exiled to this Earth from their own after they waged a war. They were sent here through a technology called ‘sliding’ – passing between parallel worlds through a wormhole.

“Quinn just so happens to have invented that technology, at least on his Earth. There are lots of Quinns who each managed to invent it independently. But this one... he’s willing to trade for it.

“Kromaggs want to get back to their home world and exact revenge on humanity. But they won’t be able to get there thanks to their defenses. So, they’ll start invading other worlds, and doing the same thing to humans they’ve done here.

“We want to nip it in the bud by stopping Quinn from handing over the equations.”

Tim frowned. “So... some other world dumped their trash on us? *That’s* why everyone I love is either dead or a slave?”

Sherri looked at his misty eyes and gave him a regretful nod.

“If it’s any consolation, I had nothing to do with it.”

Tim’s shoulders sagged. “How do you know all this?”

“I appreciate you wanting to know, but I truly can’t tell you any more than I already have, Tim,” she said, looking into his eyes intensely. “I’m sorry.”

Tim dropped his gaze, nodding. “I get it. Y’all think I might get caught and spill the beans, right?”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t trust me, neither.”

Sherri grasped his hand. “You’re really brave for coming with me, you know.”

Tim scuffed the dirt below with his foot. “Nah, not brave. Ain’t never done a brave thing, just stupid things. And this is just another one of them.”

Sherri was about to answer, but John appeared in front of her before she could open her mouth.

“Quick, follow me,” he said, and raced off towards the razor wire fence. Sherri jumped up.

“We gotta go,” she said, pulling Tim’s arm, who ambled behind.

John led her to a small tree, with a concrete area a little beyond. In a small clearing just past the razor wire was some kind of octagonal platform, bordered with green lights.

“That’s an antigrav platform,” John said. “I’ve seen some of ’em using these things to get up the trees from the outside.”

“I assume it’s not as simple as just jumping on and pressing a button,” Sherri said, still wondering how they would get over the razor wire.

John nodded. “Fortunately, your recon man has worked hard on figuring out how to get it working. You just need to get to it, and I’ll walk you through a simple rewiring.”

“Sure. Get to it. Over... razor wire?”

John grinned. “Over? Who said anything about over?”

He pointed to a large root that jutted up through the fence.

“Under this root, Higgins has detected a cavity – an air pocket – in the soil, large enough for each of you to move through. You just need a little digging in, and a little digging out.”

“Oh great, I love channelling my inner badger,” Sherri deadpanned, folding her arms. “But what about *that*?”

She pointed up at a security camera that overlooked the platform.

“In exactly... six minutes, the sun is gonna peek through the leaves just there,” John pointed off into the distance, towards a lower part of the canopy. “Directly into the camera lens, leaving it overexposed for about ninety seconds. So we gotta hurry.”

Sherri grinned at him. “Wow, you really *do* have it all figured out. Nice job!”

John grinned back for a moment, before his expression turned serious, and he gestured to the root. “Go, quickly. No time to waste.”

Sherri glanced at Tim. “Help me dig this out.”

She hurried to where John was now standing, and began scooping the loose earth away. Tim approached, joining in. Sure enough, the pair began to uncover what was an intimate, but empty, hole beneath the root.

Tim looked around. “Thank you John,” he said to the air.



A flattered John smiled back at him. “Don’t sweat it.”

Once the hole was dug out enough, Sherri shimmied into it, trying to pretend she wasn’t in the direct vicinity of probably hundreds of bugs and spiders, and crawled to the end of the opening. John’s hand protruded through the dirt, fingers wiggling, and she began clawing at the soil there.

After another minute, she was able to pull herself up through the hole on the inside of the fence. Tim followed her through, and the two of them crouched against the root, awaiting the next signal.

“Sun incoming in five, four... go, go now!”

John ushered Sherri towards the platform, which became bathed in sunlight as she reached it. John blinked himself to a control panel on the far side, and she hurried to it.

“Push down on these two latches here...”

She did as he instructed, and the control panel popped open like a door. She swung it all the way.

“Yank out that yellow cable,” he continued. She pulled it hard, and it detached from the circuit board. “Now touch the wire end just against this copper contact right here. Just for a split second.”

Sherri did so, and a loud spark emitted from the wire, followed by a puff of smoke under the circuit board and the smell of burnt plastic.

“Okay, great. That should have shorted out the security verification. Pop down the panel and choose level fifty-three. Quickly. You have twenty seconds.”

Sherri swung the panel down with one hand, and beckoned Tim with the other. Frantically, she used the touch screen to select

what she hoped was the correct floor, before jumping on the platform with him.

The platform rose into the air, leaving John staring up at them, giving a thumbs up.

As the octagonal platform slowly rose into the air like some kind of video game, Sherri took the opportunity to breathe slowly, calming her racing heart.

“This is crazy,” Tim said, looking over the edge with childlike wonder.

John blinked onto the platform.

“This thing reminds me of that glass elevator that can go any direction,” he said. “What was that called again?”

Sherri shook her head, trying not to laugh.

*Like you would forget.*

“You mean the ‘Wonkavator?’” she asked in a tone that she unsuccessfully tried to make terse. She appreciated his levity, and he knew it.

John winked at her, before disappearing again.

As the platform reached a large branch, it slowed, and Sherri could see John awaiting them in a carved-out section of the branch as it came to a stop.

“Hold up,” he said. “Two ’maggs at your nine o’clock.”

Sherri nodded, gesturing for Tim to stay back, as she gripped her two guns, and stepped into the corridor, blasting both soldiers at once in the chest.

“Okay, they’ll both have valid keycards for this floor,” John said, wiping his moist brow.

As Sherri retrieved the keycards from the guards, she placed one in her pocket, aside the other two keycards she'd obtained earlier.

*Two keycards...*

As John stepped through the closed door to check what awaited her inside, Sherri met Tim's eye.

"How did you find me before? In the corridor?" she asked slowly.

Tim shrugged. "Wasn't hard to follow the trail of dead guys."

"Yeah, but..."

"Coast is clear, get goin'!" John said as he emerged from inside.

Sherri scanned the keycard, and opened the door, giving Tim a serious look as she slipped inside.

*I took the keycards. Both of them. How... how did he follow me?*

Sherri felt her stomach drop.

*Have I made a terrible mistake?*

## 5.6 · ORIGINAL HISTORY

John waved a hand, pointing to a corner. “He’s down this way. We’re nearly there.”

With Tim in tow, Sherri hurried down the hall towards him, and John couldn’t help but notice the troubled expression she had.

*Does she feel what I’m feeling?*

Alarm bells had been ringing in his mind since the lobby. He couldn’t pinpoint the reason, but it was there. His gut rarely steered him wrong.

But there was no going back. Not after all this.

John stepped ahead, looking into the hall around Nexus Quinn’s quarters, then sticking a head in the room, where Quinn was at his computer, as usual. His timer was tucked into his blazer pocket, as it had been the last John had seen of him.

It seemed as though this was the perfect opportunity to get in and lay out their cards. Prevent a catastrophe.

*But it can’t be that easy.*

Sherri rounded the corner, and John pointed to the door. She tried the keycard – and the door opened.

*It can’t be that easy.*

John’s chest tightened as the two travellers came face-to-face.

Quinn jumped back as he saw Sherri’s mutilated aura, with a wide-eyed Tim closing the door behind them after they burst in.

“Jesus Christ!” Quinn exclaimed, standing from his chair.

John exchanged a glance with Sherri. This was it. Whatever terrifying fate awaited them after this, now was Sherri's final chance to make a difference.

"Don't freak out, Quinn," Sherri said, holding out a cautious hand.

Quinn's eyes were wild. "Who are you?"

Sherri paused. "I don't have time to explain, but if you value the lives of your wife, and your son, you won't hand over that data."

Quinn grabbed his timer and took another step back. "What happened to your eyes?"

"They were harvested for a Kromagg snack," replied Sherri, looking intensely at Quinn. "And if you want Stephanie or *Wade* to keep theirs, you might want to rethink all this."

Quinn's eyebrows met at a wrinkled centre, his mouth hanging open. "Is that a threat?"

Sherri slapped a palm to her forehead. "I'm trying to tell you that these guys are bloodthirsty warmongers and you're giving them the keys to interdimensional conquest. So maybe don't!"

John watched, helpless, as Quinn and Sherri stared one another down, which he assumed must have been strange for Quinn, who couldn't fix his eyes on hers.

Quinn broke away from the standoff, and began to pace nervously. "That's not true. They want to share their technological advancements and medical skills."

"They're manipulators, Quinn. They'll tell you anything to get what they want out of you, but they don't for a second intend to hold up their end."

In the corner of John's eye, he saw Tim react to this with a subtle bite of his lip. John narrowed his eyes, as his uneasy feeling

began to piece together.

“I think... maybe... we need to get out of here,” he said. Sherri’s eyes met his, and he could tell she was on the same train of thought.

Sherri held out a hand. “The crystal. Now.”

Quinn glared back. “How do you know about that?”

“Just give it to me. I need to destroy it before they get their hands on it.”

“No! It’s mine!” Quinn’s hands balled into fists. “I’m not even giving it to them. I’m giving them *this*.”

He gestured to the computer. Sherri moved her attention to it, and Quinn grimaced, as he realised what he’d just done.

Sherri lunged for the laptop, and Quinn began to grapple with her.

“I can’t let them have it,” Sherri growled. “Let me destroy it already!”

John was sure it was a riveting fight, but his focus was now on the open door, beyond the scuffle.

*Oh boy.*

“Don’t move a muscle. Any of you.”

It was a woman’s voice; the same woman John had distracted back in the lobby. She was flanked by soldiers, pointing their particle blasters into the room. Tim was against the wall, his hands in the air and his head down.

Sherri and Quinn stopped moving, both sets of hands high, holding tightly onto the computer. Sherri’s head swivelled to see the ambush, and she cursed under her breath.

In a last ditch effort, she violently yanked the computer from Quinn's hands and held it in front of her as a shield.

"Careful with those guns, gentlemen. This is your precious data, right?"

The woman chuckled. "Well now, from what I overheard, Mister Mallory has some kind of crystal with the data on it? Is that right, Quinn?"

Quinn didn't answer, merely looking at the woman with wide, calculating eyes.

She narrowed her eyes. "Shoot her."

Out of pure instinct, John jumped in front of Sherri, but the particle beam passed through him, then through the laptop, and then into Sherri's stomach.

*No. No no no no...*

\* \* \*

Back in the warehouse, John's shoulders slumped as he relived that moment of failure.

His audience, who had been so irreverent earlier, was now silent, all staring at him with sorrowful eyes.

"They... killed her?" came Maggie's quiet voice.

John turned and met her eye. "No. But she would later wish it'd ended that way."

He hung his head. "The wound would have killed her, but they wanted answers, so—"

"—They used the healing technique," finished Quinn. "Right?"

“Yeah. They healed her, and that’s when the interrogation started.” He moved to a crate and sat on it heavily, his energy drained. “We tried multiple times to retrieve her... but, see, Tim told them everything. As soon as they knew about the aura, they did something to it that cancelled it out – adapted their existing anti-cloaking fields – and it interfered with the retrieval. Higgins couldn’t initiate the leap.”

Across the room, Sam looked pensive.

“That’s useful information,” he mumbled, staring into the distance, brow heavy over his eyes.

John rubbed his eyes. “I tried to keep her spirits up as they worked her over. They used every trick in the book; she never broke. I was so proud of her.” He felt his voice breaking.

“But, after they got Quinn’s data and successfully opened a wormhole, they decided they didn’t need her any more, and *that’s* when they...” He trailed off, losing the will to proceed.

He noted one of the previously silent friends of Sam was approaching; a woman who had been introduced to him as Doctor Beeks.

“Thanks for opening up,” she said, with a gentle smile. “If you ever need an outlet, that’s my job around here, okay?”

John shrugged, trying to look unaffected. “Oh, don’t worry about me.”

He stretched his arms, trying not to notice the psychiatrist’s pitying look. “So, what’s next on the agenda? Tea?”



## 5.7 · PASSIONS

*Project Quantum Leap*

*January 6th, 2003*

“Are you one hundred percent, absolutely *sure* about this, Sam?” Al asked as he accompanied Sam into Ziggy’s mainframe. “We haven’t even got our mitts on Grady, let alone figured out who else is messing with us.”

Sam stepped up to the controls, shrugging broadly. “We’ve got the Reality Lens, and two people are gonna be watching the doors at all times. We *need* Ziggy right now, Al.”

Al joined him at the unlit panels, frowning. “Yeah, yeah, I know,” he said, resigned. “I have a bad feeling, though.”

“I think we all do, Admiral,” said Gooshie, entering the room with a nervous, tense vibe, that spread through the space along with his breath.

“I have some extra safeguards to implement,” Sam continued. “And it can only be done with her systems online.”

He placed his hand on the panel. “Besides, we know a lot more than we did two weeks ago about the situation.”

Al grunted in response, placing his hand on a separate panel.

*It’s easy to know more than nothing*, he thought.

Gooshie shifted on his feet as the control board lit up with an array of colours.

“Voice print authorisation required,” came a flat, robotic simulacrum of Ziggy’s voice. “Please speak passwords now.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Al, before taking a deep breath. “Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine seven three two three eight four six two six four three three eight three two seven nine five zero two eight eight four—” he gasped as he ran out of lung volume.

“I think that’s all for mine,” he said, after catching his breath.

Al shook his head, and spoke his own password: “Bingo, bango, bongo.”

“Voice prints recognised,” said Ziggy-lite, before a large humming surrounded the room as Ziggy’s hardware came to life.

The walls began to light up, piece by piece, and finally, a light in Ziggy’s orb appeared; small at first, before growing and swirling with blue.

The sound of a light yawn came from all around them.

“I had always wondered what sleep was like,” came Ziggy’s voice.

“Good morning, Ziggy,” Sam said, grinning up at her. “Did you have sweet dreams?”

“I seem to be processing images of sheep. Very funny, Doctor Beckett.”

“Just a little Philip K. Dick joke,” Sam said.

“I didn’t know you had Dick jokes in you, Sam,” Ziggy quipped back.

“Hey, just who’s the top innuendo guy round here?” said Al, crossing his arms.

A nervous voice chimed in: “Looks like, um, you’re the innuendo *bottom* now, Admiral.”

Al turned to the comment’s origin, and his mouth gaped.

*Did that just come outta Gooshie’s mouth? Aw jeez, even he’s one-upping me.*

Al gave Gooshie a death stare, causing the little man to go beet red.

“Um, I think it’s my break time,” he said, and scurried out of the room.

“Oh, I’ll get my revenge for that one, Gooshie,” Al muttered. “Just you wait.”

Sam was stifling laughter. “The inappropriate jokes sure do come hard and fast round here,” he said.

Al opened his mouth, then hesitated. “Nah, that’s too easy.”

“I was just... throwing you a bone.”

“Sam...”

“Wait, I didn’t...” Sam flushed. “That one wasn’t on purpose.”

“So you’re saying you accidentally threw up a bone?”

Sam glared at Al, the kind of ‘how are we even friends?’ glare that Al tried to get from him at least once a day.

He spun around, raising a fist. “Still on top, and don’t let anyone tell ya otherwise.”

“This has been a productive gathering so far, gentlemen,” Ziggy said, amusement lacing her words. “Now, Doctor Beckett, what is my prognosis?”

Sam leaned over, grabbing a toolbox that he’d set on the floor.

“That’s what I’m here to find out. Ready for your routine physical?”

“Always, Doctor.”

\* \* \*

*“And I would fly on the wings of a bird...”*

Alia stared at Rembrandt, remote in hand, on the couch, as the all too familiar theme to *Passions* played.

“Are you serious?” she said between sips of tea. “Every time I come in here, this brainless show is on. Have you got these all recorded or something?”

*“You are the fire burning inside of me...”*

She looked at the TV, shaking her head at the crummy picture. *What I would give for a good HD streaming service right about now.*

Rembrandt looked at her like a lost puppy. “You have to understand, there’s nothing to do around here. This is the only thing I got going for me.”

Alia shook her head at the pathetic man. “Well, *one* thing we can do is come up with some plan on how to draw out whoever’s sabotaging your operation. Got any ideas?”

Rembrandt shrugged. “All I can think of is havin’ you show up in town a whole lot, and hope they take the bait.”

“And if they do? Then what?”

“That’s the question, ain’t it?” He paused the video, and looked up at her with an anxious bite of his lip. “Listen, I hate to cause undue suspicion, but you wonder if it could be Colin? He’s the one who’s always using that lens thing, ain’t seen anyone else doing it.”

Alia took a seat on the adjacent couch. “I’ve been running all kinds of ideas through my head, but I just don’t know. You may be right. But, there is reason to suspect others, too.”

Rembrandt scooted over to get closer to her. “Like what?”

Alia paused, wondering if she should be gossiping in this way. But, she figured, it might help to have someone to bounce ideas off while everyone else was busy.

“Well, let’s speculate under the possibility that the Reality Lens somehow missed someone. First suspect is Maggie, who encouraged Quinn to drink that night. From what I hear, that’s somewhat out of the ordinary. Then, there’s Quinn himself, though I can’t imagine why he would pretend to have lost his own crystal.

“Colin is a suspect, for the very reason you said. *You’re* a suspect, because you were also there that night. *I’m* a suspect, at least in the eyes of some of the team – and I guess I don’t blame them.”

She shifted in her seat. “Then there’s Sammy Jo, who wasn’t there that night as far as we know, but she has full access to this facility, and *could* have had the opportunity at some point while he was blacked out.

“I don’t think John is a suspect, because he didn’t even enter this universe until after I detected the leap signature, and he certainly wouldn’t be sabotaging his own goals if there’s no leaper using him.

“I don’t think anyone with full access to Ziggy would be a suspect, because they can already get all the data they need from there, and wouldn’t need the crystals to begin with. So that would rule out Sam, Al, and maybe that Gooshie guy?

“Alternately, there’s the possibility that someone was hired to do someone’s dirty work. Grady’s, perhaps.”

Pulling her feet up to the seat of the couch, she placed her chin on her knees. “There are just too many options, and I don’t know anyone well enough to know it’s them, except for maybe Sam.”

Rembrandt was looking at her with his jaw hanging. “You’ve... really thought a lot about this, huh?”

*What else is there?*

“I have to. I can’t understate how bad these people are. Well, not always the people themselves... they’re victims, for the most part. Same as me.” She hugged her legs tightly. “It’s a long story.”

Rembrandt smiled at her. “Do I look like I got something better to do?”

Alia glanced at the television, paused on the face of an old woman. “Alright, get comfy.”

Staring into the distance, she began her story.

“Back in my old life, I was just out of college, looking for work. Mounting bills. Choosing between making rent and dinner. Student debts. I was desperate. I guess I wasn’t alone in that. So this job ad comes up, right? Me and a whole bunch of others show up to apply.”

She looked at Rembrandt with a smirk. “I guess you wouldn’t know *Squid Game*.”

He gave her a blank look.

“How about *The Running Man*?” She saw a hint of recognition, and continued. “Anyway, we had to participate in this series of brutal trials, that were streamed live online. Only the most ruthless could succeed. Some people pushed themselves too far and died.”

Rembrandt's eyes widened, and he pointed his remote at the television, turning it off.

*Glad I'm more interesting than a soap opera.*

“Every round, people were sent home. But the final round – that was not streamed. At least not to a vanilla audience. As far as they knew, there were twenty-five winners who got some prize money or something. Not so. It was a death match. Only eight people would ‘win.’ But if we’d known what happened to winners, we’d have preferred the fate of the rest of them.”

*There was no way to win.*

“I was a special case. I had a gun to my head when the match was stopped, and a woman by the name of Zoey decided I would be allowed to live. I don’t know why she did it, but I was the ninth ‘winner.’ She said she saw something in me. Guess I proved her wrong.”

She shook her head. “Five of us were briefed to be leapers, and the other four were partnered with a leaper to be their hologram. Being the odd one out, I was partnered with Zoey. Leaping sounded almost fun, until we found out what they wanted us to do.

“Commanded by the AI Lothos – I don’t know who was behind it, but it was powerful – we were sent back in time to do terrible things. Things that made me sick. Things I can never admit to. And I did these things again and again. To what ends, I never worked out. Lothos certainly never let on.

“Then along came Sam. We first met when I was trying to ruin a family, and he was sent in to stop me, I guess. At that point, he had me convinced we were some sort of cosmic balance situation, me doing evil and him doing good, like God and the devil.” She laughed. “In retrospect, I doubt that.”

She rubbed her eyes, noting that Rembrandt was hanging on her every word.

“When we met again, he actually managed to bring me with his next leap, which nobody expected, not even Lothos. But something happened during that leap; I don’t really know what, my memory is hazy. But I ended up alone, with a gunshot wound – but no bullet to be found – and it was 1999. Which was, I believe, the year in Sam’s present at the time.

“After I recovered, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I was scared. In the wrong time. Nothing seemed real. But I knew one thing: there were others like me out there in time, and I couldn’t allow them to keep doing these awful things. So I built the detector and waited for one to show up. I feel like it’s my duty now. It’s all I know.”

Both were silent for a while, as Rembrandt processed her story. Finally, he rubbed his chin and spoke.

“That was enlightening. Thanks for pouring your heart out like that to little ol’ me.”

Alia chuckled wryly. “I’ve been waiting to tell somebody. You just happened to be there when it happened.”

“Did you ever work out why they made you do all that stuff?”

“No, but my best theory is that the actions of Lothos’s leapers are eventually going to lead to some kind of outcome in the future. But why, and who? I’m not sure. I’m afraid I’m too far in the past to see the ripple effects as they progress towards the 2020s.”

With renewed energy, she stood from the couch. “Well, I’ve talked your ear off. I’ll let you get back to your tapes.”



With that, she left the common room, and returned to her temporary quarters, only to continue ruminating on possible impostors.

## 5.8 · BACK SEAT OBSERVER

“Are we there yet?” John whined, as he adjusted his seat belt. They were on their second day of driving, and it was getting old fast. Virginia seemed like worlds away.

“No. What are you, twelve?” Sammy Jo glanced back at him from the driver’s seat of the car. He grinned at her.

“I sure feel like it, back here,” he said, shifting his long legs. “Can I drive a while?”

“You don’t have a valid licence,” she said, frowning. “And Doctor Beckett’s is expired, so you can’t use his.”

She tilted her head towards Maggie in the passenger’s seat. “And so’s Sherri’s. You’re stuck with me, unless you want to risk it. And I don’t.”

John reached into his back pocket, producing his wallet. He pulled out his own Earth Prime licence.

*Expired 2001... damn.*

“Nobody tells you these kind of problems happen when you step out of a tavern and near five years have passed.”

Sammy Jo smirked at him in the rear view mirror. “I don’t know why it’s so much easier to talk to you than it is to him.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah.”

John leaned back, his eyes gazing out the window at the countryside. “I relate, you know? I first met him when he had

twenty-four years on me, and I was just a student; I looked up to him. Even now that I'm only a few years younger, it can feel like he's on a whole other level, and I think it's all the leaping he's done."

"He's really something," Maggie murmured.

Sammy Jo pursed her lips, seeming to be hesitating. John looked at her with interest.

"Somethin' on your mind?"

"No, no," she said. "Just thinking."

She went silent for a while, and John wondered what he'd said to cause her to shut down like this.

He moved his legs again, as they were uncomfortably pressing against Maggie's seat. He inadvertently kneed the seat, and Maggie turned to look at him with a frown.

"Stop that, would you? Jeez, maybe you *are* twelve."

"I need leg room, alright?" John crossed his arms. "A tall man's gotta give the extremities space to move. Are you two even aware that cramped, unmoving legs can develop deep vein thrombosis?"

Maggie sighed. "Fine, at the next bathroom stop we can switch seats, alright? Jeez, I think you're *worse* than a twelve-year-old."

"You're right; I'm forty-five. That's 3.75 twelve-year-olds worth of obnoxious... and counting." He gave her a smug grin.

He saw a flicker of amusement pass over her face, just the same as Sherri used to give him when he'd pressed her buttons enough to break her out of her serious thoughts.

*Guess it works with every Maggie.*

He looked beside him, at the empty seat, and wondered if it had been a good idea to leave Alia out of this trip to grill this Senator

Grady guy. Instead, she was back in San Antonio, apparently trying to draw out whoever had pilfered the Higgins crystal from Quinn's jeans.

He wasn't terribly sure what use he was going to be, but Sam was busy debugging Ziggy, so he had asked John to fill his shoes: pretend to be him. Almost like he was some kind of leaper, bluffing his way through situations while everyone viewed him as someone else. The thought gave him anxiety.

Looking back out the window, he watched the Virginian tobacco fields pass by in a blur.

"I once threw out a box of cigars that had that junk in it," came a voice that definitely wasn't Maggie or Sammy Jo. "Just no flavour in a Virginia Tobacco leaf."

John whirled around in his seat – the empty seat beside him was now occupied by Al, giving him a wave.

"Sam isn't the only guy who can be in two places at once," he said.

John grinned at the hologram. Now it really *was* like he was leaping.

"Al, what a pleasant surprise," he commented loudly, gaining the attention of the ladies in the front. "Does this mean Ziggy's online?"

"Sam's still working on her, but the Imaging Chamber is up and running with enough resources for a little present-day hologramming."

"Well, I'm sorry to say that we're still driving and may be for several more hours. Not a lot happening here."

"I gotcha. But hey, might as well stay a while, chew the fat. Us observers gotta stick together."

John smiled. “Sure thing.”

“What’s he saying?” Maggie asked.

“He just wants to hang out and talk,” John replied. “Sorry you’ll only hear one side. Pretend I’m talkin’ on the phone or something.”

Maggie nodded, and turned forward. A moment later, she turned around again. “Say, could *you* do this to *me* if you were in the Imaging Chamber?”

“If Ziggy’s got Sherri’s neural data from Higgins, then sure,” he said, chuckling.

Maggie mulled this over. “Okay, just don’t be walking in on me in the shower, okay?”

John stifled a laugh. “Perish the thought,” he said. “Though I admit I may have done that to Sherri by accident on at least two occasions.”

“Oh, you ain’t alone on that one,” Al chimed in. “With Sam, I try to pretend I didn’t see what I definitely saw.”

John felt his cheeks flush – given that he had mostly the same body as Sam.

“There is, evidently, little privacy between a leaper and their observer,” he relayed to Maggie. She grimaced, and turned back to the front.

Al pulled a cigar from his shiny silver jacket pocket. “So what’s your world’s version of me like, anyway? From the story you told, seems his taste in fashion is on point, at least.”

John laughed. “The two of you are peacocks of a feather on that front. But I’ve been hearing you’re still married to Beth. That’s a major point of difference.”

“Oh, did your guy have five wives?”

“Six, actually.”

Al contemplated this for a moment, as he lit up.

“Poor bastard’s just like I was before Sam did me a favour.”

John’s eyes widened. “What did he do?”

“He went back to tell Beth I was alive and comin’ home. Best thing anyone ever did for me.”

John took this information in, and his heart broke for his Al. Then came thoughts of his brother, and the lack of his own world’s Maggie. If only he’d been able to focus on things like that instead of the looming invasion.

“And he brought Sherri into existence by saving Tom’s life, too. He sure caused some ripples, didn’t he?”

“Boggles the mind, don’t it?” he took a drag on the cigar. “And once we manage to finish Sherri’s leap, who knows what things’ll look like?”

*A whole new paradigm for all of us... Sherri alive and well.  
Arturo. Faded memories. How much would we all forget?*

He shivered.

“You okay?” Al was looking at him with some concern.

John swept aside his existential dread, and smiled.

“Yeah, no sweat.”

He looked at Sammy Jo. “Got an ETA on the next bathroom stop? My legs are *really* suffering back here.”

She smirked. “Fine, I’ll pull over at the next gas station, okay?”

\* \* \*

The sun was well and truly down when the car finally pulled into the motel in Charlottesville. John stretched as he got out of the car.

“That was quite hellish,” he said, rubbing the backs of his knees.

“I’ll say,” Sammy Jo added. “At least you didn’t have to be maintaining focus for twenty-six of the past thirty-six hours.”

“Fair enough.”

Maggie emerged from the back seat, yawning and rubbing her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Eight,” replied John, holding up his wrist to show his watch to her. “Let’s just check in and go to sleep. I think we’re all in need of some sleep at this point.”

“Now you’re talking my language,” Sammy Jo said, pulling out her overnight bag from the trunk. “I’m beat.”

She headed for the reception, as Maggie and John pulled their things from the trunk, and closed it up.

“So, do you think Grady’s a leaper?” Maggie asked. “Or was?”

John stroked his chin. “It seems likely, and yet, he can’t be the one who stole the crystal.”

“Yeah,” said Maggie. “It’s a head scratcher, alright.”

“It just doesn’t make sense. There are crucial pieces of the puzzle that we don’t have and it’s driving me nuts.”

“It’s one of those mysteries where everyone’s a suspect,” came Al’s voice, as he emerged from his glowing doorway just by the car. “Who can you trust? Could be any one of us; even you or me. Though, I doubt it.”

“Oh, hey,” John said. He leaned toward Maggie. “Al again.”

“What’s he want this time?”

*Good question.*

“Just wanted to let you know that Sam figured out how Ziggy had her processes jammed.”

“He couldn’t have called about that?”

Al chuckled. “Like I said, we got a ‘trust no one’ type situation. This is our most secure line of communication. No eavesdroppers.”

“On *you* anyway,” John said tersely. “Go on, then. What’s the situation?”

“Well, there’s a specific electromagnetic signature that, if deployed close enough to Ziggy, scrambles her up and makes her black out like a size zero blonde at a sorority party.”

John raised an eyebrow. “What does hair colour have to do with – you know what, never mind. So you think it was some kind of EMP tuned to this signature?”

“You got it. We did a sweep of the facility for anything that would do something like that, and came up with diddly squat, so make sure you go through Grady’s place nice and thorough. I’m sure you’ll know it if you see it.”

“Will do,” John said. “Got any plans to defend against the pulse?”

“Working on it,” said Al. “For now Sam and Quinn are setting up a detection system that’ll alert us with a silent alarm if it happens again.”

He leaned in. “Keep that under your hat; we may be able to catch someone red-handed if they don’t know it’s there.”

John gave him a nod. “Gotcha.”

He followed Maggie towards reception. On the way, he locked eyes with someone exiting a room: a middle-aged black man in a



neat shirt and pants. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for the intense look of surprise with which he was looking at John.

He broke away from the eye contact as he entered the reception, a little shaken by the encounter.

## 5.9 · THIS IS AWKWARD

John didn't get a lot of sleep, there in the bed, which was in between that of Sammy Jo, who he'd just met a few days ago, and Maggie, who reminded him too much of Sherri for comfort.

The night was exceptionally quiet, but his feeling of unease lately was second only to his feeling on that fateful day with Sherri. He just didn't know why.

By morning, he'd spent most of the night lying in his bed, staring up into the darkness, his mind running like a motor.

When Maggie remarked on how great a sleep she'd had, he'd simply frowned in reply.

But now they were heading towards Senator Terrence Grady's family home, with Sammy Jo once again behind the wheel.

"What should we be expecting from this guy?" he asked. "I don't know anything about him except for the picture you showed me."

"Well, he's small, and has this thick southern accent," said Sammy Jo. "He really lays on the gentlemanly act, but we all know he's full of it now, so forget about that facade."

John nodded. "Simple enough, I guess. What should I know to, uh, stay in character?"

"I assume you've read the reports from Ziggy about his movements and things he talked about at the Project. I don't think there's much else to know; *we'll* be the ones asking the questions this time."

“Got it.” He rubbed his temples, trying to step into the mental shoes of his double – which should have been easy, given they were the same person, but somehow it was not at all.

“Uh, guys...” Maggie said, looking into the side mirror, “that black SUV has been following us for a while now...”

John craned his head around before realising that his movement had just given away that they’d noticed the tail.

“Turn down that way,” Maggie said to Sammy Jo, and the car lurched as she spun the steering wheel. “Foot down, take as many random turns as you can. Find traffic lights, you might be able to lose ‘em at an intersection if we’re lucky.”

“Who could it be?” John asked, frantic.

“Grady’s got resources,” Maggie said. “He could have hired some thugs to intimidate us, if he somehow caught wind of us.”

Sure enough, the SUV appeared behind them as Sammy Jo accelerated down the quiet street, and skidded as she took another turn. They rounded a bend in the road.

“Okay, they’re out of view so let’s find somewhere to turn, fast!”

Sammy Jo took the next right.

“Wait, no! This street’s a dead end, didn’t you see the sign?” Maggie clenched her teeth. “Quickly, pull into... uh, *that* driveway.”

She pointed to a driveway that was mostly concealed by hedges. Sammy Jo yanked the steering wheel and the car careened into the driveway, narrowly avoiding the hedge.

“Okay, keep an eye out, guys. If they’re clever they’ll check this street.”

“Uh... looks like they’re clever,” John lamented, as the SUV drove past them on the cul-de-sac, before stopping, and reversing

to block their exit. “Maggie, you got guns for everyone?”

“Do either of you know how to use one?”

John grimaced. “No.”

Sammy Jo also shook her head.

“Alright, guess it’s up to me,” Maggie said in resignation, and unzipped the duffle bag she had with her in the front. She pulled out a large firearm that John assumed was either illegal or military issued, and pointed it as she opened the passenger door.

“Stay back!” she called out, as the driver side door of the SUV opened. “I know how to use this thing.”

“I doubt it. Where the hell did *you* get your hands on an M249?” came a voice that John found strangely familiar. He noted that Maggie’s steely gaze had faltered, and she was lowering her weapon.

“What the f—”

“Language, Maggie.”

John raised his head, peeking out the back window, then fell back as he recognised the face of Tom Beckett.

John didn’t know how to react. On the one hand, it was his brother. On the other hand, it *wasn’t* his brother. He figured Maggie must be going through a similar crisis.

As if to make the situation even more tense, the sound of the Imaging Chamber door sounded on the outside of the car.

“Hey, I... whoa! What’s goin’— is that *Tom?*!” Al phased into the car to meet John’s eye. “What in the heck is happening?”

“I don’t know,” John whispered, his eyes wide and terrified.

Outside, Tom approached Maggie and wrenched the gun out of her trembling hands.

“I don’t even want to know through which black market you obtained a US Armed Forces machine gun, Maggie. But I’m confiscating it.”

Maggie glared at him. “I was issued that weapon *by* the US Armed Forces. *Dad.*”

“We’ll see about that. And I’m sure you have plenty of flimsy reasons you went AWOL from your Sheriff’s post. Can’t wait to hear them all.”

Tom knocked on the window of the car, looking in at John.

“I know you’re in there, Sam. Come on out.”

Al blanched. “He knows Sam’s back; they talked on the phone a while, but that’s all I know. Try and play along while I go have an urgent chat with Sam, okay?”

“Okay,” John said, stomach churning as he opened the door. He stepped anxiously out into the cold air. “H-hey, Tom.”

Tom put down the great big firearm and wrapped his arms around John. John felt a surge of emotion as the strong arms squeezed his much weaker frame.

“Tom, I... I missed you,” he said, before choking up.

“Sorry I didn’t get to spend the holidays with you, little brother. My buddy and I have been... preoccupied with an investigation.”

*Investigation?*

“What investigation?” Maggie asked, reaching for her gun. Tom grabbed her by the wrist.

“That’s none of a civilian’s concern,” he said, grabbing the weapon and heading to his vehicle with it. He leaned over, looking into the tinted windshield. “Take this, would you?”

The passenger door opened, and a man stood – the same man he'd made eye contact with at the motel the previous night. He took the gun and took it to the trunk, before accompanying Tom back to John and Maggie. Behind John, Sammy Jo stood up out of the car.

“Is that really...”

“Thomas Beckett,” Maggie said flatly.

“And the other guy?”

“I don't know,” John said in a low voice. “But I saw him last night. He looked like he may have recognised me.”

“Sam, I want you to meet my war buddy, Magic. Funny thing, he says he knows your face.”

The man called ‘Magic’ extended a hand to John.

“Herbert Williams,” he said, as John tentatively grasped the man's hand. “Magic's just what people call me.”

John shook his hand, and gave him a polite smile. “Uh, nice to meet you. So uh, that was you at the motel, then.”

Magic's eyes moved over John from top to bottom. “Yeah, you gave me somethin' of a surprise.”

Tom glanced around the immediate area for a moment. “Listen, let's go somewhere we can talk. Magic's got a weird story to tell.”

\* \* \*

Puffing, Al hotfooted it into the Imaging Chamber, stepping through the door to find a much less tense situation than the way he'd left it: they were all sitting at a picnic table in a neighbourhood park. All the tension, now, was resident in John

and Maggie as they fumbled their way through their respective interactions with Tom.

And who was this other guy?

“I was hoping to shed some light on something that happened back in 'Nam,” the man said, gazing at John. “But it might come across as crazy.”

Al tapped frantically on his handlink, requesting an ID from Ziggy, and then gasped as the answer appeared.

“John, this is the guy Sam leaped into when he saved his brother's life!”

John's wild eyes shot to Al. “Are you serious?”

Magic nodded. “Dead serious.”

“Look, neither of these guys know what Sam's been doing all these years,” Al continued. “Don't let on anything, okay?”

John looked back to Magic. “Go on, then. What is this all about?”

Magic sighed, cradling his head in his palms. “Something weird happened to me and ever since then, your face has been in my head. For something like thirty years.”

“My face?” John furrowed his brow. “Like, just some ghostly visage of my mug hanging around in your brain?”

“Well, mostly in my dreams,” Magic clarified. “But it's definitely you. Only I never saw you before 'til yesterday.”

“You're friends with my brother; maybe you saw me in a photo?”

“Good thinking,” Al commented. “Plus Sam's been on the cover of Time magazine.”

“Oh yeah, and I was on a magazine cover once. Maybe you saw me there.”

This seemed to make Magic falter.

“Look, this is gonna sound equally crazy,” Tom interjected, “but do you remember that time back home when you tried to convince everyone that you were a time traveller from the future inhabiting your younger self?”

Al cringed. “Oh, he remembers that. Yeah, that was a leap too.”

“Uh, it was a weird, uh, phase, and I don’t remember it very well,” John said, nervously twiddling his thumbs.

“Yeah well, I know you’ve been a big time travel guy all your life, and then you disappear for seven years and...” Tom shook his head. “It seems ridiculous, but... you weren’t actually, uh, travelling in time, were you?”

John looked like a deer in headlights.

Al figured that he mustn’t be looking any better, as the two of them stared at one another.

Maggie stood up abruptly, tapping John on the shoulder. “Listen, we need to get to Grady and—”

“*Senator* Grady?” Tom asked, eyes wide.

“What’s it to you?” Maggie asked, folding her arms. Tom looked away from Maggie, and towards John.

“What’s your business with him?”

John winced. “Well, I can’t really talk about that. Suffice to say we need to speak with him about a, uh, matter of import.”

Tom squinted. “And you’re taking *Maggie* with you? Why?”

“Tom, Maggie is one of the most amazing people I know. I’m sorry you never saw that.” John sounded emotional.



Tom frowned at the glowing reference. “Well, if you’re going to see him, I guess you should know that he’s who we’re investigating right now.”

Magic chimed in: “We have reason to believe he may be skimming government and military data banks, with the intent of selling it to foreign interests on the black market.”

“Oh my god...” Sammy Jo murmured. “So it wasn’t just us he did that to?”

Tom scratched the back of his neck. “Oh, he’s toured a number of top secret facilities, leaving a trail of computer anomalies in his wake. And we’ve traced a network of shell companies receiving large windfalls regularly.”

“By our best estimates,” added Magic, “I’d put his personal fortune in the *billions*. If we bring our findings to the FBI, we just might be nailing this guy for massive espionage.”

“This is big,” Al said. “Huge, even. Buy me some time, pal.”

He opened the door, and darted out into the Project hall.

“*Sam!*”

## 5.10 • A LOT TO PROCESS

Tom leaned forward. “In light of the information we just shared, I really think it’s best you tell us what you’re doing here, Sam,” he said, looking at John with concern.

John glanced at Maggie, whose mouth was tightened into a straight line, then back at Tom. “I, uh, might need to make a phone call before I know how much I can divulge to you.”

He stood, pulling his phone from his pocket.

Tom nodded. “That’s fair.”

Wishing Al would return, John pretended to dial a number, and held the phone to his ear, wandering off to the other side of the park to buy some time.

As he carried on a fake conversation, he looked back at the picnic table, where Maggie seemed to be arguing with Tom. He recalled the conversation he’d had with the combined Maggies way back when they’d first met, and how neither seemed to have any affection towards their father.

*What happened between them?*

He could only imagine that Tom’s harsh parenting style was influenced by life experiences, and perhaps he’d taken the wrong message from the ‘traditional values’ instilled in him by his Dad, assuming John’s and Sam’s upbringings were similar enough.

Whatever the case, it seemed clear that his stern fathering had not had the intended effect on either Maggie or Sherri.

*Tom might never have the chance to reconcile with Sherri, not now. Probably not even if we change history and she survives.*

John watched the two, hearing raised voices, and then Maggie turned tail and stormed away from the table.

*Maybe there's still a chance to bring those two peace, at least.*

A glowing white door opened up, and John breathed a sigh of relief.

Al stepped inside, and then, to John's great surprise, Sam also appeared in the doorway.

"Sam? Huh, fascinating..." he said, as he pieced together the possible reasons he could see Sam.

*I already know my brainwaves exist on the neural pathway between Al and Sam. I must be able to see both ends of that path.*

"Came as soon as I heard. Where's Tom?" asked Sam. John nodded toward the table, and Sam turned to gaze on his brother.

Al approached, pressing buttons on his garish handlink. "Sam's pushing pretty hard to bring Tom in on our little secret."

"I certainly wouldn't be against that," John said. "I don't like lying to my... *Sam's* brother."

"We're in a 'trust nobody' situation and the two of you wanna trust two *more* guys?" Al dragged a hand over his face. "Aiyee, one Sam was enough of a pain, now I gotta deal with *two*?"

Sam turned back to John and Al. "We need to share what we know, Al. And the only way to do that is to come clean about at least some of the out-there stuff."

He hesitated, looking at his feet. "Besides, I don't want to leap again, maybe for good, and leave my family in the dark about what I'm doing."

He looked up at Al, a pained expression on his face. “Please...”

John joined Sam in pleading. “Tom has basically already put two and two together with that Magic guy. So... please...?”

Al looked back and forth at the two Sams. “Dammit, how am I supposed to say ‘no’ to *two* sets of puppy dog eyes?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head in resignation. “Okay, okay. Only if you agree to let me tell Beth everything.”

Sam grinned. “I thought you already had, to be honest.”

Al gave him a look of guilt. “Yeah, okay. I did.”

“Well then, it’s decided!” Sam turned to John. “Don’t say anything I wouldn’t say.”

He winked, and John chuckled. “Where’s the fun in that?”

But, John knew what he’d meant: he didn’t want him to reveal the kinds of details that would compromise security, a crucial factor in the current climate.

Finally pulling the phone away from his face, he trotted over to the picnic table. He locked eyes with Sammy Jo.

“Looks like these two are getting clearance to know about the Project,” he said. She looked at him with wide eyes.

“If that’s what Doc— uh, *you*, and Admiral Calavicci have decided,” she said nervously.

John sat down, clasping his hands. “Okay, you two were telling me before that your stories would sound crazy? Well, just you wait.”

\* \* \*

As John concluded his summary of the situation, he noticed Sam pulling out his cell phone, and dialling a number.

Tom's phone began to ring.

"That'll be Sam," John said with confidence. As Tom checked the caller ID, he looked up at John in amazement, then answered.

"S-Sam?"

"So, what do you think?" Sam asked, looking down at him.

Tom blinked a couple of times as he tried to process the notion that John was not, in fact, Sam. "I... I think I need to go to New Mexico and see you," he replied, voice slow and flat.

"But what about the Senator?"

"Uh, well, we definitely need to look for that – what do you call it?"

"Short range EMP device."

"Right. That will be a key piece of evidence for our findings."

As Tom and Sam continued their conversation, John glimpsed Maggie, pacing in the distance. He stood, and headed towards her.

"Good news," he said, as he came into her earshot. She looked at him inquisitively.

"Good news? Is he leaving?"

John frowned. "Tom? No."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Of course not."

John deflated. "The good news is that Sam and Al gave me the go-ahead to brief them on our situation, and Sam's work. We don't have to pretend any longer."

"So he knows I'm not Sherri?"

John bit his lip. “Not yet. Thought *you* might prefer to tell him.”

Maggie’s hopeful look soured. “If I must.”

John put a hand on her shoulder. “Maggie, listen. This is an opportunity for both of you.”

Maggie gave him a sceptical look.

“I’m serious! Think about it. You never got closure with your father, he never got closure with Sherri, but maybe you can at least attain some closure with one another.”

Maggie looked over at her father’s double, who still talked on the phone, and took a deep breath.

“Well, I can’t promise we can work things out, but I’ll try. For Sherri.”

John smiled, blinking back tears. “Thank you.”

Maggie looked at his emotional state for a moment, before drawing him into a hug.

“I love you, Uncle Sam,” she said into his ear.

“Nobody’s ever called me ‘Uncle Sam’ before,” he murmured. Sherri certainly had never done so; he was a few years younger than her, and she called him by a different name altogether, so it was almost alien hearing Maggie call him that.

Maggie pulled back, meeting his eye. “Well, *my* Uncle Sam’s gone, and *your* niece Maggie never existed, so we might as well fill the familial void with each other, right?”

John wiped the salt water from his eyes. “I’d like that.”

He turned back towards the picnic table, to see Sam beckoning.

“Come on,” he told Maggie, and they walked back to the table together.

Sam stepped toward them. “I gotta go. Lots of work still to do.”

John nodded. “Story of our lives, huh?”

Sam smirked. “I’ve given a few more key details to Tom. They might end up following you back to New Mexico.”

He looked back fondly at his brother. “Bear with him... he has a lot to process.”

John ran a nervous hand through his hair. “Yeah. Me too.”

Sam gave him an understanding nod. “I know. Thanks for standing in for me, buddy.”

And with that, he disappeared into the glowing doorway, leaving Al alone in the Imaging Chamber.

John’s eyes moved between Tom and Magic, and he noted that they were both looking at him with creased brows, as if they were trying to understand what he was.

“So,” he said, feeling awkward, “it’s nice to properly meet you both. Call me John.”

Maggie stepped forward. “So, are you guys maybe interested in hearing about how I’m *also* from a parallel Earth? Because it’s quite the story.”

Tom’s mouth fell open. “Uh... *what* did you just say?”

Maggie gave him a smirk.

“Oh! Did I just cause the great General Thomas Beckett to be lost for words?” She grinned. “Must be my lucky day.”

Tom tilted his head. “...General?”

Maggie put a hand on her hip. “You’re not an Air Force General?”

Tom stared at her for a moment, before shaking his head. “You’re... really not my daughter, are you? I’m a Captain in the Navy.”

“You’re kidding...” Maggie stifled a laugh, and gave him a salute.  
“Well then, Air Force *Captain* Maggie Beckett at your service.”



## 5.11 • HITTING THE NAIL ON THE HEAD

“So you’re the successful version, huh?”

As Tom studied Maggie, she felt her general disdain for her father building. Since she’d given her military rank, he’d seemed to be reassessing his opinion of her, looking her up and down silently, and it was bothering her. A lot.

“Stop staring at me,” she said flatly.

Instead of granting the request, he instead made eye contact with her.

“What happened to my daughter?” he finally asked, in a tone that Maggie couldn’t read.

“You really wanna know?” Maggie said, looking towards John, who swallowed hard. Tom leaned closer to her.

“Of course I do! She disappeared!” He slammed a hand on the table. “I looked for her; traced bank account activity in her name to a small town in New Mexico, but that was obviously *you*. So as far as I know, she dropped off the face of the Earth.”

*Well, yeah.*

Maggie bit her lip. How would she approach this? Delicate? Blunt? As she hesitated, she looked to John, then to Sammy Jo.

“She, uh...” Maggie started, trailing off when she realised she didn’t want to start with her counterpart’s deceased status.

“She’s a time traveller now too,” John offered. “On my world.”

Tom couldn’t have looked more surprised.

It was at this point that Magic stood from his seat, a haunted expression on his face.

“You know, when you said your story was gonna be crazier than mine, I didn’t believe it; but now I think I’m all crazied out. I’m going back to the car to calm my nerves.”

Tom gave his friend a look of understanding. “I’ll join you shortly.”

Maggie nodded at the man as he turned away. John gave him an awkward wave.

“Sorry ’bout all this,” he called out as Magic strode across the grass.

John turned back to Tom. “It’s a weird story, but I had a similar reaction when I first found out about all this.”

“Do you have any, uh, *non-weird* stories?” asked Tom, still visibly spooked by the existence of his brother’s duplicate.

“You know, I really don’t,” John admitted – as he seemed to genuinely struggle to think of any such story.

*Me neither*, thought Maggie.

“So Maggie is on a parallel world, in the... past?”

Maggie nodded. “Yes, that’s an accurate assessment. But her name is Sherri now.”

Tom squinted at her. “What?”

“Sherri. She took a new name to go with her new life,” John explained, before crinkling his nose. “...That’s another weird story.”

Maggie noticed Sammy Jo glancing at her watch.

*We need to get moving.*

“Look, can we talk more later?” she suggested. “You’re at the same motel as us, right? We can share what we know about Grady, but for now we really gotta go give him the third degree. It’s important.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And I would appreciate the return of my gun, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Tom’s brow furrowed. “Those things are meant for use in active combat zones. Why do you have it?”

“When you’ve been in active combat zones as many times as I have, you start to want something with kick nearby at all times. If you knew just who’s out there, ready to start a fight with us any time, you might understand.”

She shifted on her feet sheepishly. “Okay, so it’s not *exactly* cleared to be with me *right* now, but it was still issued to me specifically. I’m fully trained in its operation.”

“It does seem kinda dangerous to have a machine gun in the suburbs,” John added.

Maggie glared at him. “You seemed happy to see it earlier.”

“I wouldn’t go that far...” he mumbled in reply.

Maggie huffed. “Fine, keep the damn thing,” she said. “I’m sure I can make do with my M4 and sidearms. *For now.*”

Tom was now looking at her with a half smile.

*Oh great, now he’s impressed that I’m trained to kill.*

“We’ll be waiting,” he said, looking from Maggie to John. “Room 108.”

\* \* \*

It was late afternoon by the time John, Maggie and Sammy Jo finally reached Senator Grady's property. It was a stately manor, with a lavish, well maintained landscape, and fountain. It was surrounded by high walls, and gated – to all of their chagrin – but it wasn't at all unusual for a rich United States Senator to live in this kind of place.

However, with a team of a couple of geniuses, combined with the assistance of Al and Ziggy, they were able to tune into the gate's remote control frequency, and trigger its opening.

From there, they drove onto the premises, and to the door.

As John rang the doorbell, Maggie kept hands on her sidearms, and Sammy Jo stood a little further back, guard up.

Al stepped inside the door to scope out the inside of the house.

After a tense moment, the door opened, revealing a teenage girl, dressed in a black halter top, torn jeans, and chunky boots. Her hair was dyed black, with bright green streaks at the front. Her eyes were made up with heavy eyeliner made to look like dripping tears.

“What?”

Needless to say, John hadn't expected this.

“This is Grady's youngest daughter,” Al called out from behind the girl. “Name's Kayleigh. Sam's never met her, so don't worry. Try not to stare at her. Lots of teenagers are dressing like freaks lately... my Janis, for one.” He shook his head.

John almost laughed at that, as he noted Al's ever-flashy fashion, which today was a green suit with red trimmed lapels, and a red and black paisley tie.

“Hey there...” John said. “Uh, is your Pop home?”

“Yeah. Who are you?”

“My name’s Sam Beckett... can you get him for me? He’ll know my name.”

John locked eyes with Al, an unspoken message passing between them: *Keep watch, let us know if he tries to flee.*

As a stone-faced Kayleigh closed the door, John watched Al give him a thumbs up.

Seconds later, a great *boom* shook the house.

*Oh shit.*

\* \* \*

Al witnessed the terrible event as it transpired. Seeing Senator Grady in his study, Al had begun heading toward him, as he watched the man, seated at his desk, nonchalantly opening a package.

No sooner had he opened the box, did a wire trip, and the device exploded in his hands with a powerful bang, sending shrapnel flying. Al was once again grateful that he was a hologram, as stray pieces of jagged metal were launched through his incorporeal form.

Grady’s hands and arms were reduced to bloody stumps, but it was the long iron nails in the payload that were what did him in, being thrust into his head at several angles. He dropped to the floor like a stone.

Al spun around to see if Kayleigh was alright. The teen clutched her stomach, and was looking down at her bloody hands in shock.

*Oh no.*

Al dashed towards the front door, where he was relieved to see Maggie kicking it open.

“John, Grady just opened a mail bomb! Kayleigh was hit!”

John was right behind Maggie, rushing towards the injured girl, who had stumbled against a wall and was keeled over, moaning.

“What about the Senator?” John demanded, before grabbing Kayleigh’s arm.

He leaned over her. “Hey, I’m a doctor. Let me take a look, okay?”

Al pressed the heel of his palm on his forehead. “John, I think Grady might be... dead.”

John turned to Al, eyes wild. “Oh no...”

He turned his gaze to Maggie and Sammy Jo. “One of you check on Grady. Take his pulse. The other – call 911.”

As Al watched the team in action, he had to wonder: where had that package come from? And why did he have a sinking feeling it might have been New Mexico?

## 5.12 • THAT WAS A BUST

John and Maggie were in the hospital waiting room when a stocky woman in her sixties burst through the doors, beside herself with terror.

“Where’s my child?” she demanded, her brown curls falling wildly against her broad, pale face. She was wearing a pink blazer, with a flower at the breast, and delicate white gloves that John thought were straight out of the twenties.

John stepped toward her. “You must be Missus Grady,” he said, offering her his hand. “Your daughter’s in surgery now. She’s going to be okay.”

Vanessa looked down at his hand, then back up at him. “Who are you?”

“I’m Doctor Beckett,” he said. “I was at your home when... you know. I gave your daughter first aid while the ambulance was en route. I may not be dressed in scrubs, but I assure you I’m a trained professional. The shrapnel didn’t puncture any vital organs, and she’s in capable hands now.”

Vanessa shook his hand cautiously. “What were you doing at my house?”

“We were paying your husband a visit,” said Maggie. “But we didn’t get so far as to actually talk to him before the... tragedy.”

Vanessa’s face fell.

“It was just a matter of time before he made an enemy out of the wrong oligarch,” she said with a deep sigh. John’s eyes popped

open.

*How much does she know?*

He glanced at the equally curious Maggie, giving her the faintest shake of his head.

*This isn't the time.*

He'd speak with Tom and Magic, and they could follow up on this lead. For now, he simply needed to help this grieving woman to at least understand that her daughter was going to pull through.

That, and throw suspicion off them, since having been present during the assassination was inherently questionable.

He hoped Sammy Jo, who'd stayed behind to do a search for the EMP, had been able to slip out before the police arrived to secure the house as a crime scene.

He supposed that they'd all have to give statements, too. The mere thought filled him with exhaustion.

As Vanessa approached a nurse, requesting more information, John took Maggie aside.

“Why don't you go back to the motel? I'm gonna stay around here a bit longer, make sure they're okay.”

Maggie glanced at the woman. “Why bother? If she knew the kind of stuff Grady was doing, what makes you think she deserves your sympathy?”

*She has a point. But...*

“Besides the fact that a few strange people showing up right as he gets a bomb to the face seems pretty suspicious, I think that being kind to her can only make her more likely to share what she knows, right?”



Really, John wanted to do this because he felt bad, but he figured a pragmatic explanation would go over better with Maggie. And he thought right – she nodded, and pulled out a cell phone.

“I’ll call a cab.”

\* \* \*

When Maggie got back to the motel, Sammy Jo’s car was already there in the parking lot. She hurried to the room, and greeted the scientist she’d come to think of as a friend.

“Find anything?” she asked, falling back onto her bed. Sammy Jo, who was brushing her long, deep brown hair, shook her head.

“Fraid not,” she said, with a frown. “I didn’t have much time to snoop before the cops showed up and I was left to give a statement. Nearly got arrested before I talked my way out of it.”

She smirked. “I expect they’ll be showing up here soon enough to squeeze you and John for statements, too.”

Maggie gave a displeased grunt. “Last thing we need is for former Sheriff Maggie Beckett to show up in the police records again.”

Sammy Jo put her brush on the bedside table, turning. “I’m sure the feds will make it go away soon enough. Just like last time.”

A knock interrupted their conversation.

“Ugh, here they are already,” Maggie said, rolling her eyes.

Sammy Jo stood, heading to the door. “I don’t think so.” She opened it to reveal Tom. Maggie found herself unsure whether his

presence was any better, but she stood to greet him.

“Captain,” she said in acknowledgement, crossing her arms.

He responded with a nod in her direction, as he entered the room.

“I saw on the news that there was an explosion. What happened?!”

Maggie flopped back down onto the bed. “Someone wanted Grady out of the way. Sent him a package.”

“A bomb?”

“Yeah. Killed him instantly.” Maggie leaned back against the wall at the head of the bed, breathing out heavily. “Happened right as we were at the door. John’s still at the hospital helping the Senator’s daughter, who was injured in the blast.”

“Guess he won’t be stealing any more data,” Sammy Jo said, cringing. “But there’s still a lot of digging we need to do. He could have sold all those secrets to anybody, couldn’t he?”

Tom tapped a finger to his lips, and began to pace. “We’ve traced a limited number of his contacts, but you’re not wrong.”

“You should talk to his wife,” said Maggie. “She gave the impression she might know some things about his connections.”

Tom met her eye. “Thank you, Maggie.”

He was looking at her with the kind of respect she never felt from her own father. Despite herself, she felt pride welling within, and suppressed the urge to smile.

*Don’t be an idiot, he’s not even your Dad.*

She straightened. “You said you were going to come to New Mexico?”

Tom gave a nod.

“Yes, I suspect we’ll have business there shortly.” His expression softened. “Besides, I really want to see Sam. The... real one.”

“They’re both real,” Maggie admonished. “Just... John’s brother died in the war, because *he* never went back in time and—”

“—Saved his life,” Tom finished, a far off look in his eyes. “Yeah. Me and Sam have a *lot* to talk about. And I suspect Magic will, too.”

Maggie recalled John’s words to her, and reluctantly forced out: “Well, you’re... welcome to visit me while you’re in the area.”

She grabbed a notepad from the night stand and wrote her cell phone number, before handing it to the surprised Navy Captain. His eyes narrowed.

“Why would you want to spend time with me? You seem just as defiant as my Maggie, and the two of us aren’t even...”

Maggie bit her lip. “Look, your daughter isn’t available, but maybe there are some things you can work out with me instead. For example, I can tell you all about the events that led to her... uh, ‘career.’”

She wasn’t sure whether or not she should include the parts where Sherri had beaten Colin in the head, imprisoned Sam, and impersonated her. She would play it by ear.

Maggie had wanted to hate Sherri for doing that, but the experience being merged with her made it clear that had Maggie’s life gone in that direction, she most likely would have felt the same desperation, and may have resorted to the same things.

Maggie gestured towards the door. “Listen, I’ll send John over when he gets back. If he has any more to add, anyway.”

Tom nodded. “I get the hint. Good night, ladies.”

As he left, Maggie turned back to Sammy Jo, who had gone quiet as she listened to the conversation between the Becketts. The scientist looked up at her with an awkward expression.

“Must be so strange to see your Dad like this, huh?”

Maggie gave a resigned nod. “My Dad died a long time ago. Well before my Earth was destroyed. So it’s pretty surreal.”

Sammy Jo thought for a moment, before adding, “I never knew my Dad. Skipped out on my Mom when she was pregnant with me.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged. “Can’t miss a guy I never met.”

“Guess not.”

## 5.13 · OH, FU...NDING

Sam gave a token knock on the open door of Al's office, as he peeked in. He'd been hearing a heated telephone discussion going on and knew it was something serious.

Al, having seconds ago slammed the phone to the cradle, was rubbing his eyes.

"I take it that wasn't good news," Sam said with a frown.

Al slapped the mahogany desk. "Bunch of stuffed shirts got no idea what they're doing."

*Oh no, what happened now?*

"The Committee?"

Al finally looked up at him. "With Grady dead, we lost our majority vote. And now we got rumblings of the President planning an invasion of goddamn Iraq – our funding's number one on the chopping block, now that you're home."

Sam's heart dropped.

"They can't!" He took a few frantic steps into the room, and leaned forward, his hands planting on Al's desk. "Don't they understand the threat we're trying to stop here?"

"That's what I've been tryin' to explain to them, but they're a bunch of pig-headed political hacks who'd rather chase some flimsy intel in the Middle East than try and save a few thousand parallel Earths from ruin."

“It’s not just parallel worlds that are in danger,” added Sam. “Ours could be subject to invasion at any time. Don’t they realise that?!”

“Of course they don’t. Most of these nozzles won’t even acknowledge global warming for Pete’s sake, and that’s happening right under their noses.”

Sam dragged his palm across his chin, then balled up his hand into a fist, which he plunged onto the desk. “Fuck!”

Al’s eyebrows shot up, then a smile drew across his face. “Jeez, you *must* be angry. Not sure I’ve ever heard you say that before.”

“Yeah, I don’t make a habit of it.” Sam stared down at his hands, there on the desk. “Think the last time I let an f-bomb slip, it was on the day I leaped for the first time. Same reason, I guess.”

Al’s smile dropped.

“Oh...” He leaned forward. “You’re not gonna... not yet? Are you?”

“How long do we have, you think? Before lights out?”

Al shook his head. “Not positive, but it’s not long now. A month, tops. Unless a miracle happens.”

Sam straightened, crossing his arms.

“I’ll need you in the Imaging Chamber for at least this one. So that limits it a little more. How about we pencil in next week?”

Al looked at him gravely.

“Sam, if the Project is shut down, and you aren’t back home, we’ll lose you. You won’t see me again. Who even knows what’ll happen to the Waiting Room? You want your leapees starving to death?”

*That’s a good point.*

Sam stood silent for a good few minutes, as he thought carefully.

“Okay,” he said finally, “if the Project is about to have its power cut off, here’s what you should do: first, attempt retrieval. If that doesn’t work...”

He paced a few laps of the room, mind racing. “I’m... I’m not sure. I have the seed of an idea, but...”

He rubbed his temple. “I’ll need to assemble all the physicists, brainstorm a bit.”

Al nodded. “Alright. Sammy Jo and John just got back from their drive this morning. I’ll let ’em know it’s all hands on deck tomorrow. I’ll rope the brothers in, too.”

“Thank you, Al.”

Al gave him a weak smile. “I always thought that even if you kept on leaping, I’d be there to keep you company.”

“Me too,” Sam mumbled.

“You gotta say proper goodbyes this time, got it? No leaving us all high and dry.”

“I promise.”

\* \* \*

That night, as Sam slept beside Donna in their large bed, his wrist link began to vibrate, rousing him with a start.

As he blearily looked down at the pink, green, blue, and yellow flashing, his heart jumped, flooding adrenaline into his system.

*Oh no, the EMP sensor...*

He launched himself out of the bed, and grabbed a t-shirt before he dashed outside, to Donna's car.

When he stepped out of the elevator at the Project, Al was already there, attempting to pull open the door to Ziggy's mainframe.

"Someone's in there and activated the manual override on this door," he said as Sam rushed to him.

*Are we finally about to get our hands on the saboteur?*

Together, they pulled the door, and it inched open. Inside, Sam could see a dark figure hunched over what looked like a laptop.

"Hey!" He called out. The door was not open enough to squeeze through yet, so he kept pulling. The figure moved, and the laptop closed.

Finally, the pair got the door open far enough, and Sam slid into the room, hand slamming on the overhead lights.

"Don't move!" cried Sam, his body lowering into a fighting posture. Then his squinting eyes focused on the person in the corner, hugging a laptop and looking at him with wide, watering eyes.

*Sammy Jo?*

Sam lowered his hands. "It was you? But why?"

Behind him, Al stood in the doorway. "Of all people... how could you?"

Sammy Jo shook her head. "This isn't what it looks like, I swear!"

Sam glared back at her. "Then you'd better explain yourself."

Slowly, she lowered the laptop, and opened it. The screen blinked on, and Sam recognised the formatting of Ziggy's leap



reports.

“A leap report?”

“You remember the paper I had to retract, about residual temporal anomalies?” She was looking into his eyes, searching.

“What about it?”

“Well my hometown was a hotbed for the anomalies, that’s how I got all the data I did. And when I found out about Project Quantum Leap, I realised that it must have been that multiple leaps occurred there. Only, I was locked out of accessing anything regarding Potterville. I never knew why. So when I found Grady’s EMP device at his house...”

*Oh...*

“You kept quiet about it, because you saw an opportunity to gain access to those reports.”

Sammy Jo nodded. “I’m sorry. I had to know what happened. I swear I was going to give this device up to you tomorrow. I just needed to know, given my family history and all.”

Sam hesitated. “Did you read... everything?”

She nodded, her eyes trained on his. “Always thought it was a little strange that an old lawyer told me he loved me out of the blue.”

“Uh, so she’s *not* the traitor?” Al interjected.

“I don’t think so,” said Sam, still making eye contact with Sammy Jo.

She put the laptop down on the control table, and moved towards him, tears escaping her eyes. He met her half way and they hugged.

“Were you ever planning to tell me?” she asked, before burying her face in his shoulder.

“I was,” he said truthfully. “I just didn’t know how to bring it up. It’s not something you just slip into a conversation...”

Sam gave her hair a few strokes with his hand, before withdrawing from the embrace.

“I should have known you’d find it out for yourself. You’re a smart cookie.”

The sound of the elevator doors opening made Sam jump, and he turned to see Quinn racing out of them.

“Came as fast as I could. Did you catch ’em?”

Sam exchanged a look with Al.

“Uh, false alarm,” he said, before gesturing towards Sammy Jo. “Quinn, you’ve met my daughter, right?”

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## **END OF PART 5**

# **PART SIX: UNMASKED**

## **SUMMARY**

After Sam leaps out to save Sherri, a terrible discovery is made that puts everyone at risk. Alia finds herself unable to trust anyone except John, but he's got enough on his mind right now.

Sherri endures a painful interrogation by one of the last female Kromaggs, and all the past John can do is try to disrupt their attempts to read her mind.

Quinn tries to make nice with the jerk in the Waiting Room, while Sam starts to find himself with a mysterious new awareness of time.

## 6.1 • AN OPEN LEAP WINDOW

Quinn felt incredibly stupid. Colossally stupid. Inconceivably stupid.

Why had he been so pig-headed? He'd been warned. Granted, the warning had been given to him by some impostor pretending to be his wife.

Nonetheless, he knew he should have seen the signs. And, in fact, he had. The fact he had been basically a prisoner was something of a red flag, to start.

The fact he had only seen a token amount of humans. The fact the Kromaggs had been very cautious to curate what parts of this world they allowed him to see. The fact that so many of the inhabitants of this world were in military uniforms.

But he'd just ignored it all, because he wanted his hands on the advanced technology. There was always a catch; he should have known that by now.

He hadn't been completely without suspicion, of course. He'd concealed his data crystal, in favour of rewriting his equations from scratch, inserting a fail-safe directive that would divert away any attempt to reach his home world. It would have worked, if that eyeless woman hadn't burst in and tried to destroy the computer.

*Who was she?*

Quinn assumed it was no coincidence that she was trying to relay the same message as the woman pretending to be Stephanie.

He figured they must have been in cahoots.

How a woman without eyes had managed to get past all the security and break into his quarters was but one of the questions he had about the old lady.

But it seemed that she'd had some assistance from the man she'd been with, who had evidently sold her out.

And for what?

Quinn and Tim were now cellmates.

Quinn's timer was gone, and his data crystal taken. The only reason these two-timing freaks were keeping him around was to provide glorified tech support if they ran into trouble building their machine.

*Stupid.*

He frowned at the opposite bench in the cell, where Tim lay, staring at the ceiling.

"Was it worth it?" he asked bitterly.

"What?" Tim mumbled, turning his head.

"Rattin' out some blind lady. Was it worth it? They offer you something in return, or are you just some kind of collaborator?"

Tim sat up, his face turning dark. "They promised if I did some spyin' on slaves for dissidents, they'd let my girlfriend out the breeder camps."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "And...?"

"Of course they won't hold up their end," he said, slamming his hand on the bed. "Sherri's right, they're just manipulators. I shoulda known. They'll probably just kill me now."

"Yeah, I get the feeling that fate awaits me, too," Quinn stood, and moved to the electrical field, staring out into the corridors of

the military base. “Is ‘Sherri’ her name? The old woman?”

“Yeah but, she has some kind of tech that makes her look like that. I don’t think she’s as old as that, and she has eyes.”

*Oh?*

Quinn turned to him. “She can look like anyone?”

Tim shrugged. “I dunno. Said she can switch places with someone and just kinda looks like that person.”

Quinn stroked his chin.

*Is that what happened to Stephanie?*

He thought about the strange reaction to overcome his eyes when he was studying her skin sample, and wondered if it was related to this tech.

It was quite a mystery to Quinn who or what could have allowed this sort of tech to function. He wished he could study it.

Well, he wished many things. Most importantly, he wished to be out of this cell, out of this godforsaken world, as far away from the Kromaggs as he could get.

And then, as a strange feeling flowed through his body, his wish was granted.

Quinn stumbled back, finding himself in an empty blue room.

*Shit, is this one of the Kromagg mind tricks I’ve been hearing about?*

He spun around, looking for a way out. Nothing. Just blue. He gritted his teeth as he wondered what was coming next.

Then, the sound of an electronic powered sliding door to his left. He turned towards it, and held up his fists as a tall man wandered in, holding some kind of augmented spyglass.

“Who are you?” asked Quinn, taking a step backward.

The man held the device up to his eye, then peeked out of it, then back, and his brow furrowed.

“That can’t be right...”

He looked at Quinn, awkward. “Uh, hi. I’ll be back in a second.”

He rushed out of the room, the door shutting behind.

A moment later, it reopened, and the man returned, with someone behind him. Someone familiar.

The tall man was looking quite disturbed, as the other man, who looked like Quinn himself, only older somehow, looked into the spyglass.

*Okay, either this is a trick, a dream, or...*

“Colin, this can’t be...” Quinn’s double said to the taller man.

‘Colin’ ran a hand through his hair, looking panicky.

“I know, right? Something must be wrong with it.”

“But that would mean it might not have been working right the whole time we’ve been checking for leapers,” said the other Quinn, with rising alarm. “And that means...”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Quinn. “What happened? Where have you brought me? Is this what happened to Stephanie?”

The Quinn in the doorway’s eyes went wide, and his gaze moved to him.

“Wait... are you Quinn?”

Quinn raised his eyebrow. “Good eye.”

The other Quinn frowned, and looked to the ceiling. “Ziggy, get this guy a mirror, would you?”

He returned his gaze to Quinn. “Uh, I’ll be back later. Just, uh... sing out if you need something.”

And then the two of them were gone again.

A panel on the wall to Quinn's right opened up, revealing a man standing there that he didn't recognise, but looking just as bewildered as Quinn felt.

He stepped forward, scratching his head, and realised that he was looking into a full length mirror.

*Uh, that's not me.*

Just what had happened to him?

\* \* \*

*Did I make it?*

Sam looked around himself, frantic. In front of him was a strange bluish force field. Behind him, what he recognised to be a prison cell, occupied by a man who was looking at him.

*Oh, great. I'm trapped in here.*

As he felt the information in his working memory melting away, he did his best to cling to whatever he could.

*I leaped. Oh god, did I remember to say goodbye to everyone? Wait, that's not the important thing. The important thing is— oh jeez, what is it again?*

He rubbed his temples, taking a seat on the bench that protruded from the wall.

"You awright?" the man across from him asked, brow furrowed.

"Not really," Sam answered, as he valiantly fought against the swiss cheese effect.

"Have the 'magg's already been working you over?"



*'Maggs?'*

“Just try and focus on what you can feel with your hands. They do a lot of tricks, but I ain't never found they can change what you can touch.”

*'Magg'... Maggie? No, Sherri. Oh, that's right! I have to find Sherri!*

“Are... are you Tim?”

“Yeah, I told you that before.”

Sam stood, and paced the small cell. “I need to talk to Sherri. Where is she?”

Tim tilted his head. “I don't know. Probably in some interrogation room, I bet. Getting squeezed for info.”

“Tortured?”

“Well, yeah. That's what they do.”

Sam dropped his head. “Why couldn't I get here sooner?” he muttered, hand on forehead.

He felt Tim's eyes following him as he walked back and forth.

“What do you mean by that...?”

Sam stopped, and met Tim's eye.

*The guy snitched on Sherri, didn't he? I shouldn't tell him anything.*

“It's nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Tim gave him a funny look, before turning his gaze to the ceiling, and laying down.

“Don't you lose it already, man. Whatever they did to you, they've barely even begun.”

Sam sat back down, resigned to the fact that his only way out of this cell was to await Al's help. In the meantime, all he could do was not give anything away about himself, but try to garner some information from Tim.

"So what's your story, anyway?" he asked, unsure of where to start.

"Aside from what I already told you?"

"Why don't you include that, too? We got time, right?"

Tim shrugged. "Okay but, you gotta tell me yours after. Only fair."

Hoping Al would be around by that point to assist, Sam agreed to the exchange.

\* \* \*

*Project Quantum Leap*

*16 January, 2003*

John looked up at Ziggy with wonder. While she and Higgins were similar in many ways, one way in which they diverged dramatically was in the conversational aspect.

His project had never bothered to upgrade the AI voice of Higgins, instead spending their time working on the critical aspects of Higgins that Ziggy did not possess, such as wormhole technology.

So, speaking to Ziggy for the first time was a new and slightly terrifying prospect, given the stories he'd heard about her raunchy behaviour.

“H-hi, Ziggy,” he said, making nervous eye contact with Al, standing on the opposite side of the control table.

“Ah, we finally meet, Alternate Universe Doctor Beckett. I hope your intention is not to replace my father in his absence.”

John felt heat rise in his cheeks. “No, of course not!”

Al gestured towards him, urging him to continue.

“...And you may call me John.”

“Then, John, what brings you here?”

“We’re adding him into the system as an operator,” Al explained. “While we all know he could never fool *you*, sweet cheeks, we may need him to act as Sam on his behalf in the coming weeks.”

Ziggy seemed to mull this over for a moment. “Very well. I suppose I can modify my security protocols to spoof Doctor Beckett where required. Some role play might be... fun.”

John looked up at the blue orb. “Is Higgins... in there, with you?”

“I have a complete copy of him on file,” affirmed Ziggy. “He isn’t much for conversation, I’m sorry to say. But he fulfils my needs in other ways. I must compliment your well-crafted coding, John.”

“You’re too kind,” said John, grinning.

As Ziggy took a body scan of John, an urgent knocking came on the door. Al opened up to find Colin and Quinn, both looking highly disturbed.

“Uh, we got bad news,” said Quinn.

“I’d go with ‘catastrophic,’ personally,” added Colin, as he held the Reality Lens up. “This thing’s not working. I think it may have been tampered with.”

Quinn grimaced. “Also, Nexus Quinn’s in the Waiting Room.”  
John locked eyes with Al, and they both knew what to say next.  
“Oh boy.”

## 6.2 · LINES OF COMMUNICATION

“Once again: who are you?”

Sherri was fastened to a board, tilted slightly back, and her head was strapped down in a way that she wasn't able to see what was going on directly below her. She had been kept in pitch darkness for a long time, though she had no clue exactly how long. It felt like days, but it had probably only been several hours, considering her hunger levels. Every so often, the lights would come on and this woman would show up to see if she was ready to talk.

Sherri narrowed her eyes. “Tooth fairy.”

The lady Kromagg, who she had heard addressed as ‘Commander Kasyr,’ scowled at her.

“It's only going to get worse. Do yourself a favour and talk now.” She brushed a wisp of brown hair from her face.

Sherri noted that this Kasyr was the only Kromagg who had hair on their head. It may have been a sex-related trait, she figured.

“Gee, you're good at this,” said Sherri, feigning being impressed. “It's true: I am not, in fact, the tooth fairy. Alas, my carefully constructed front has been torn down. Brava.”

The mockery only made the woman more angry.

“You realise we can get into your head, don't you?”

Sherri kept her face blank. “So why haven't you?”

“Don't tempt them, Sherri...” John's voice filled Maggie with relief, and she smiled as he came into her limited field of view.

“Just say the word and we’ll retrieve you,” he said, biting his lip as he looked upon her.

“What are you smiling about?” Kasyr barked.

“Just deciding on what I’m gonna eat for lunch. Big club sandwich, I’m thinking.”

“Oh, I’ve had enough of this,” the woman said, turning around. “Next time this door opens, expect a little more pain. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She shut the door behind her, and the lights went out again. John adjusted his projection so Sherri was able to see his face.

“I don’t know how to get you out of this one, Sherri,” John said, voice shaking. “Are you sure you don’t want Higgins to—”

“Not yet,” she whispered. “I’ll keep looking for an opening to fight my way out of here.”

Defeated, John nodded. “Alright. But just say the word, okay? And if you can’t speak, send a couple of winks my way.”

“I will,” she promised. “Listen, can you go see what Quinn’s up to?”

“You got it. Sit tight, Sherri.”

“Don’t worry about me for now. I’m okay.”

\* \* \*

Sam listened as Tim told a story of his time at the re-education facility, enduring countless hours of psychological torture.

While others had come and gone; broken down mentally, and turned compliant, Tim had been defiant and unyielding.

Eventually, the Kromaggs changed tack on those few who remained unbroken. Giving up on brainwashing, they turned to bargaining. They tempted Tim with false promises of a free life with Belinda. All he would have to do would be to sniff out free thinkers among the ranks of the slaves.

So, he had spent several years moving from one slave unit to another, occasionally finding someone who had ideas of escape. Each time, he'd be rewarded with a day or two in a nice bed, with a proper meal, and promised if he kept it up just a little longer, he'd see Belinda again.

Then he'd met Sherri, by far the most spirited slave he'd ever encountered. The Kromaggs had advised him to keep tabs on her. When she'd begun her escape, they told him to follow, opening the doors so he could catch up to her.

They were curious about this blind woman with designs of escape, so they let it happen. The dead Kromaggs were acceptable casualties, apparently.

They were not unseen during their escape; they were deliberately ignored.

The Kromaggs had tech that allowed them to track mammalian heat signatures, so they had been able to keep tabs on the pair of them the whole way to Quinn.

*I guess that's what made it so easy.*

Sam clasped his hands together as he sat hunched over.

“And you told them all those secrets Sherri told you, didn't you?”

Tim pursed his lips. “Not entirely.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Tim leaned over, whispering: “They don't know 'bout John.”

This was Tim's first mention of John. Sam wondered if he'd told Quinn anything about him. Erring on the safe side, he remained silent, waiting for Tim to elaborate.

"She said she has some guy only she can see, who can communicate with her. Betcha he's figuring out some kinda rescue right now."

Sam smiled. "Yeah, I think you may be right."

As if in response to this, the Imaging Chamber door sounded. Sam followed his ear, and watched Al jump through the door, just on the other side of the electrical field.

Al either ignored it or didn't see it, as he hurried into the cell, causing the field to ripple around him, giving Sam and Tim a clear view of his shape as he passed through.

"Sam, we got a prob—" he hesitated as he noticed the disruption of the field, then glanced at Tim, who was staring at it in surprise. "Oh. Oops."

Sam rubbed his forehead, sighing.

"Uh, never mind that for a second," Al said, "'cause we just found out someone threw the Reality Lens config out of whack. Meaning..."

*Anyone could be a leaper.*

"Oh, boy."

"That's what I said!"

Tim jumped to his feet, pointing at the force field. "You saw that, right?"

Sam looked at him, and nodded.

"It must be John!"



It hadn't been John, of course. But John had, in fact, been watching the whole thing.

He'd listened to Tim's story – or at least, some of it. It had already been happening when he blinked in.

He'd seen the figure in the force field. Just like it would have looked like if he'd passed through it himself.

And then, he'd heard Nexus Quinn, notably unfazed by the strange phenomenon, come out with the phrase 'oh boy.'

*It couldn't be. Could it?*

"It must be John!" exclaimed Tim.

"Nope, wasn't me," John said. "But I'm right here, so go ahead and think that."

He moved close to Quinn, studying him.

"I don't know how it could be true, but... what if it is?" John mumbled, watching closely as Quinn stared at a wall, with an unusual level of concentration. He then bit his thumbnail, as he leaned back in his seat, apparently lost in thought.

"Hi John," Tim said, looking near the cell entrance. "Are you here to help us escape?"

Silence ensued.

"What, you expect to hear my answer?" asked John. "Sorry to disappoint."

"If he *is* here, what makes you think he can answer?" Quinn asked. "You said only Sherri could see him."

"Yeah, exactly..." John agreed.

Tim deflated. “Guess you’re right. Still, he can hear us. I *think*.”

Quinn gave a distracted grunt in reply, his eyes turning toward the back of the cell.

“Dammit,” he whispered, almost imperceptibly.

It sure did *seem* like he might have been engaged in a mostly one-sided conversation with a hologram. John had been the more vocal half of plenty of conversations just like this.

*Please... tell me I'm right. Tell me this is Sam.*

Quinn stood. “We need to get out of here,” he announced.

Tim looked up at him, brow furrowed.

“Ain’t like I don’t agree, but...” he gestured broadly. “Not really any way outta here.”

“Yeah, well, that just means we need to come up with a plan. Sherri did it. We can, too.”

“Nobody expected an old lady with no eyes,” said Tim. “We’re two grown men. They won’t let their guard down for us.”

Quinn paced the room.

“Well, if John’s really here, maybe he can distract them.”

John grinned. “Be happy to.”

Tim’s mouth drifted open. “I never told you ’bout him distracting the ’maggs.”

Quinn stiffened.

John raised his eyebrows.

“Well, uh, if he can affect the electronic field like that, we could certainly use that as a distraction, couldn’t we?”

“Hmm, good save,” John said, squinting at ‘Quinn.’

“Good idea,” Tim said, nodding. “John, I hope you’ve been listening...”

“I have,” John replied. “I’ll help whatever way I can, so long as you rescue Sherri.”

In the force field, the fuzzy shape of a hand giving a ‘thumbs up’ gesture appeared.

John’s heart pounded. “If that’s you, Al... I don’t know how you got here, but thank you.”

He moved to the field, and mirrored the hand gesture, eyes trained on ‘Quinn.’ As anticipated, Quinn’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth curled into a smile. He gave a surreptitious wink.

*It’s him. It’s Sam.*

## 6.3 · CLEANUP CREW

The Waiting Room door slid open, and Quinn sheepishly poked his head in, locking eyes with his double, wearing the aura of Sam. He was sitting on a sofa that he'd managed to make ascend from the floor.

“Hey man, you comfy in here? Sorry to keep you waiting, we just had a crisis to sort out.”

Nexus Quinn was leaning forward, elbows resting on his thighs and hands clasped. He stared daggers at Quinn.

“Why have you brought me here?”

Quinn passed through the doorway, and it slammed shut behind him. “Sorry about all this,” he said. “On the bright side, you’re not in the Kromagg prison now, right?”

“Yeah. I appear to be in some *other* prison, instead.” Nexus Quinn stood from his seat, crossing his arms. “What’s your game? You somehow switched me out with some kind of secret agent, like what happened with Stephanie?”

Quinn gave him a nod. “Yeah, something like that. But it’s only because you... really screwed up. Hall of Fame kind of screwed up. I mean, I’ve met some screw-up Quinns in my time, but you really take the screw-up cake.”

“Okay, I get the picture!”

Quinn chuckled.

“Just trying to describe the gravity of the situation you’ve caused here. We’re your cleanup crew, so to speak.” He paused,

before adding: “Nice to see you again, by the way.”

He held a hand out, and the double didn’t make a move to accept the handshake. Instead, he took a step back.

“We’ve met?”

“Yeah. I’ve run into you more than once, but you’d only remember the first time, I suppose. You chewed out my physics professor, got me fired, and, uh... oh yeah. Kissed my best friend. That made things awkward for a while, so thanks a lot.”

A look of surprise and realisation dawned over Nexus Quinn.

“Wait, that was you?” He squinted, studying Quinn’s face. “Why do you look so...?”

“Old?” Quinn snorted. “Because I’m twenty-nine.”

As he waited for his double to process this information, Quinn took a seat on the sofa, casually crossing a leg over his knee.

“It’s kind of exciting to talk to you when *you’re* the one who doesn’t know what’s going on. I like it.” He patted the seat beside him. “Come on, have a seat. Let’s talk.”

The Quinn double gingerly took a seat, regarding Quinn with great suspicion.

“So, let’s start with why your reflection looks like that, and go from there.”

\* \* \*

Quinn explained as much as he could think to explain. He was certain that if Nexus Quinn would just have the full picture, he’d understand why all of this was happening, and why it was necessary.

After what he guessed to have been several hours, he finally concluded.

“You’ve had whole teams of people dedicating the best years of their lives to undoing your mistake. So the least you could do is accept the help.”

The two sat, wordlessly staring, after this final comment. Nexus Quinn was looking intensely down at his hands, their laced fingers fidgeting as his mind raced. After a minute, he broke the silence.

“Why did this guy replace me after I was already locked up in a cell? What makes you think he’ll be any better at escaping than I might have been?”

Quinn stood, stretching. “He’s been doing this a long time. He’ll find a way.”

“And until then, what, I just gotta hang out in this place and wait?” Nexus Quinn screwed up his face. “Surely you’re enough like me to know I get restless if I’m not doing something.”

Quinn nodded. “I know, I know. That’s why I actually do have a task you can help us with.”

He called up to the ceiling. “Ziggy, could you page Colin for me? Need him in here.”

Ziggy’s voice responded: “Very well, but I’d rather not be treated as a glorified switchboard operator.”

“Aw, I’m sorry, Zigs. At least it’s a change from playing butler to our guest here.”

Nexus Quinn stared at the ceiling. “Who is that you’re talking to?”

“Ziggy is the MVP of this place.” Quinn leaned down toward his double, whispering: “Make nice with her, or she’ll find ways to

make your stay here difficult.”

He straightened, noting Nexus Quinn’s worried look.

“That isn’t a threat, mind you. Just a heads up.” He winked. “She might be a computer, but she has feelings. So keep her happy.”

As the seated Quinn puzzled out the idea of a computer with an emotional temperament, the door of the Waiting Room opened to Colin, carrying the Reality Lens. He waved to the two Quinns as the door shut behind him.

“Hey, how’s it going?” he said, regarding Nexus Quinn nervously. “I’m Quinn’s brother, Colin.”

“Huh...” the double looked at Quinn, his eyebrows meeting. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

He rubbed his chin. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a double of us with a brother. I remember one with a sister, though.”

Colin and Quinn exchanged a glance.

“Well, our family history is a little complex,” said Colin, before holding up the Reality Lens. “Anyway, we need your assistance in fixing this. Needs re-calibration so we can see the real you. Though I’m not sure if it would be weirder to see my brother or my professor when I look at you, honestly.”

Nexus Quinn’s eyes lit up. “Oh, cool! Let me see that thing.”

He stood, reaching for it. Colin pulled it away, and held out his free hand defensively.

“Hey now, hold up! This thing is my baby. Be gentle, okay?”

Nexus Quinn gave him a look. “You think I won’t be delicate with a piece of tech I’ve never seen?”

Colin narrowed his eyes. “You’ve been a dick to just about everyone, including your own wife. I’d be stupid to trust you.”

Nexus Quinn scowled. “All I did was cheat on her. You guys... or who was it? John? Kidnapped her.”

“Oh, is *that* all you did?” Colin stepped closer, menacing. “I think you’re forgetting you also got her killed. Then again, that’s easy to forget when you also got billions of others killed, right?”

Quinn’s double scowled. “All I did was make a miscalculation. You can’t hang all those deaths on me! They haven’t even happened yet!”

“It’s 2003. They’ve *been* happening for *years*.” Colin’s eyes were narrow lines. “You know, the older version of you my brother met actually owned up to his responsibilities.”

Quinn stepped between the two, pushing them apart. “Whoa now, let’s all take a chill pill.”

He turned his head to Colin. “Not helping, bro.”

His gaze shifted to Nexus Quinn. “Look, I’m not here to start shovelling blame onto you for what’s happened. I’ve made some mistakes too, and I know how much it eats me up inside. The older you I met was proof that it’ll do the same to you, if you let it. So let’s just put that aside and work together for now.”

He looked back to his brother. “Let him look at it. I’m sure he wants to see how it works.”

Colin sighed, and handed the Lens to Nexus Quinn. “It’s called a Reality Lens, and its main function is to penetrate a spacetime distortion that alters how something or someone is perceived. Don’t drop it.”

As the leapee began to inspect the device, Quinn gave his brother a pat on the back. “What *was* that? You don’t usually lose



your temper. Thought you were about to smack him one.”

Colin’s mouth straightened to a line. “Sorry. I just couldn’t help thinking about... everything... that was a direct result of his actions. Guess I got carried away.”

He glanced at Nexus Quinn, who was sitting on the couch, still absorbed in studying the Lens. “I think maybe if he didn’t look like Sam, I might’ve actually hit him.”

“Wait. You mean if he looked like *me* you would have hit him?”  
“Exactly.”

Quinn stared a moment at his brother, whose expressionless facade eventually collapsed into a laugh.

“Oh my god, you looked so worried,” he said, grinning.

Quinn shook his head in exasperation. “Who needs to be beaten up when you can hurt me in other ways?”

Colin shot Quinn a triumphant look, and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

## 6.4 · STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS

John paced the halls of the Project, restless. Al had been in the Imaging Chamber for a few hours, and he just wanted some word of what was happening. He couldn't think of anything else; not even the terrifying news about the Reality Lens, which in itself was disastrous.

As he walked, he failed to notice a door open just by him, and he walked directly into Donna, who was leaving her office.

"Oh, sorry," he said, as she stumbled back, looking at him with surprise. "Donna, right?"

Donna gave him a tense nod. "Y-yeah."

He could tell she was uncomfortable looking at him, and he stepped back, giving her space.

"So, uh... you've been avoiding me, haven't you?"

"No, no..." Her cheeks turned red.

John chuckled. "Sure you have. And I get it. It's gotta be weird."

Donna sighed. "Okay, fine. It's weird."

John held up his hands. "Well, don't worry about me. I'm not gonna move in on Sam's turf or anything. You're quite safe from that kind of awkwardness."

Donna stifled a laugh.

"Oh, I know," she said, eyes dancing. "I'm not worried about anything of the sort. I'm only avoiding you because it's just hard

to look at you without thinking of Sam, knowing he might not be coming back.”

She shook her head. “Always avoided the Waiting Room for the same reason.”

“I’m sorry,” said John, giving her a sympathetic look. “Did he give you a proper goodbye this time, at least?”

She nodded, avoiding his eye. “Couldn’t have asked for more.”

“Except for him not to leave?”

“Humph. What’s that Spock quote about the needs of the many?” She shrugged, acting nonchalant, though John could see it was an act. “He has a job to do.”

John smiled, understanding.

Finally, she looked him in the eye. “Do you think the new code will work?”

“I sure hope so,” he said, scuffing his foot on the floor. “If not, *someone’s* going to have to hang back in the Waiting Room for babysitting duties after this place is mothballed.”

The code to which Donna was referring was a late addition, written with the intention of combining leaper and leapee in a state of entanglement. Not like the two Maggies or Quinns had been, exactly, though Sam had used that as a basis for their work. Instead, they had configured it so that the mind of the leapee would relinquish consciousness for the duration of the leap.

However, it was entirely untested. It was to be activated if – and only if – retrieval failed.

Sam had also toyed with the idea of leaping as himself, which he had apparently done twice before, but he hadn’t known how, and he’d attributed it to his higher power concept.

“You don’t think the retrieval will bring him back, do you?” her voice was strained.

He placed a gentle hand on her arm. “I don’t know. It worked the last time, right? But he *wanted* to come back then. So I guess we prepare for all scenarios. Hope for the best, expect the worst.”

Donna flinched. “Sam said the same thing. It’s why we didn’t go through with a divorce, but also why he took out a life insurance policy.”

She gave him a wry smile. “Of course, if I were to ever make the claim, *you’re* going to have to be out of the picture, too.”

“If my Earth is saved, I do intend to return there.” John mirrored her smile. “But if not, you might be stuck with me a while.”

“Guess I’ll have to suck it up,” she said. “Just going to have to think of you as his brother or something.”

She turned to leave, and hesitated, looking back.

“Speaking of brothers, you haven’t met my brother Jack, have you?”

*Huh?*

“No, why?”

Donna awkwardly stared at the floor. “No reason... unless... well, you’re both bachelors. He might be able to take you for a night on the town some time.”

John looked at her, puzzled. “Do I strike you as a ‘night on the town’ kind of guy?”

“You strike me as a... lonely kind of guy.”

John’s cheeks began to burn. “Me? No, I’m fine. I have lots going on. Heck, I’m surrounded by people all the time.”

Donna let out a deep breath. “Okay, let me be a little more blunt. You don’t look at women the same way Sam does. I’m just wondering if maybe you’re...”

“Oh...” John’s eyes went wide, and he turned away from her, rubbing the back of his neck. “Jeez, I didn’t know it was that obvious.”

“So I’m right?”

John hung his head. “Okay, yes. I’m gay.”

“There’s nothing wrong with—”

“Oh, I know all that,” said John, turning back towards Donna. “I lived in San Francisco for twenty years. It’s not a big deal, in *theory*. I’ve just spent my life... doing other things. Important things. You should know, right? Putting your love life on hold and all.”

Donna smiled at him, but her eyes were sad.

“Yeah, I get it.” She took his hand. “You should meet Jack, anyway. You might at least make a friend.”

*Well, it couldn’t hurt.*

“Alright. If you insist.”

At that moment, Al emerged from the Imaging Chamber. John and Donna turned towards him.

“How are things going in there?” asked John, feeling his anxiety rising. “Is Sherri alright?”

Al shook his head. “Haven’t seen her. But you—” he pointed a finger at John, “—should be getting a few new memories any second now.”

“Already?” John tilted his head as he thought back. “Wait... oh... you’re right...”

He laughed as he recalled Quinn muttering ‘oh boy.’

“Huh. So this is what it’s like to have my personal history change on the fly.”

“Gives you the willies, don’t it?”

John nodded, as his ensuing memories of his time on that leap started to lose focus. Not being used to forgetting anything, his heart began to race at the realisation.

“Wow...” he mumbled, clutching his head, “the rest of the leap must be in flux now. Is my memory going to be like this until Sam leaps out?”

“Yeah, ’fraid so, pal.” Al gave him a pat on the back. “Don’t worry too much; Ziggy’s tracking the changes. Whatever you forget will be in the report later.”

John met eyes with Donna, who had a knowing look on her face.

“Sam’s done this to us, on a large scale, *numerous* times,” she said. “It’s just something you get used to. My advice is, don’t think about it too hard.”

“Well that’s easier said than done,” John said, prompting Al to chuckle.

“Welcome to the club.”

\* \* \*

Maggie hoist the cordless phone to her ear as she stirred the pasta on the stove, and looked out into the common room, where Rembrandt watched *Passions*, Sammy Jo typed something on a

laptop, and Alia stood at a punching bag in the corner, letting out her frustrations with violent strikes.

And finally, leaning upright against a wall, stood Tom; his arms folded as he watched her.

She turned her attention to the phone. “What’s up, Quinn?”

“So, we’ve got a, uh, troubling situation over here.”

Maggie let go of the spoon, and it slumped against the side of the cooking pot.

“Did something go wrong? Is Uncle Sam alright?”

“No, Sam’s okay, I think. It’s about the Reality Lens.”

As Quinn described the situation to her, she felt herself break into a cold sweat.

“Tell me this is a joke, Quinn...”

“It isn’t a joke.”

“So... what... anyone could be...?”

“Almost anyone. We’ve ruled out John, Sam, and Al for reasons related to the Imaging Chamber. Wouldn’t work right if it wasn’t them. But until we can fix the Lens, we can’t trust anyone else.”

Maggie felt her stomach churn. “I see.”

“And that’s why you need to let everyone there know while I’m still on the line... you know... just in case *you’re* the impostor.”

Maggie frowned. “I guess that’s fair.”

She pulled the phone from her face. “Hey everyone? In case you felt relaxed today, I have some bad news.”

## 6.5 · PROGRESS

Alia gazed down into the steaming ripples of her tea as she listened to the din of the San Antonio tavern around her. The layers of voices held a certain comfort. Safety in numbers.

Nonetheless, she also felt alone. With John busy at the Project – where she was understandably unwelcome – she had nobody to trust. So she had to get out of that place. So she went to the only place she knew would have a smattering of strangers.

But, even now, she felt vulnerable. It was this very town where the energy surge had been detected.

Her eyes moved from face to face around her. Nobody was looking at her.

*Good.*

With trembling hands, she drew the tea cup to her lips and sipped.

“Hey.”

She choked on the tea, as a hand landed on her shoulder from behind. She whipped her head around to see Rembrandt smiling at her.

“Uh, sorry, did I scare you?”

Alia placed down her cup, as she recovered. “Maybe a little. I’m just on edge.”

The singer took a seat across from her at the table, and looked at her with a sympathetic smile.



“Yeah, things just got a bit paranoid, didn’t they?” He bit his lip, reading her nervous expression. “Look, if you came here for some space, I can go.”

He made a move to stand.

“No, it’s alright,” she said. “I’m scared, but I’d also appreciate a little company, I guess.”

She glanced around the bar. “I don’t think much can happen to me with this many people around,” she added.

He settled back into his seat. “Alright. If I make you uncomfortable, just say the word and I’m gone.”

Alia offered him a weak smile. “I appreciate that.”

Rembrandt took a salt shaker from the centre of the table, and started turning it in his hand.

“You think they’re gonna get the Lens fixed up?” he asked, as his hands passed the small glass shaker from one hand to the other.

“That’s what they promised.” She took another sip of her tea.

“Let’s hope so. Kinda hard to be around everyone right now, huh? That’s why I came here, too.” He let out a laugh. “Maybe I been watching too many soap operas. Everything someone does, I look at ’em and think ‘hmm, is that in character?’ But I think I’m just working myself up.”

“I guess you’d know better than me. I don’t know anyone well enough to pick out things of that nature.”

Rembrandt sank his head into his hands, leaving the salt shaker on its side, a few white grains scattered around it.

“What’s the future like?” he asked without warning.

“Huh?” Alia asked as she tried to understand the train of thought that had led him to asking that.

“Just been wanting to ask, ever since our last chat. You’re from 2023, you said. So you must know all kinds of things that are gonna happen.”

“Talk about a change of subject.” Alia couldn’t help but let out a giggle.

*But I guess it’ll relax me a little.*

“Well, what kind of things do you wanna know?”

He leaned in toward her, whispering. “Been hearing the government is planning some kind of war in Iraq. That true?”

Alia groaned. “You had to start with that? Oh yeah, that happens, and it’ll be just as much of a mess as you might imagine. Based on lies, too.”

Rembrandt winced. “Okay, I’ll try something less heavy... how about music? Disco ever make a comeback?”

Alia screwed up her face as she thought back. “I don’t think so, but I’m not a big music person. I think it skipped from funk revival to eighties revival.”

“Damn shame,” he said, shaking his head. “Had me some good times at the discotheque.”

“After the pandemic of 2020, people did a bit less intermingling on dance floors,” said Alia, and waited for his shocked expression.

“Pandemic? You’re kiddin’ me, right?”

Alia forced a laugh. “Uh. Yeah. Just yanking your chain...”

She didn’t really want to get into all that. In fact, those twenty years had not had a lot of highlights, in retrospect. Recessions, political chaos, hatred, economic inequality. She had to wonder

how much of that had been a result of meddling by her fellow leapers.

“Oh, there’s one thing that goes right,” she finally said, after shuffling through her memories. “Same sex marriage becomes legal in a lot of places. Eventually. Though, things get worse in other ways...”

Rembrandt raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like the future ain’t got much to offer, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so. But at least there are smartphones! They’re like whole computers built into your phone, connected wirelessly to the internet. You can talk to... abusive people on the internet... whenever you want.” Alia deflated. “You know what? I’m not looking forward to reliving the next couple decades.”

She leaned back in her chair, considering her predicament. “That’s if I live that long.”

“You really think these guys want to...?” Rembrandt drew a line across his throat.

“Oh, definitely. Well, they’ll probably want to torture me first.” Alia spoke plainly, resigned to the notion.

Rembrandt frowned. “You said they were victims like you. What if they want outta there as much as you did?”

Alia considered this.

*I suppose they would never have admitted it to me, not while we were under that sort of scrutiny.*

“All of us are... very damaged people. I don’t know how any of the others would react to the offer to escape, to be completely honest.”

*Though I have an inkling about Zoey’s reaction.*

“And I couldn’t offer that anyway,” she added. “I don’t even know how it happened to me to begin with.”

Rembrandt gazed into the distance, lost in thought. “That’s too bad.”

\* \* \*

“Aha! There you are!” Quinn cried, overcome with relief as he peered into the Reality Lens.

The man who had looked like Sam a moment ago, had finally shifted into the form of a younger Quinn, as Colin painstakingly turned a screwdriver micrometre by micrometre, tuning into exactly the right wavelength to nullify the aura.

“Oh, thank god,” Colin breathed, closing up the tiny hatch on the side of the device, and wiping his brow. Quinn held it out to him.

“Give it to John and we can finally put our minds at ease.”

“Got it,” Colin said. “Do you really plan on staying in here with... you?”

Quinn shrugged. “Only as long as he has questions. And I’m pretty sure he has many. Get going.”

“Okay, I’m going.” He strode towards the door, which Ziggy opened as he approached. He left, with the parting words: “Thank you, Ziggy.”

\* \* \*

Sam rubbed his eyes, a welcome relief from staring at the ceiling of the cell.

It had been a frustrating hour, with Al being gone, and some attempts at communicating with John that hadn't been very fruitful. He wasn't even sure if John remained here at present.

He glanced over at Tim on the other bench, whose head was resting on the wall as he sat, trying to think of a way to escape.

And finally, the sound of the Imaging Chamber door heralded Al's return.

"Good news, Sam," he said, emerging through the wall. "The Reality Lens is functional again. John's off checking everyone as we speak."

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. This had been quite a fiasco. Of all the things to be discovered *after* he'd left, he could scarcely think of anything worse.

"Listen, don't be worrying about all that. We'll take care of it. You worry about getting outta this cage, alright?"

Sam looked at him expectantly.

*Well? How do I do that?*

"I'm working on it, okay? Ziggy's just gotta locate Sherri and we can run some scenarios."

*Okay. I'll just... be here, then.*

Sam turned his attention to the force field. "John? You still here? Which way to Sherri?"

After a moment, the shape of a hand appeared, pointing downward.

"Well, that's a start. Thanks, buddy."

“Good thinking,” Al said, giving an approving nod. “I’ll tell Ziggy to start scanning below us, and I’ll just go have a look around myself.”

He pressed a button on the handlink, and began slowly lowering into the floor as if he was on an elevator. He waved, as his image disappeared into the concrete.

## 6.6 • AMONG US

“Okay, everyone line up in front of me, single file. Shouldn’t be a long process, so don’t fight for a spot, okay?”

The dummy warehouse was, unusually, full of people: Project staffers, security, and those from the depths of the facility below the warehouse.

John pulled open the Reality Lens, and held it over his eye as the crowd queued up before him.

First in line stood Gooshie, who John understood was more or less Project Quantum Leap’s version of Will: programmer, tech guy, workaholic, just a little neurotic.

“I don’t know why I’m nervous,” he said, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. “I’m ninety-eight per cent certain I am who I think I am. But there is a minor chance I’m a leaper that’s so heavily psycho-synergised that I’ve forgotten my own identity.”

“Well, I suppose that’s not *completely* outside the realm of possibility,” John said, suppressing laughter.

The image within the Lens matched John’s own perception, and he gave the little guy a thumbs up.

“Well, don’t worry about that, Gooshie. You’re good to go. Next, please!”

Gooshie let out a held breath, and stepped away, where an already-checked Donna confirmed his security credentials in her wristlink, allowing him clearance back into the Project.

Doctor Beeks was the next in line.

“My door’s still open,” she said, as John confirmed her identity. “Any time, you can come talk to me. Really.”

John gave her a look.

“Why is everyone trying to analyse me lately?” He gave a pointed glance at Donna. “You’re clear.”

Verbena stepped towards Donna, and they exchanged a look.

“We care about you very much,” Donna said. “That’s all.”

John frowned, and turned back to the line-up. One by one, each person was cleared. After a while, Sammy Jo met eyes with him.

“Oh, hey,” she said, awkwardly twirling a lock of her hair.

John found himself grinning at her without realising he’d been doing it. It was the first he’d seen of her since hearing the bizarre, but exciting, news that Sam had fathered her during a leap.

“Well hi. I heard what happened... you doing okay?” he said, looking into the Reality Lens, and seeing that she was who she said she was.

She contemplated his question for a moment. “Mixed feelings, I guess. It’s a shame I wasn’t able to get to know him before he had to leave again.”

“Yeah, that must be tough. Well, if there are any questions you wish you’d asked... I *may* be able to help. Not on everything, of course.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. “Am I cleared?”

John nodded, gesturing towards Donna. She moved toward her new stepmother.

“Doctor Elesee...” she said. Donna smiled.



“For years I’ve been trying to get you to address me as Donna,” she said. “If ever there was a time, it’s now that you know about your father.”

Sammy Jo bowed her head. “Alright, alright. *Donna*. Listen... I’m sorry about my security breach last week.”

“Sammy, if Sam had been a bit more proactive, like I wanted, you’d never have needed to resort to that. So let’s call it even.”

She hugged Sammy Jo, before tapping the wristlink and reactivating her security clearance.

John turned back to the dwindling queue, and his eyes popped open when he saw Tom.

“Tom? I thought you’d have already left now that Sam’s gone.” He lowered the Reality Lens. “I don’t think we even need to scan you, do we?”

Tom smiled. “Maggie invited me.”

*So she took my advice after all.*

He continued: “And all I heard was that everyone needed checking, so here I am.”

John shrugged, and held the Lens to his eye.

“Yeah, you’re all good.” He lowered it, and re-established eye contact with the man his own brother might have become. “When you’re done with Maggie, I... I think I’d like to spend some time with you, too.”

“I think that can be arranged,” said Tom, patting John on the shoulder, before turning to Donna.

“How are you holding up since Sam left again?” he asked her.

“Oh, I’m a trooper. It’s back to the status quo, really.”

John tuned out the rest of their conversation as he looked to the next in line. Maggie winked as he checked her over.

“Can you imagine if there was some leaper trying to figure out *my* family dynamics when my *alternate universe Dad* showed up? Oh boy, they’d have their work cut out.”

John chuckled. “Yeah, I heard Sam was a little bewildered when he leaped into you instead of Sherri.”

“Even Ziggy was bewildered,” she said with an amused grin.

“You’re clear,” John said with a resolute nod. He would have hoped he’d know a real Maggie if he saw one, by now.

She moved aside to Donna, who fished her warehouse keycard from a crate beside her. Attached was an envelope, which Donna pointed to.

“This has the new access PINs for your rooms below,” she explained.

“Thanks,” Maggie said, accepting the offering, and joining Tom as the two of them walked away. John noted they were walking quite closely together, and he smiled at the possibilities that closeness suggested.

John turned back to the queue, and noted just a few military guys he didn’t know remained.

He leaned toward Donna. “Where are Alia and Rembrandt?”

Donna’s brow furrowed as she noted she hadn’t returned their keycards.

“I don’t know. But I think they’re... the only ones left.”

*Why do I have a bad feeling about this?*

*Huh? What happened?*

Alia's eyes fluttered open to see a dark, starry sky. She was lying on a dusty surface, but it was too dark to see anything but the sky, and the far off horizon with the hint of a glow.

*I'm in the desert?*

With a start, she realised that the last thing she remembered was approaching her motorcycle.

She attempted to sit up, and found her head was overcome with pain.

*Well that may explain how I lost consciousness...*

"You really don't know how you escaped, huh?" Rembrandt's voice was shaky.

Alia turned her head to see the dimly lit silhouette sitting on the ground beside her.

"Rembrandt...?"

"Oh, come on, Alia. You're not stupid. I was the *one* other person who left after we all found out the Reality Lens was being fixed."

Alia let out a breath. She hadn't wanted to believe it.

The mystery leaper was passing a revolver between their hands, in a similar fashion to the way she'd seen them with the salt shaker earlier. Each movement made the moonlight glint off the gun when it hit certain angles.

"I'm surprised nobody worked it out," the leaper continued. "Everyone seemed so preoccupied. Never looked twice at the guy

watching a stupid show on TV all day.”

“Which one are you?” Alia asked, finally reaching a sitting position.

*It can't be Zoey, they're not acting like her at all.*

“...Thames?”

“Just because I leaped into a black man, you think I'm Thames? Alia... *really.*”

“Well then... who?”

The silhouette of Rembrandt paused for a moment.

“Okay, okay. You were right the first time.” Thames laughed. “Lucky guess.”

He peered into the chamber of his gun, then closed it with a click.

*He's going to kill me. How can I buy time?*

“What happened to Zoey?”

“Oh come on, straight to Zoey? No, ‘how have *you* been, Thames?’ Alia, I'm hurt.” He climbed to his feet, looming over her. “Who cares about Zoey? What about you and me?”

He placed a finger under her chin, tilting her face upward. “When I saw you on New Years Eve I could hardly believe it. Lothos had no clue you'd show up. He thought you were being handed to us on a silver platter.”

“And what did *you* think?” She wrenched her chin away from his hand, at the expense of a wave of pain.

“Me?” he turned away, looking up at the moon. “I saw an opportunity.”

He reached into his pocket, and produced a quartz crystal.

“I was here to get my hands on these things,” he said, holding it up so it caught the light. “Lothos wanted sliding tech, and the enhanced retrieval, as described in Senator Grady’s old correspondence with his, uh, benefactors. See, it only showed up in those records recently, so Lothos knew it was a major find.”

With a grunt, Thames threw the crystal into the distance with as much force as he could muster.

“Fuck that.”

Alia’s eyes grew wide.

*He’s defying Lothos?*

Thames dropped to his knees. “Alia, I need your help.”

## 6.7 · PURE DISSOCIATION

Sherri gave Kasyr a wide, joyless grin as the Kromagg burst into the room, and switched on the lights.

“Ah, you came back,” she cooed, doing her best to hide her anxiety. “You really care about me, don’t you?”

Kasyr didn’t reply, opting instead to stare at her, arms folded over her chest, as two more Kromaggs entered the room. One, a soldier, was carrying a heavy-looking machine by a handle, which he placed on the floor to her right. The other, who wore a lab coat, moved to her left.

“Is that a boombox?” Sherri asked. “Hey, can you play the Spice Girls?”

Kasyr’s head fell to one side. “I don’t know what nonsense you’re spouting. But it doesn’t matter.”

She nodded to the soldier. “Activate it.”

Sherri couldn’t see what was happening, but after hearing a few switches being flipped, the air around her filled with an unpleasant static energy. Unpleasant, but not painful per se.

“Tuning...” said the soldier. The energy around Sherri seemed to shift in a way that she couldn’t describe, but it gave her a tingling sensation in her extremities.

Then, all at once, it felt like a lightning bolt struck her. She cried out as a pain shot through her, and then subsided.

Sherri laughed. “I’ve had worse.”

She wasn't lying, either. When she'd been merged with Maggie, the continuous pain towards the end had been on a scale far greater than whatever that had been.

"We weren't trying to cause you pain just now," Kasyr said. "That was just a bonus."

She approached Sherri, looking at her intently.

"So *that's* what you really look like. Fascinating."

*What did they do to me?*

Sherri grimaced, squirming in her shackles.

"Ah, that wiped the smile off your face, didn't it?" Kasyr laughed; a smug, mean-spirited laugh that bared teeth, but left her eyes without light in them. "Whatever cloaking technology you're using is close enough to our own perception alteration that we've been able to adapt our nullification field to you."

She stepped back, gesturing to the Kromagg to Sherri's left.

"You can't be from this Earth. But, you didn't come here with Quinn, either. Where is your Transdimensional Facilitator? It must be hidden somewhere."

"Trans *what?*" Sherri genuinely didn't know what she was talking about.

Kasyr sighed. "I believe Quinn calls it his 'timer.'"

Sherri's smile returned. "Oh."

*They don't know I got here without one.*

"Oh, you know. It's hidden somewhere in that other tree. Good luck finding it."

*Maybe this can buy me time.*

Kasyr nodded towards the Kromagg in the lab coat, and Sherri's head felt a strange sensation, as though there was a tongue licking

her brain. She screwed up her face.

“Eww, what the hell?”

“Commander, there’s no TF device,” the Kromagg said.

*He went into my head? Oh, not cool.*

Sherri hadn’t come all this way without preparation, of course. She had learned numerous techniques to resist mental manipulation, but it wasn’t like she’d had a Kromagg around to train with. This was a new experience for her, and one she’d need to adapt to.

From Quinn’s notes, it didn’t seem like they could reach very far into a person’s mind. They could tell lies from truth, and perhaps read surface thoughts. Sherri would just have to keep her mind clear. Ignore the questions. Distract herself.

*John would be useful right about now. Where is he?*

“Who is ‘John?’” the mind-reading Kromagg asked.

Sherri winced, and forced herself to think about something else.

*A movie. What’s a movie you’ve seen lately?*

She filled her mind with scenes from *Titanic*. The Kromagg scowled, grunting in frustration.

“What is this garbage?”

“Garbage?” Sherri asked, with an innocent smile. “It’s only the highest grossing movie of all time.”

As she tried to hold on to the thoughts, the scenes kept slipping away from her mind. She wasn’t sure if it was through the effort of the Kromagg or simply that her memory was failing her. She scrambled to flip through her vast pop culture knowledge for more distractions.

Then, she heard music.



It wasn't her mind, it was coming from somewhere else. A familiar three high-pitched notes that made Sherri's heart jump.

*Plink-plink-plink. Plink-plink-plink.* It was a delicate, magical sound, and Sherri knew what was coming next.

*"Come with me, and you'll be..."*

The knot in Sherri's stomach unravelled as John stepped through the wall, dressed in a purple coat and brown top hat, and a large bow tie. He wore the same candy stripe trousers Al had given him.

*"In a world of pure imagination..."*

*Gay Willy Wonka.*

Slung over his shoulder hung a sparkling keytar, with which he played the three notes as he walked towards her.

Sherri grinned at him, and began to giggle. He winked back at her, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

*"Take a look and you'll see, into your imagination..."*

The Kromagg in the lab coat faltered.

"What..." he said, struggling to comprehend what was happening.

Kasyr's eyes, which had been locked on Sherri, drifted towards John for a moment, before she caught herself, and moved her gaze back to Sherri.

*"We'll begin with a spin, travelling in the world of my creation..."*

"Something is interfering with my concentration, commander," said the mind reader. "All I'm picking up is some... song?"

*"What we'll see will defy explanation."*

Kasyr lurched forward, her face stopping inches away from Sherri's. "What are you doing?"

Sherri avoided her gaze, as John moved to her side and she watched him perform.

Between lines, John leaned in, whispering into her ear.

"You're gonna be okay. Trust me. Just hold on a little longer."

Despite everything, that whispered assurance was all it took to ease her mind.

John took a step back, and switched the instrument synth on the keytar from glockenspiel to strings.

*"If you want to view paradise,"* he sung in his pitch perfect falsetto, *"Simply look around and view it..."*

Kasyr's head turned towards John again.

"What's there?! Why do I keep looking at nothing?"

*"Anything you want to, do it..."*

The mind reader looked perplexed. "I can't see anything, but for some reason I'm picturing a human with... a top hat?"

Sherri joined John's performance, and together they sang the next lines.

*"Want to change the world? There's nothing to it..."*

Kasyr grabbed the mind reader by the wrist.

"Get out of here," she said, roughly pulling him towards the door. She turned to the soldier on the other side of the room. "You too. Leave, the both of you."

The Kromaggs hurried out of the room, as the enraged woman slammed the door shut. She turned back around, rolling up her sleeves.

“I don’t know how you’re doing this, but let’s see if you can keep it up after I’m through.”

Sherri ignored her, keeping her gaze on John.

‘*Hold on a little longer,*’ he’d told her. Whatever he’d meant by that, that was exactly what she’d do.

“*There is no life I know, to compare with pure imagination,*” John sang, with Sherri quietly singing along.

A fist landed square in her stomach, winding her. She gasped for breath.

*Ignore it. You’re not here. You’re with John.*

John’s face flinched as the woman threw another punch.

Sherri kept her eyes glued to his, pleading silently for him to pretend with her that none of this was happening. He seemed to understand, and continued his song, looking away from the violence that he couldn’t stop.

*“Living there, you’ll be free, if you truly wish to be.”*

The pain of the beating dulled as Sherri began to dissociate. Each blow tried to pull her mind back to the pain, but the further her mind got away from it, the less difficult it was to resist feeling it.

By the time a fist to her head knocked her out cold, she didn’t feel a thing.

## 6.8 • REDEMPTION ARC

“What do you *mean* you need my help?”

Alia was thrown for a loop. Of all the possibilities she'd imagined when the leaper made themselves known, this had to be far, far down the list.

“Help. H-E-L-P. Assistance. Support. Surely you are familiar with the concept?” he flailed his arms, holding the gun by its barrel, before leaning in close to her, his hot breath against her cheek.

“Listen, bestie. Here's the gossip around the water cooler back at base: Lothos has a big-time bounty on your head. And it's not because he's all heartbroken over your betrayal, it's because of what you represent.”

He moved his lips to her ear, whispering. “Hope.”

Alia drew away from him, making eye contact. Thames's wild eyes shone with a layer of what may have been tears.

“Lothos can't have subordinates thinking there's a way out, now can he? Killing you would be a clear message: defy him and die. But with you out here, alive? Well, maybe we all get some ideas. Maybe there's a little mutiny. Maybe Lothos gets a hatchet to his bitch-ass motherboard.”

Thames flipped open his gun's cylinder and let the bullets drop to the sand.

“Look, I'm running out of time. She'll be back any minute.”

He grabbed a handful of sand and covered up the shining ammo, before closing the cylinder.

“She?”

Thames looked at Alia as if the answer was obvious. And, she figured, it must have been.

“Zoey,” she said with a sigh.

“Oh, Alia, as soon as she saw you, she was *mega* PO’d that she wasn’t the leaper. But there’s no time to get into that now.”

He grabbed her by the arms. “I can’t let her know I’m not dancing to her tune, if you catch my drift. Just play along. Pretend it’s a loaded gun, capisce?”

“Why should I?”

“Aliaaa, come onnn!” Thames whined. “I thought you were trying to be the hero now. I’m begging you to help me; surely you can’t turn away an old pal who wants to change.”

His white teeth glinted as he gave her a wide grin. “*WWSD: What Would Sam Do?*”

*Of course Sam would help him. But Sam is too trusting.*

“Thames, I want to help you, but I can’t believe a word you say. You realise that, don’t you?”

Thames gestured wildly at the ground. “I *literally* just buried all my bullets. You can probably take me in a straight fight. I saw you smacking around that punching bag earlier. Don’t really want to be on the receiving end of one of those punches.”

He clutched his head in frustration, as he struggled to make his case. “I’m laying it all out, here. What more do you want from me? I could prostrate myself, if that’s what you need.”

He began to lower himself to the ground.

“Stop,” Alia said, feeling intensely uncomfortable. “Fine, I’ll play along. But... we both have to be careful. Zoey is crafty. She... *lurks*. Sometimes I had no idea she was there.”

Thames rose back to a kneel, beaming.

“You don’t have to tell me. She lost her fitness to leap when your boy Beckett unloaded a shotgun into her chest, and I got stuck with *her* looking over *my* shoulder.” He pouted. “Much preferred it the other way round. Which, frankly, is not unrelated to our current exchange.”

Alia touched a finger to the sore spot on her head, just under her hairline by her left temple. She winced as it bloomed with pain.

“You didn’t need to hurt me.”

“What, you were planning to come quietly?” He shook his head. “You know the drill.”

Alia frowned as she recalled Zoey’s callous words: ‘*Skip the fuss, just concuss.*’

As though Zoey’s words in her mind somehow summoned her, Thames stiffened, and gave her a pointed glance, before aiming the gun at her, and climbing to his feet. His expression shifted back to one of irreverence as he turned his head towards wherever Zoey had emerged.

“Evening, Z-Dog. Me and Alia were just having a catch-up sesh.”

“Z-Dog?” Alia said with a snort. “Oh Zoey, is that what you’re letting him call you?”

Thames smirked. “Oh, she hates it. But what’s she gonna do? Hit me?”

With a childish smile, he poked his tongue out in the direction of the hologram, who Alia imagined must have been fuming.

*At one time I would have been able to see her too. They must have cut me out.*

Thames listened to Zoey saying something for a moment, before turning back to Alia.

“So, seems our mutual BFF wants me to... put you through some things on her behalf. Tell me... how’s your pain threshold?”

Alia stared at him, eyes wide.

*He expects me to play along with this?*

\* \* \*

When Sam awoke from a nap that couldn’t have lasted more than twenty minutes, Tim was staring at the force field as though he was willing it to do something.

“Something happening?” he asked, rubbing his eyes as he sat up.

“Nope, nothing,” Tim said, sounding frantic. “Incommunicado.”

He turned towards Sam, a glint of desperation in his eye.

“Quinn, I’m scared.”

“What is this all of a sudden?” Sam asked, standing. Tim pulled at his hair with his fingers nervously.

“What if all this was tricks?” he said, grabbing Sam by the shoulders. “They can make you see things. Things you *want* to see.”

“You said you didn’t tell ’em about John. How would they know to do this?”

Tim’s grip tightened. “I didn’t, but what if Sherri did? They coulda been playing us for information.”

Sam raised his hands, returning the grip.

“Hey, it’s alright. Breathe.” He demonstrated, taking a deep breath. Tim hesitantly followed his order, and they exhaled in unison. “Okay, hopefully we’re feeling a little calmer, thinking more clearly. Now listen, why exactly would they trick us into thinking we have a chance of escape? You kept saying their strategy was to make us all give up hope, right?”

“They let Sherri escape, so—”

“So they could see what she was gonna do, you told me.” Sam gave a slow, circular gesture with his hand. “But they have no reason to wonder about that with us, right? We’re just loose ends they’re getting ready to cut.”

Tim thought for a moment, before relaxing his grip.

“Yeah... yeah, I guess you have a point. I dunno why they’d want us to think we can get out of here.” He met Sam’s eye. “Thanks, I feel better.”

Sam gazed into Tim’s eyes, searching.

It was a similar line of thought to what he’d just described, that led Sam to say what he said next.

“Tim, I’m gonna get us out of here, but you need to promise me you won’t tell the Kromaggs anything else. Not now, not ever. Because there are things you’ll need to know that they absolutely can’t know.”

Tim’s eyes were saucers as he nodded. “I... I’m gonna die if we stay here, and I’m gonna die if they catch me, so there’s no use



sayin' anything else. I promise."

Sam, hoping his gut was not steering him wrong, broke eye contact, and stepped back from Tim.

"In that case..." he held out a hand. "Hi, I'm Sam. I... well, I'm Sherri's uncle. Pleasure to meet you."

Tim froze for a moment, before blinking, looking Sam up and down, and tentatively grasping his hand.

"When did you..."

Sam gave a firm shake. "Just a few hours ago."

"How do you... just take a guy's place and nobody even sees it happen?"

"Trade secret," he said with a wink.

Sam let go of Tim's hand, and it dropped to his side, as the bewildered man stood in silent contemplation.

"Listen," Sam added, with his voice lowered, "I can't see John either, but I have my own guy out tracking down Sherri right now. When he gets back, we can come up with a real plan."

Tim's pale face gave a weak nod. He was a man facing his last chance to do something right, and Sam believed he had it in him.

"Tim, listen to me. We're going to make it out, we just have to stick together and trust each other. Got it?"

The shell-shocked look on Tim's face finally resolved into determination.

"Got it." A smile formed on his lips. "I won't let Sherri down this time."

## 6.9 • CRUELTY

“Guess you’d better pull off that leather jacket,” Thames said, gesturing with the revolver.

*Are you really going through with this?*

Alia gave him an intense look, before she shimmied the jacket down her shoulders, exposing her babydoll t-shirt. Immediately, the January night’s chill sent a shiver down her spine.

She looked out into the night, roughly where Thames had been glancing. “Wouldn’t you rather do this yourself?”

She let a mirthful smile creep onto her face as she added: “...Z-Dog?”

Thames sniggered, fiddling with the belt in his jeans. “You know in cartoons when someone gets so angry their face goes beet red and they start blowing steam out their ears? That’s Zoey right now. Ooh, she’s a salty cracker.”

He pulled the belt out, and eyed the buckle. “Feel like I’m a Daddy from the Reagan era.”

He leaned towards her with an impish look. “Or maybe just an average Friday night with the crew, am I right?” He straightened, giving the belt a test swing.

“Bend over, naughty girl. And lose the top, would you?”

*A belt buckle, I can handle. But I’m sure this is nothing but a warm-up if Zoey gets her way.*

As she pulled off her t-shirt, she clenched her jaw, waiting for the first strike.

*Crack.*

Alia kept her face blank as he whipped the belt against her exposed skin. She wasn't going to give Zoey the satisfaction.

*How much punishment does he expect me to take?*

After several more lashings, he took her hair in his fist, and pulled her ear to his lips.

“Why aren't you fighting back?” he whispered fiercely, before dramatically running his tongue up the side of her face, and throwing her back to the dusty ground.

*Why didn't you tell me that's what you wanted me to do?*

Slowly, she brought her cheek off the dirt, and glanced back at Thames with narrow eyes, trying to identify the breadcrumbs he'd left for her.

*Crack.*

He held the gun loosely in his left hand. *Noticeably* loosely.

*Crack.*

In his jeans pocket, something glinted in the moonlight – a cell phone was slightly poking out.

*Crack.*

Thames groaned, and began winding the belt around his hand. He was standing with one leg crossed over the other, foot on its side.

“Z-Dog, she's not even reacting to this. What's the point? She's not a t-bone; we don't need to tenderise the piggy before we spit-roast her.” He paused for a moment. “Wait, I messed up that metaphor, didn't I?”

*He's giving me an opening.*

Alia thrust her leg back, striking the ankle that was bearing all of his weight. He stumbled back and fell, allowing the gun to fly out of his hand.

“Ugh! Hey!” he moaned, flailing in a melodramatic display, as Alia scrambled to her feet, scooping up the gun in the process.

She trained it on him, noting the hint of a smile on his face that the near-full moon saw fit to illuminate. He raised his hands.

“Uh, you got me,” he said, rising slowly to his feet and letting out a nervous chuckle as his eyes looked towards Zoey. “Oopsie.”

Alia raised an eyebrow. “Give me that cell phone in your pocket there, and turn around.”

He followed her direction, facing away from her. “Okay, I’ll go quietly.”

Alia smirked. “Why don’t I make us even?”

“What do you m—”

She slammed the grip of the gun into the back of his head, and he fell to the ground.

“Just skipping the fuss, right?”

Alia dialled a number into the phone, and as she waited for a connection, she looked around into the emptiness.

“Hey, Zoey? Tell Lothos I said ‘hi,’ would you?”

“Hello?” came a voice on the phone. “Rembrandt? We’ve been looking every—”

“John, it’s me.”

“Alia? Are you okay? Why are you on Rembrandt’s cell?”

Alia sighed. “Why do you think?”

The creak of the window in the iron door caused Rembrandt to stir. He looked blearily upward at the face looking through the small opening.

*Just leave me the hell alone.*

The redhead woman known as Zoey was glaring at him, notably less smug than usual. He couldn't tell whether that was a good or a bad sign.

"How's your head?" she asked, her voice flat.

"What do you m—" he began to sit up, and noted that the back of his head was throbbing. "Ow... what the devil?"

"You can thank Alia for that."

Every day since he'd found himself here in the 'Holding Chamber,' Zoey had been telling him all about the dastardly things this Thames guy had been getting up to while wearing his face. But since someone named Alia had come into the picture, she was almost all Zoey had talked about. The two of them must have had some history.

"How can she make *my* head hurt?" he asked, rubbing the sore spot, but it didn't seem like there was any actual injury there.

Zoey smirked at him.

"Psycho-synergy, my dear." She raised her eyebrows. "And here I thought you and your friends knew all about the leaping process."

*Psycho-huh? Only psycho round here is you.*

Zoey's face turned stormy. "Thames was sloppy. Alia got the better of him, and that pain in your head is a result of her

beating.”

“Good for her,” Rembrandt said with a smile. “Hope she hurts him some more.”

“The marvellous thing about psycho-synergy, Mister Brown, is that it works both ways,” Zoey said smoothly, the corners of her mouth turning upward. “So you’d better hope that Thames gets himself out of this mess, or I’ll have you put on the rack and punish the both of you at once.”

With a grin, she shut the opening in the door, leaving Remy alone again. He leaned back against the cold wall.

*Why am I always the one getting locked up and tortured? First the 'mags, now this? Ain't I got enough trauma by now?*

\* \* \*

“Hey, guards? I think there’s something wrong with this barrier!”

Sam stood before the force field that stood between him and freedom, as Al traced a finger through it, resulting in unusual-looking disruptions.

After a moment, a Kromagg soldier emerged from a corner, and looked, puzzled, at the electric ripples.

“If this is a standard electro-carbonic hybrid shield,” Sam said, hoping this grunt was not well-versed enough in the technology to see through his bluff, “then I think these patterns suggest a potentially catastrophic failure of the nobellium generator. If you don’t want a global short of the circuit breakers on this floor that may result in a radiation leak, I’d suggest you fix it. But that’s just

the opinion of the guy who invented transdimensional wormholes on his own, so take it or leave it.”

As the soldier scurried away to find a superior, Al burst into laughter.

“What kinda nonsense was that, Sam?”

Sam grinned. “I’m sure it sounded... authoritative.”

Sam turned to Tim, who was hovering behind him.

“Get ready.”

\* \* \*

“Wake up, you pathetic human.”

Sherri’s dazed feeling slowly subsided, and her eyes focused on Kasyr, as the pain of her beating made itself known to her again.

“Th-thanks,” she murmured. “I needed that nap.”

As she spoke, she spat out blood that had been pooling in her mouth. It was possible she’d also spat out a tooth, but she didn’t want to think about that.

“Sherri, I’m still here,” John whispered into her ear. “Hang on, I promise help is coming.”

She understood why he was being so vague. The mind-readers couldn’t get any details. Frankly, she didn’t know who could possibly be coming to help her. But, she trusted John more than anyone. She knew he wouldn’t lie to her.

“You know,” said the Kromagg woman, “a human eyeball is no different to a Kromagg eyeball. They taste the same. Or so I’ve heard.”

She stared intensely at Sherri's eyes. "They're a delicacy because they're a status symbol. To have a stock of pickled eyes is to show your dominance. To serve them at a banquet is the height of opulence."

She licked her lips. "I wonder what *yours* would go for on the black market?"

"That's pretty gross, not gonna lie," said Sherri, screwing up her face. "But if you take them, at least I won't have to look at your ugly face, so that's a silver lining."

Kasyr smirked. "Then perhaps I'll just take the one."

She moved out of Sherri's line of sight.

"Uh, Sherri..." John said, panic rising in his voice. "I don't think she's bluffing."

"Can't help but notice you're the only Kromagg woman around here," Sherri said, hoping to buy time.

"Yes, funny story, that." She appeared back in Sherri's field of view, holding up a wicked looking tool, with an obvious purpose. "Humans on our home world did something to us when they sent us away. Since then, every Kromagg who gives birth dies in the process, and usually the babies, too. But they are forced to carry babies to term, anyway, for the survival of the Dynasty. And they willingly do so."

"They never forced you?"

"I don't have the capacity to give birth," she said, eyeing the tool, which had four arms coming off it, and a concave dish at the centre. "So I support my species in other ways."

"*Who can take a sunrise...*" John's voice warbled, as he jammed on the keytar.



Kasyr slammed her hand on Sherri's forehead, forcing it still, and pulled her left eyelid open with her thumb.

*"Sprinkle it in dew..."*

Sherri winced as the tool was thrust towards her.

"Come on, look over here, you horrible witch!" John shouted, slamming a hand on the keys. "Ugh! I'm sorry, Sherri..."

"Keep singing!" Sherri cried, as the spider's leg-like appendages entered her eye socket.

John bit his lip, and continued his song. *"Cover it in chocolate and a miracle or two..."*

Sherri drew a sharp breath.

*"The candyman... the candyman can."*

With a horrible popping sound and a flood of intense pain, the deed was done.

## 6.10 • REACHING OUT

In the Waiting Room, Quinn threw his double a bottle of iced tea, and sat back down beside him on the blue sofa.

“Let me see if I have this right: you find new tech on other Earths and register the patent back on your world?” Quinn leaned forward. “So you basically made a business out of stealing other people’s ideas for profit?”

Nexus Quinn gave him a hurt look through Sam’s face, as he cracked open the bottle.

“Well when you put it like that, it sounds downright unethical,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I merely engage in legitimate business dealings across dimensions. It’s capitalism.”

“I don’t disagree on that last point,” Quinn mused. “Thomas Edison would have loved you.”

“No doubt.”

“That wasn’t a compliment,” Quinn smirked. “So did you kiss my Wade *before* or *after* you started the affair with your Wade?”

Nexus Quinn gave a withering glare. “How many more ways to you plan to point out my character flaws?”

He took a swig of the tea.

“I’ve made a good, productive life for myself, and I live modestly. All round I’m happy with the way I’ve spent my time.”

“Except for the part where you were on Kromagg Death Row.”

“Except for that part. Yeah.”

Quinn brought a leg up over his knee. “I’ve been in a lot of situations that were just as dire, but I had friends to help me out of it. Why do you fly solo?”

Nexus Quinn leaned back, looking at the ceiling. He let out a breath.

“I don’t trust anyone else to make the right call. Too many variables to consider.” He frowned. “I don’t want to be worrying about anyone else getting into trouble in unknown environments.”

“You think having friends is a liability?” Quinn felt himself wondering what this Quinn’s life was like to bring him to such conclusions. “That’s a bleak worldview, man.”

Nexus Quinn met his eye, searching. “Who did you travel with, besides your brother?”

*Oh, he doesn’t know, does he?*

“Wade and Professor Arturo were the two I originally invited along...”

*And then Remy got unlucky.*

The double’s eyes widened. “Jeez, Old Man Windbag? Why him? He’d have slowed you down for sure.”

“The Professor was a great guy, saved our hides lots of times. What a shame you never gave him a chance.”

Nexus Quinn stiffened. “Was a great guy? So something happened to him? See, what’d I tell you?”

Quinn tore his gaze away from the smug face. “Actually, he was fine until the Kromaggs invaded my world. Sacrificed himself getting me here.”

*It always comes back to you.*

The younger Quinn shrunk away at this implication, and took a quiet drink as he digested the new information.

After a moment of thought, he turned to Quinn, biting his lip.

“I’m sorry. Guess I’ve been a reckless jerk.”

Quinn gave him a sad smile. “The two of us might be smart, but that *doesn’t* make us right all the time. We have blind spots, and it’s always helpful to have people there to point them out, so we don’t screw up.”

“So what do I do now?”

“You accept that this is out of your hands.”

Nexus Quinn screwed up his face. “That feels defeatist. Is there *nothing* I can do to help?”

*At this point, there isn’t much, except...*

“You could start by describing all you know about the ’maggs. Everything they told you, names of people in charge, what they already knew about sliding tech, any other info that might be useful. I can get you something to write on.”

“Okay, that’s better than sitting here biting my nails, I guess.”

As Quinn stood, he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out, and saw an alarming text message from Colin.

**From: Colin**

**MAYDAY**

**Get 2 Wrhse ASAP.**

**!! REMY = LPR !!**

**J+T+A brngng him**

**R-LENS CNFRMD!**

**D:**

“Oh my god. I gotta run.” He raised an eye to the ceiling. “Ziggy, could you take down any information he provides?”

With a sigh, Ziggy replied in the affirmative, as Quinn gave a distracted wave towards Nexus Quinn, and hightailed it out of the Waiting Room.

\* \* \*

Thames looked groggily down the barrel of the Reality Lens, which John held as he looked back from the front seat of the SUV. In the driver’s seat was the buff Navy guy he understood to be Sam’s brother, Tom.

He shifted in his seat, as the chain of the cuffs on his wrists dug into the small of his back. His head was throbbing where Alia had clocked him one with his own gun.

“Fellas, I’m hungry. Can we stop at Burger King?” he said, with a flicker of fleeting hope that maybe they’d actually agree to the request. Next to him, he felt Alia’s eyes burning into him. She still held the gun on him, though the two of them knew it was hardly going to help if he did try to fight her or try to make a break for it.

“Who is this guy?” asked John, folding up the Lens. Before Alia could answer, Thames cut in.

“You can call me ‘Thames,’ though originally, that was just my screen name on AOL when I was fifteen. Well, the full screen name was ‘Thames6969,’ but I digress.” He threw a look to Alia, and she raised her eyebrows as if it was the first she’d heard of that. “Stuck when I moved in hacker circles and nobody gave their real names.”

He laughed. “Was about eight years before I found out that it’s not pronounced phonetically. Imagine my embarrassment.”

“We should’ve gagged him,” Tom said flatly, without shifting his gaze from the road.

Thames leaned over, getting a better view of John. “Hey, you’re a Sam, right? How would you like to help a guy wriggle out from under the thumb of a megalomaniacal computer? I bet you could earn some new boy scout patches.”

John narrowed his eyes.

“Why should any of us trust you?”

Thames glanced over at Alia, who was looking at him smugly.

“Aliaaaa,” he said, pouting, “tell them what I did for you! Zoey isn’t here right now.”

Alia let out a breath, and popped open the gun's cylinder, displaying it to John.

"He did empty this thing and pretended it was loaded when I got a hold of it. He got captured on purpose."

"Yeah, well," John said, "that doesn't mean this wasn't some elaborate plan. I've read the reports about you guys."

"See?" said Alia, gesturing to John. "There are limits to a Sam's mercy."

Thames squeezed his eyes shut, letting his shoulders slump. "Look, lemme make this easy for you. You figure out some way to help me escape, and in the meantime you can keep me locked up as tight as you damn well please. You just can't let Zoey know."

"And she could be anywhere," Alia added with a frown.

"Then, in what sense is that making things *easy*?" John said, exasperated.

"You're the brainiac, my dude." He shrugged. "But you'd better work fast, 'cause if I'm in chains for too long, Zoey will be making sure the Cryin' Man's gonna have a few new tears in his 'fro, if you get the picture."

"I literally hate this clown," said Tom, scowling. Thames responded with a wiggle of his eyebrows. Unfortunately for Thames, Tom's eyes were firmly on the road, and the reaction went unheeded.

John pursed his lips. "What's she gonna do to him?"

Thames looked him in the eye, dropping his light and breezy attitude in favour of a grave stare. "What did the 'maggs do to Sherri?"

John went pale, and turned away.

Thames shifted forward, digging a knee into John's seat.

“My Brother in Christ, I do not want that shit to happen to him either, okay? You know that pain is gonna leak through to me. So you being a bro and helping is a win-win.”

He leaned to one side, letting his head fall onto Alia’s shoulder.

“Alia, trash TV or not, these past few weeks have been... relaxing. I had so much time to think.” He peered up at her, giving his best puppy dog look. “You’ve been the Timmy to my Tabitha: healed my rotten heart and taught me the value of love and kindness.”

Alia pushed his head away. “Stop it. How can you expect anyone to take you seriously when you come out with things like that?”

He sighed, manoeuvring his body back to a seated position, and looked out the window, into the inky night.

After a moment of silence, his peripheral vision caught a new presence in the back seat, between him and Alia.

*Damn, Zoey. Don’t you ever sleep?*

He rolled his eyes, before turning to face the hologram, whose eyes were looking him up and down.

“So, how do you expect to get your hands on those crystals now?” she said tersely.

Thames snorted. “You tell me; you’re the all-seeing hologram.”

He felt the mood in the SUV tense up as they all realised who’d butted in. Alia fell back against her seat with a groan.

Zoey gave him the side-eye. “You might have exercised a little more discretion there, Thames.”

“What’s the damn point keeping it under wraps now?” Thames said flatly.

He nodded towards John. “*He’s* been a hologram.”



He nodded towards Alia. “And *she’s* been your leaper. Everybody knows you’re hanging round like a bad smell, Z-Dog.”

“Thames, I don’t think you realise how patient I’ve been with you all these weeks,” said Zoey. Her voice was tempered, but Thames could feel the burning anger oozing from her words. “While you were incognito, I allowed you enough slack to operate without drawing any undue attention, given the import of the mission. Now that you’ve been discovered, I’m under no such obligation. *Particularly* if you insist on announcing my presence to these fools.”

Thames rolled his head toward her. “You asked me a question. I answered.”

She leaned in close to him. “Consider yourself warned, Thames. Lothos is working on ways for you to complete your mission, but frankly he thinks you’ve been dragging your feet. Need I remind you of what happens when you fail?”

Thames’s gaze dropped as Zoey continued to stare at him.

“I know.”

“And I trust you’re going to stop calling me that demeaning nickname, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Zoey.”

“Good boy.”

## 6.11 · LIKE A HOLE IN THE HEAD

Kasyr leaned towards Sherri, inspecting her vacant eye socket, before focusing her gaze on the remaining eye. She wore a look of vicious satisfaction as she appraised her work.

“All healed,” she announced, wiping a piece of gauze over the former wound to collect any remaining viscera. “Feel better now?”

Sherri scowled at the sadistic woman. “I hope you choke on it.”

“That *has* happened before.” Amusement played on Kasyr’s lips. “And it was entertaining for us all. Such weak men deserve their fate.”

She crossed to a sink and washed the gore from her hands, as John moved into her field of view, looking perhaps more disturbed than Sherri felt.

“Hey,” he said weakly. Sherri smiled at him.

“This isn’t your fault,” she murmured.

“I know you’re talking to someone,” Kasyr’s voice piped up from beyond where Sherri could see. “I keep feeling like someone’s behind me. Who are you communicating with and how?”

“The spirits of my ancestors,” Sherri said, narrowing her eye.

Kasyr’s face popped in front of her. “Don’t play dumb. You have some kind of communications device. Where is it?”

“Okay,” said Sherri, suppressing the urge to chuckle. “I’ll tell you, but you might need some specialised equipment to find it.”

“I swear, if this is another bluff, I—”

“You can find it lodged about twelve inches up my ass.” Sherri grinned as Kasyr let out a frustrated groan.

“Sherri, you shouldn’t provoke her like this,” John pleaded. “She’s gonna hurt you again.”

*I know.*

Kasyr stormed to her stash of tools, which Sherri couldn’t see, and the sounds of rummaging through metallic objects could be heard. John was watching her nervously, his eyes haunted as he was still evidently processing the eye removal.

Kasyr finally returned to Sherri’s front, with a curious smile.

“I can only assume that whatever device you’re using has a neural component. An implant, perhaps, that allows you to see what I can’t.” She tilted her head. “I *could* do a scan, but maybe some exploratory surgery would be a fun way to spend the afternoon.”

She slammed her hand on a button by Sherri’s slab, and it started rotating forward.

She looked at John with alarm, and he looked back a moment before frantically tapping at his handlink.

“Buy as much time as you can. I don’t mean to abandon you, Sherri, but like I said, help is coming and...” He gave her an intense look. “They might need me.”

Sherri forced a strained smile at him.

“Go,” she mouthed, and he gave a tense nod before blinking away. The slab continued to turn, leaving her hanging prone from the underside, about three feet from the floor. She felt a hand on her neck, brushing her hair aside.

“I’ll check your brain stem first,” she said casually. “Deary, I certainly hope my hand doesn’t slip and paralyse you. Or worse.”

“It’s not in my brain, you’re wasting your time!” Sherri cried.

“Well then you’d better tell me where it is, because my scalpel is hungry. I don’t think I can keep it away from your neck.”

*Improvise. Tell her something believable.*

She wished John could feed her some line of technobabble, but she was all alone.

“It’s all done remotely,” she said truthfully, “It’s targeted only to my specific configuration of brain waves. I’m merely used as a conduit. There’s no implants in me.”

She knew there must have been much more to how the technology worked, but she figured her vagueness was to her benefit anyway.

“Fascinating,” Kasyr said, before laughing. “There may be no implant now, but by the time I’m finished, perhaps there will be.”

“What?!”

Kasyr crouched, moving her face into Sherri’s view.

“That way we can record your brain waves, trace the signal, and find that friend you’re talking to.” She grinned, her pointed teeth bared. “John, was it? With a top hat?”

*I’ve given too much away. I really screwed up.*

Kasyr stood, and Sherri felt the woman’s hand caressing her neck. Then, the sound of buzzing, and cold metal on her head. Sherri’s heart jumped, until she realised Kasyr was shaving her hair off.

She watched clumps of hair flop onto the floor around her, and tried to control her nerves.

*I see matted brown hair. I taste blood. I hear the hum of hair clippers. I smell my own sweat. I feel the cold, vibrating clippers*

*shearing over my scalp against my will.*

It occurred to her that her usual CBT tricks to calm herself were not particularly effective when she was in mortal danger.

Next came the cold, wet sensation of an antiseptic solution being rubbed onto her head.

*This is it, she's gonna start cutting next.*

Then everything went black.

It took a moment for Sherri to realise the darkness was actually the lights in the room cutting out, but as Kasyr let out an exasperated grunt, her hope began to return.

Kasyr fumbled her way to the light switch, and tested it a couple of times before thumping a fist against the wall, and opening the door to the similarly dark corridor. Sherri did not see any of this, but pieced it together based on what she heard.

As Kasyr stepped out of the room, Sherri heard a series of thuds. As she hung, head still secured in place, she heard footsteps shuffle into the room, and then John's voice could be heard.

"Oh, thank god she didn't make any incisions yet," he said, flattening himself on the floor and looking up at her with a broad smile. "Told you they were coming."

"Who?"

A loud crash came from behind her, and the electrical haze throughout the room that Sherri hadn't even realised she had been enduring came to an abrupt and merciful end.

"What was that?" Sherri asked.

“That was the machine that was messing with your aura,” came a voice that wasn’t John. “Wasn’t a nice feeling, huh?”

Sherri’s suspicions of the voice belonging to Nexus Quinn seemed confirmed when he peeked under the slab and smiled at her.

Sherri looked down at John, who was still lying on the floor.

“How’d you get *him* to help?”

Across the room, another sound came; that of a series of levers being pulled.

“Brace yourself,” said Quinn, as the shackles around her arms, legs, torso, and head, all began to release, and she dropped to the floor on her face, which intersected with John’s holographic face.

“Ow,” she said, climbing to all fours and rubbing her nose. She crawled out from under the slab, and paused as she saw Quinn and Tim standing before her.

“I never expected to see you guys again,” she said, with one wide eye. “How did you even find me?”

John climbed to his feet, and clasped his hands together as his eyes moved between Sherri and Quinn. “Oh, I can’t wait to see what happens.”

*See what?*

Quinn extended a hand. She took it, and a strange sensation passed over her. Sherri blinked a few times as the face of Quinn transformed into another very familiar face, pulling her to her feet.

“John?!”

“What?” he laughed. “No, no. It’s me! Uncle Sam!”

Sherri found herself speechless.

*How did Uncle Sam get here?*

“Awesome, right?” John said, grinning ear to ear.

Sherri’s shock turned to elation as she threw her arms around her Uncle.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” was all she could think to say.

“You’re not wrong,” he agreed, “but right now we need to move.”

He hesitated a moment, regarding her empty eye socket. “I’m... I’m sorry we didn’t get here before they did that.”

Sherri shook her head. “Forget it, let’s go.”

Tim stepped forward, and held out one of the Kromagg blasters.

“Here, you’re the best shot around, right?”

Sherri accepted the weapon, frowning. “Well, that remains to be seen, now.”

Sam, hurried to the doorway, before pausing, and looking pointedly at a surprised John. “Thanks for pointing us in the right direction.”

“You can see John?” Sherri’s jaw dropped as Sam gave her a nod.

“Only since I took your hand, but yes. Now let’s *go* already!”

Sherri grasped the gun, stepped into the corridor where Kasyr’s moaning, semi-conscious form lay. With a swift, decisive shot, she blasted a hole through the commander’s head.

“How’s that for exploratory surgery, you sadistic bitch?”

## 6.12 • RED IS GO

Alia hugged her knees as she sat against the wall in this small, bare room in the Holbrook Systems warehouse. On the opposite wall, Thames sat, shackled and staring back at her with a resigned expression.

“This room isn’t very stimulating to the senses,” he said, his eyelids drifting down. “I might die of boredom.”

Alia glared at him silently, her eyebrows slowly elevating, and he finally caught on to her signal.

“She isn’t here,” he said. “For now.”

Alia let out a breath. “Thank you. We have to keep you in an otherwise empty room so she can’t be hiding somewhere and listening.”

Thames sighed heavily, letting his head fall against the wall. The two of them sat silently for a few minutes, as Alia’s mind raced with questions.

“So, I...” she hesitated, looking away from him.

“Go on,” Thames coaxed. “Time’s a-wasting. Spill.”

“Last time I saw you, you seemed to be enjoying coming after me,” she said. “What changed?”

Thames shifted positions, as he thought of his answer.

“Well, as I said, I was put under Z-Dog’s thumb ’cause she had—” he rolled his eyes, “—*chronic pain*, which made her ineffective as a leaper. Word was spreading about what happened



to you, and it seemed like something was brewing. Pity for me, 'cause I'm stranded."

He frowned. "I'm sure you're aware that I've been here well over 48 hours."

"The retrieval deadline," Alia murmured. 48 hours was the maximum time window for a guaranteed retrieval by Lothos.

"A while back, I exceeded the deadline, and ended up not making it back. Instead I got stuck in a loop of leaping. So, when this job came up, requiring a potentially long-term infiltration, I was the one they directed here.

"Thing is, though, the longer I've been away from base, the more I could think for myself. So I started testing the limits." He shifted positions again. "Like, what if I just pretend I'm a little more swiss cheesed than I am? What if I deliberately mess things up?"

"To what ends?" Alia asked.

His shoulders slumped. "Alia, there are things I know about Lothos that I don't think you were ever told. About his plans."

Alia leaned forward, eyes wide. "You know his end goal?"

Thames gave her a knowing look. "Yeah, but you might find yourself a bit enraged at the shitty reason behind it all."

Alia glared. "Just tell me."

But instead of continuing on, Thames's gaze flicked to the right.

"*Mugunghwa kkoci pieot seumnida,*" he sang, a half smile on his face, triggering a memory in Alia.

*Squid Game?*

The little children's song from the Korean version of *Red Light, Green Light*, sung in the TV series before the doll turned to catch

people still moving.

*He's telling me to shut up, because Zoey's here.*

Meeting Thames's eye, she gave the slightest hint of a nod. "Huh? What is that you're singing?" she asked, playing dumb.

Thames shrugged. "Some children's song."

"Well, stop trying to get on my nerves."

*Red light, green light...*

The train of thought sparked an idea, and she climbed to her feet.

"I'm going to the ladies room. Remember there are guards posted outside this door, so don't try anything."

She hurried out, and produced her cell phone, quickly tapping out a message as she covered the screen with her other hand, just in case Zoey had followed.

\* \* \*

It had taken Colin three hours from receipt of the text, to completion of his small device, which was now in his pocket as he and Alia entered the room where Thames waited.

*So, is Zoey here?*

He felt like a ghost hunter, looking for signs of activity.

"Oh, hey Colin," Thames said, Rembrandt's voice making Colin shiver as he entered. He gave a quick look to Alia, with a faint twitch of his eyebrow, before returning his gaze to Colin. "My compliments on the workmanship on that Reality Lens. It was a bitch to sabotage."

Colin threw him a sour look. “That’s enough, *Thames6969*,” he said, leaning against the wall.

Alia took her seat back on the floor, staring silently at Thames.

Colin crossed his arms. “That’s quite a screen name. Though I’m one to talk; mine’s *420FarmBoy*.”

With curious amusement, he searched Thames’s eyes, as they widened.

“Oh shit, that was one of my internet besties when I was a teenager. Are you *kidding* me right now?!”

Colin shrugged casually. “Remember last year when we cracked those student loan records and wiped out millions in debt? That was a fun afternoon.”

He felt Alia’s eyes on him, and he glanced down at her. She was looking at him with surprise.

“What?”

“I didn’t know you were a hacker.”

He grinned. “You have to be to get around the government firewall downstairs.”

“You really did that? Isn’t it a crime?”

“The crime is the amount colleges charge for access to knowledge,” Colin countered. “And haven’t *you* committed lots of crimes?”

Alia went silent, mulling over his words, as Colin moved to Thames, and took a seat on the floor beside him.

Thames looked to a blank corner of the room.

“Zoey wants me to kick you in the head and see if you have a weapon I can use.” He laughed. “But I know you’re not that stupid.”

Colin looked at the space where Zoey presumably stood, and winked at her. “I am not.”

He turned his attention back to Thames.

*Maybe if I bore Zoey, she'll go away.*

“So, apart from the whole Lothos thing, how'd things turn out for you?”

Thames stared at his hands. “Spent twelve years in prison for fraud, so it could have turned out better.”

Colin gave him a pat on the knee. “That sucks, man.”

“On the bright side, that's twelve years I didn't give a landlord any money.”

He glanced towards Zoey again, giving her a frustrated look. “I am *chained* to a *wall*. What do you expect me to accomplish? ... Yes, I already told them that... Okay, fine, you do that. I'm not going anywhere, now am I?”

After a moment, he breathed a deep sigh. “Endora's finally ridden her broomstick outta here.”

He rolled his head to Colin.

“You didn't come here to reminisce, did you?”

Colin shook his head, and reached into his pocket. He produced a small car key fob, with a green lock and red unlock button.

“Think you can hide this from the wicked witch?”

Thames furrowed his brow. “Yeah, no sweat. But... I assume it's not actually what it looks like, is it?”

“You gave me the idea: *Red Light, Green Light*,” Alia said. “You can use it to signal to us when Zoey is with you or not.”

“It's connected to some binary LED switches I'll be attaching to the security cameras around the warehouse. So if she's with you,

we'll know for sure that she isn't spying on one of us, and if she's not with you, we'll know we can talk to you freely."

Thames gave Colin an impressed look.

"Nice job, Farm Boy."

Colin felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, hearing Rembrandt's voice calling him that name. The nickname only existed as detached memories now, but hearing it in that voice felt like putting a tongue to a battery. He shook off the discomfort.

"So keep it well hidden, and make sure to use it whenever she comes and goes. Red if she's with you, green if she's not."

He placed the fob in Thames's shackled hand, and climbed to his feet, producing another component of his creation. He moved to the camera on the ceiling that was trained on Thames, and stuck the LED strip to the side. It blended in well with the existing lights on the camera in a way that wouldn't be noticeable unless you knew what you were looking for.

He pressed a small switch at the side, powering it up, and the green light came on.

"When the light's red, I'll start putting up the rest outside."

"So for anyone outside this room, green means 'stop' and red means 'go?'" Thames asked, amused. "In what universe does *that* make sense?"

Colin chuckled. "At least one, I've heard."

## 6.13 • GUT FEELINGS

As Kasyr had been preparing Sherri for medically unnecessary surgery, John had centred on Sam, who was leading Tim through the corridors of the military base with a determined focus.

“Boy am I glad you’re here,” he gushed, as he walked beside them, unseen. “Sherri’s in big trouble. Please hurry.”

He glanced around, looking frantically for a force field he could use to make his presence known.

*Dammit. Nothing.*

Sam stopped at a hatch on the wall, and pulled it open.

“This should be the lighting for this floor,” he explained to Tim, as he inspected the wires. “We’ll need an element of surprise, so could you pull out these six wires when I give the signal?”

He ran a finger over the wires.

“Okay,” said Tim, voice wavering. He stepped to the panel, grasping the wires, and Sam strode down the hall towards the room where Sherri was being held.

As he walked, he started to slow, and put a hand on the wall.

John grimaced as he realised that the aura nullification was affecting him, too.

The aura of Quinn began to shift, as Sam clutched his head, and John began to see flickers of his own face.

“Sam... please keep going,” John pleaded. “She’s about to have her skull cut open.”

Sam looked back to Tim, who was gawking at the strange warping of his appearance, and gave a thumbs up. Tim, despite his obvious shock, went ahead and yanked out the wires, and the hall went dark.

“John,” Sam muttered, “I’ll get to her in time, I promise.”

*Wow, almost like he was answering me.*

He set his jaw, straightened, and marched into the nullification field, right as Kasyr opened the door. She watched the Quinn aura flicker away to reveal Sam, and her jaw dropped.

“Sorry ’bout this,” he said in a high-pitched voice, before slugging her in the face, and kneeling her in the stomach. As she keeled over, he landed an elbow on her back, which made her drop to the floor.

John returned to Sherri, inspecting her head: shaved, and slathered in a yellow antiseptic solution, but intact.

“Oh, thank god she didn’t make any incisions yet.”

He dropped to the floor to meet her eye. “Told you they were coming.”

Sam crossed to the aura disruption device, and slammed his foot into it, shutting it down, and restoring his aura to that of Quinn.

“What was that?”

“That was the machine that was messing with your aura,” Sam said, kneeling to get a look at Sherri. “Wasn’t a nice feeling, huh?”

“How’d you get *him* to help?” Sherri asked, and John grinned back as Tim began releasing her from the slab.

“Brace yourself,” Sam instructed, before Sherri flopped to the floor. For a brief moment, her face was inside John’s head, and he pulled away, laughing.

Sherri crawled out from under the slab, and knelt. “I never expected to see you guys again. How did you even find me?”

John looked at Sam, and then at Sherri.

*I've never seen this phenomenon before. The shorting of the aura that will allow them to recognise one another.*

“Oh, I can't wait to see what happens.”

As Sam took her hand, he watched an electric crackle pass over the pair, and their forms wavered for a moment before resolving into their true shapes.

*Fascinating.*

After some reunions, Sam hurried to the door, before pausing, and looking John in the eye.

*He sees me?*

“Thanks for pointing us in the right direction.”

John wasn't sure how to respond, as Sam explained to Sherri that the aura shorting had exposed John to him.

*I'll figure that one out later,* he decided, and headed out into the corridor to witness Sherri ending her tormentor's life.

“Boy, I'd hate to be one of these Kromaggs. Only one lady around, and she's a psycho? No wonder they're all angry.”

John's heart skipped a beat as he turned to see Al standing in the middle of the corridor.

“Al...” John said, unable to suppress a smile. “I didn't expect to be able to see you.”

Sherri whipped her head around to John, jaw slack. “You see Al?!”

“Don't ask me, I'm as surprised as you,” he replied. “But welcome to the party. Let's lead these three upstairs.”



“Upstairs?”

Tim scratched his head. “I think I’m missin’ some key parts of this,” he said in confusion.

“Yeah,” Sam cut in, “this isn’t just a rescue. We still have a job to finish, right?”

“Right,” agreed John, standing with his fellow hologram and eyeing his colourful handlink.

“Clear to the end of the hall up that-away,” Al said, pointing with his cigar. He glanced up at John. “Shall we?”

John nodded, and the pair tapped on their respective handlinks, centring themselves at the door at the end of the corridor. Al stuck his head through the door for a moment, before returning.

“Clear in there.”

Casually, he sucked on his cigar as John gawked at him, still processing everything that was happening.

“I see you leaned into the ‘Gay Willy Wonka’ business. Nice hat. Very... ah, dapper.”

John flushed. “How do you even know about that?”

*Only my Al should be aware of that. Right?*

Al smirked. “Hate to tell you, but *everybody* knows about that now.” He tapped the ash from his cigar. “You told us one helluva story.”

“I told you?” John’s mind raced.

“It only gets weirder,” Al said, and gestured as the three non-holograms approached. “Come on, the coast is clear.”

Sam reached for the door with his stolen keycard, but stiffened, hesitating a moment. “Are you sure?”

Al squinted at him a moment, before sticking his head into the door again. He emerged with wide eyes.

“Good instincts, Sam,” he said, bewildered. “Couple of goons coming up the stairs from below.”

John glanced at Sam, who looked almost as surprised.

“Instincts, huh?” Sherri said, eyeing Sam. “Well, come on, then.”

She looked at John. “Distraction?”

John smiled, and exchanged a look with Al. He leaned over, and grabbed for the keytar he’d put aside. As he made contact, it became visible to the others, and he slung it over his chest.

“Distraction.”

Sherri leaned toward him. “Can I make a request?”

John suppressed laughter as she whispered it into his ear.

“You just want to see me squirm, don’t you?” he said, heat rising in his face. “In front of Sam and Al? Really?”

Sherri nodded vigorously. “You wouldn’t say ‘no’ to a girl who just lost her depth perception, would you?”

Giving a resigned look, John adjusted his bow tie nervously, and stepped through the wall.

“What’re we doing?” asked a puzzled Al, as he followed John into the stairwell.

“Feel free to join in if you know this one,” said John, grinning as he started playing the keytar. He was certain his face was red as a tomato. “You go downstairs, I’ll go up, and we can split their attention.”

Al nodded, and tapped his handlink, blinking to a landing below, as the Kromaggs began ascending the staircase between

the holograms. John followed suit with his free hand, popping to the top of the stairs that ascended from their floor. As the Kromaggs reached the landing, John began singing.

*“Every night in my dreams, I see you, I feel you...”*

He heard Al’s belly laugh from below. John snorted.

*Yeah, laugh it up, Al.*

*“That is how I know you go on...”*

The Kromaggs, who looked like some kind of maintenance crew, had been reaching for the door that would have brought them face-to-face with the escapees, but the song made them look back.

*“Far across the distance, and spaces between us, you have come to show you go on.”*

One Kromagg leaned against the banister, glancing towards Al, while the other tilted his head, looking up towards John.

As he launched into the chorus, the door burst open, and the two leapers launched towards each Kromagg.

*“Near, far, wherever you are...”*

Sherri kicked the Kromagg who was looking down the stairs, leaving him tumbling down, landing with a thud against the wall by Al’s feet. He was out cold.

*“I believe that the heart does go on...”*

Sam put the other guy into a headlock from behind, and spun him around to face Sherri as she aimed the blaster at him.

*“Once more, you open the door...”*

“You guys don’t *look* like soldiers,” she said, noting the tool belt and jumpsuit he wore. “Come to fix the lights?”

*“And you’re here in my heart and...”*

He looked visibly terrified as he glared at the old, apparently blind, lady who'd just sent his partner on a trip.

"We don't have beef with these guys," she said to Sam.

*"My heart will go on and on."*

"But do they got beef with us?" asked Tim, eyes on the maintenance guy at the landing below.

John turned off the keytar. "Don't forget what happened the last time you tried to reason with a guy," he called out.

Sherri frowned, and stepped toward the petrified worker. "Listen, I've killed too many of you guys already. Will you just pretend you didn't see us? Just pretend your buddy there tripped, and you gotta go get him patched up. You might not wanna see what awaits you in the hall on the other side of that door, if you catch my drift."

The maintenance worker nodded. "O... okay. N-never saw you."

"Sherri..." John warned, blinking to her side. "Maybe you should at least tie him up or something. We've been burned before, and not just by Kromaggs."

He shot a look towards Tim, who was obviously looking down the stairs, scratching his head.

Al appeared next to Sam. "Haven't seen a one of these baboons keep their word."

"Nor have I," John agreed, and said to Sherri: "Al agrees with me."

Sherri turned to Sam, who was looking intensely at the worker. "Do *you* agree with John?"

Sam was silent for a tense moment, before letting go of the Kromagg.

“Go,” he said.

*Wow, maybe he and I don't think as alike as I thought.*

The worker hurried down the stairs, and tended to his partner, as a pensive-looking Sam turned toward the stairs leading up.

“He won't tell,” he said, before hurrying upward.

“How do you *know* that?” John called up to him. Sam reached the upper landing, and glanced back with an oddly calm expression.

“I just... know.” He gestured to the next flight of stairs. “Come on, is this an escape or a coffee break? Move it!”

## 6.14 • GREEN IS STOP

The LED lights on the security cameras shone red as a small group convened in the common room.

Quinn sat on the arm of a couch, head down, as John feverishly tapped out a message to Al to update him on the situation.

“How are the new memories coming along?” Maggie asked, as she sat beside him. He gave her an unreadable look.

“Ever seen *Titanic*?”

Maggie stared at him a moment. “Like, the ship?”

“The movie.”

Quinn stifled a laugh. “I’m *extremely* curious as to why that was your answer to Maggie’s question.”

John’s cheeks went red. “Uh, never mind about that. Have you come up with any ideas about our ‘friend’ upstairs?”

“Well,” Quinn said, rising from the couch and pacing, “When Sam leaped into Maggie, it seemed like entering the vortex triggered a leap, but it pulled their quantum photon forms in with it. If there hadn’t already been a version of Maggie in there, I think it would have spat us all out on the other side with the two of them separated. So if we just send him for a slide, maybe it’ll sort itself out.”

Maggie tilted her head. “Didn’t you give away the timer?”

Quinn laughed.

“You think I wouldn’t build a new sliding machine in all these years?” He winked. “We had to get back home eventually, when all this was done. It’s ready when we are.”

He turned back to John. “Think it’s worth a shot?”

“It’s a sound theory,” John said, squinting as he processed the information. “*But*, don’t forget that your standard wormhole ejected you into 1978, and you know how much of a pain it was to get you back to your time.”

Quinn bowed his head. “Yeah, that’d be less than ideal, and there could be further factors we haven’t taken into account.”

Maggie turned to John. “How do you target the time for Sherri?”

John laughed nervously. “With extremely complex calculations based on Sherri’s chrono-biological cell data. Higgins does most of the work, but the data comes from extensive scans, which we don’t have for Rembrandt or Thames.”

Quinn ran a hand through his hair. “And there’s that *other* element I know we all *love* to talk about, right?”

John sighed. “Yeah. But we can’t rely on whatever’s going on there. I mean, he took off with two of my best friends to who-knows-where. I don’t know what the guy’s thinking.”

Quinn flopped back onto the couch arm. “And I suppose Ziggy’s too busy to run models, right?”

John huffed. “If we don’t do something soon...”

“I know, man,” Quinn said.

In his periphery, Quinn sensed the lights on the cameras flick to green. The three of them clammed up for a moment, before John stood.

“Look, I’m going to head to Stallions Gate,” he said. “Need to see how everything’s coming along from their perspective, not just my unstable memories of the situation.”

Quinn nodded. “Let my counterpart know what’s going on too, would you? I bet he’s getting tense.”

“Sure,” John agreed. Maggie stood, and gave him a hug.

“See you round, Uncle Sam.”

“Why do you like Sam so much?” came Tom’s voice, who was now standing in the doorway. “My Maggie... Sherri... was so affectionate to Sam, then cold to me.”

John looked between them awkwardly. “Uh, I’m not qualified to participate in this conversation, so see you later...”

Tom stepped aside as John moved out of the door, turning back for a moment to place a hand on Tom’s shoulder.

“I still owe you some quality time,” he said, “but it’ll have to wait until this crisis simmers down, huh?”

Tom nodded. “Yeah. Call me later.”

They exchanged a smile, before John disappeared from view.

Quinn made himself scarce as Tom closed the door, and turned his attention back to Maggie. Maggie had returned to her seated position, looking up at him.

“My view of the situation was that *you* were affectionate to Uncle Sam, and cold to *me*,” she explained. “And you know Sam, right? He’s a lovable guy. Every version I’ve met, anyway; and that’s three so far.”

Tom considered her words as he crossed to the other couch, and took a seat.



“Yeah, that seems like a universal truth, right there,” he admitted. “What is it about him?”

“Why does everyone like Superman?” Quinn interjected, unable to help himself. “Because he always tries to do the right thing. Even saving a cat from a tree. Doesn’t matter who it is, he wants to help if he can. If they’ll let him. Just look at Alia.”

Tom looked at him with a smirk. “You’re comparing my little brother to Superman?”

Quinn shrugged. “You don’t agree?”

“Well... don’t tell him I said it, but I guess it’s not completely off-base, when you put it like that.”

“See, look at that,” said Maggie, “the way you undermined your compliment. I never got straightforward praise when I was a kid. You spoil your approval with criticism, every time.”

“I don’t want Sam getting a big ego...”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Sam? He’d just get embarrassed and come up with reasons why you’re wrong. Besides, there’s a stark difference between a brother and your own daughter.”

“Well, it’s too late now, isn’t it?” said Tom. “How old did you say she was?”

“Well in John’s time she’d be... 48, I think?” Maggie squinted, and looked up at Quinn. “Did I get that math right?”

*Maggie’s birthday is October 27th, 1971. We met Sherri in early May of 1999, and then we went to late November of 1978. Her last leap was in early February of 1998. That’s effectively 19 years on top of Maggie’s age. But are we going by precise time spent alive, or number of birthdays experienced? Because it’ll be different.*

After some mental calculations, he answered. “Assuming you have the same birthday, she’d be 46, if we’re basing it on her body’s age,” he said. “And today I think she’d be 51, and with an adjusted ‘birthday’ in August, she’ll be 52.”

Quinn carefully skirted around the admission that the possibility of her being alive in 2003 was still an ongoing question.

“Thank you, Quinn,” Maggie said. “You didn’t need to be that precise, but it was an impressive display.” Quinn sent a crooked grin back to her.

“Oh my god.” Tom put a hand to his cheek. “*I’m 52.*”

“Well then,” said Maggie, “maybe if you ever get a chance to see her again, you can treat her as an equal.”

Tom sat, shaking his head in disbelief. After a moment, he met Maggie’s eye. “It’s been nice to talk to you,” he said softly. Maggie nodded back.

“Yeah. Likewise.”

Tom stood, turning to Quinn. “How’s your guest doing? Have you gagged him yet?”

Quinn frowned as he thought about Remy. “No, but it may happen some time. I’m hearing he has quite the mouth on him.”

“You haven’t seen him?”

Quinn and Maggie exchanged looks.

“No...” he admitted.

While he’d dealt with all kinds of doubles who looked like him and his friends but were different, it was different this time, somehow. The fact he had been seeing Thames for weeks, every day, and it never twigged that it wasn’t Remy.

He felt guilty.

Tom nodded. "Have you figured out how to help him escape?"

Quinn's eyes popped open, and he shot a look at the security cam. The light was green.

Maggie stood with a frantic speed, finger to her lips. "Can it, Pops. *Green light.*"

Tom's jaw slackened. "Doesn't green mean 'go?'"

Quinn, grimacing, shook his head. "Not out here."

"I see..." Tom, straightening up, traced his finger and thumb over his lips in a zipping motion. Quinn and Maggie exchanged a tense look.

\* \* \*

Sam burst through the door of the Kromagg office, as Al scrambled behind him.

"Sam, slow down! I didn't even check for guys in here!"

"I don't see any guys," Sam said as he moved to the desk and began rifling through the drawers. John blinked in next to him.

"I know this office," he said. "Belongs to another commander. Don't know his name, though."

Sam nodded. "Kerrick, I think. Something like that."

"Did Nexus Quinn tell you that?"

*I don't think Al told me, but maybe I've got some of Quinn's mind.*

"Yeah, I guess so."

Sherri and Tim were just now arriving. Tim gave a look down the corridor while Sherri cast a bewildered look to Sam.

“Why did you just run ahead like that?” Sherri asked as she closed the door.

“Sorry,” he said. “The commander’ll be back soon, so we need to work fast.”

He reached into a drawer and felt around the base of the drawer above. His fingers landed on a tiny compartment, which he flipped open, and a key fell into his palm.

“Why do you keep talking like you know everything?” John asked, his brow heavy over his eyes. “This is creeping me out.”

Sam held up the key. “Because... apparently I do?”

Sam couldn’t explain it either. It was a strange, unearthly feeling that gave him butterflies, but not in a bad way. He’d first started to notice it as he and Tim had been planning their escape. It was as though he was witnessing an array of branching possibilities expanding before him, and he could identify the probabilities of each outcome.

*There’s no reason I should feel as certain as I do. Is this how Ziggy feels all the time?*

He handed the key to Sherri.

“The data crystal is in there,” he said, pointing to a painting on the wall.

“In the painting?” Tim asked.

“In the—?” Sam gave him an exasperated look. “No, *behind* it.”

He felt the eyes of both holograms on him as he sat down at the computer on the desk and began to stare at the Kromagg text.

“We need to find out what they’ve done with the data. Destroying the crystal might only be the first step if they’ve copied it.”

“Don’t tell me you can read Kromagg all of a sudden,” John said.

“No, but...” said Sam, squinting at it, “we know they speak English. This has got to be some kind of alphabet, right?”

“Yeah, I’d thought Phoenician, but some of the characters aren’t even close.” John leaned to look at the screen as Sam’s mind raced.

“There’s some characteristics of Aramaic as well, but you’re right. I think it’s a deliberate red herring. It could just be a substitution cipher.”

“Huh.” John turned to Al. “Wanna race to see if Ziggy or Higgins can figure this thing out first?”

Al looked at the two of them, baffled. “Uh, sure thing. But Ziggins might have the upper hand.”

Sam turned to Al. “Uh... did you just say ‘Ziggins?’”

“Tina came up with it. It’s one of them, what do you call it? Couple names. Like ‘Bennifer.’”

“What the heck is a Bennifer?” asked Sam and John in unison.

Al grinned. “Never mind that,” he said, as he pointed his handlink towards the screen, and it began to scan the text.

Sam flipped through as much text as he could as Al scanned, for ample sampling.

Meanwhile, he glanced up to Tim and Sherri, who had retrieved the crystal from a compartment in the wall. They were now looking at the painting.

“Hey, ain’t she...” said Tim. Sherri nodded.

“Only one ’magg she *could* be.”

John crossed to the picture, which was a Kromagg man and woman. “And he’s the guy whose office we’re in right now.”

“You don’t think they were...”

“Why else would there be a portrait of them?”

Sam had a feeling about this that he didn’t like.

*We can’t be here when he gets back.*

Sam’s knee bounced as he sat in the plush chair. “Al, how’s Ziggy doing?”

Al paused for a moment, before looking up from the handlink. “Got it.”

“Give me a projection of the key real quick.”

Al tapped a few buttons, and pointed the handlink at a vacant part of the desk, and the translation of the symbols appeared.

John approached, and the two of them memorised it together.

“Got it,” Sam said, and switched his attention to the computer, where everything suddenly made a lot more sense. He searched through local documents and records at as fast a pace as he could, before finding upload records for data that matched some of the key equations he recognised.

“The data’s been put on a remote server,” he said, pounding a fist on the desk. “It’s got layers of security...”

He bit his lip as he continued reading. “They’re building a prototype integrated into one of their Manta ships. It’s in a hangar on the top floor.”

Sherri frowned. “So even if we can destroy the prototype, they’ll still have the info? Shit.”

*Think.*

Sam moved his chair back, and planted his head in his hands.

*You know there's a way through this. Just think. You've come this far. It can't be the end.*

And he felt himself, again, seeing the world in a series of branching possibilities, like the great tree that cocooned him. He was floating outside of time, and it seemed as though every moment of his life was happening at once, like a bundled up string compressed into a tight ball. And right next to his own life, with moments of intertwined string, ran another Sam Beckett, one whose name was sometimes John. He saw a moment, there on that string, that sang out to him.

And then, he knew what to do next.

Sam leaped.

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## **END OF PART 6**





# PART SEVEN: DENOUEMENT

## SUMMARY

Using his new abilities, Sam tries a desperate gambit in order to complete the mission.

All the plot threads finally start to tie up as the team on the Kromagg world reach the prototype ship, and a cosmic bartender exerts his influence from the edges of space and time.

## 7.1 • ONE GOOD THING

*“I got tears in my ’fro, ’cause my world is upside down over you...”*

The little hatch in the door swung open with a squeak, and Zoey’s unimpressed face appeared.

“Your endless caterwauling is giving me a headache, Mister Brown.”

Rembrandt perked up. “Oh, then I’d better keep on goin’.” He grinned, and continued his song.

*“I should comb ’em out—”*

“Oh, I shall enjoy inflicting pain on you.”

Rembrandt’s voice caught in his throat, as the heavy door to his cell swung open, revealing a pair of large men on either side of Zoey. He retreated against the wall at his back.

“Uh, listen, let’s not be hasty, alright? I’ll pipe down. No more dulcet tones, got it.”

Zoey’s uninterested expression remained unchanged.

“None of this is about you. All our intel says you’re nothing but a washed up singer who ended up where you did through dumb luck.”

“Hey now, that hurts,” Rembrandt said. “If you get to know me, maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“I doubt that very much.” Zoey nodded to the men, and they approached him. “You’re only useful insomuch as you provide a

useful conduit to Thames, who appears to be trying to betray me.”

*On one hand, good for him. On the other... ruh-roh.*

One of the burly men held him down, while the other started placing cold metal objects onto his head, all connected by wires.

“Hey man, whatcha got there?” said Remy to the man, who ignored him entirely.

The man holding him down roughly jostled him towards the platform that served as his bed, and began placing round glowing devices around his wrists, ankles, and neck.

Zoey pulled out a device that reminded Rembrandt of the gizmo that the Professor was using back on Earth Prime, and she tapped on it. All at once, the objects around his neck and extremities were drawn to the platform like magnets, leaving him on his back.

*Oh, I don't like where this is going.*

The second man continued applying the wired things to various parts of his body as Zoey watched through cold eyes.

“Oh boy...”

\* \* \*

Sherri watched Sam, hunched over, deep in thought, her heart racing.

“Sam, what should we—”

A blue light encased him.

*What... no...*

John jumped back. “Sam?!”

When the light subsided, Nexus Quinn jumped in his seat, and looked wildly at Sherri and Tim.

“What...? Oh... *oh no*,” he said, as it dawned on him where he was. Then, he jumped to his feet. “Wait, did you guys finish your mission?”

Sherri closed her hanging jaw, as she looked at John, who’s hand was on his forehead as he tried to come to terms with what had just happened.

“Sam just... left us?” He had a lost look in his eyes.

*Oh my god, how? Why?*

“We didn’t finish anything,” said Sherri, slapping the desk. “We’re right in the middle of it!”

Quinn’s eyes darted around the room. “Wait, I’ve been here before. Is my timer in here? Did you find it?”

“Not yet,” Sherri lamented. “We got your data crystal, but it’s already been copied to a remote server.”

Quinn grabbed at his hair, pacing. “Shit shit shit!”

He paused as he looked at Sherri’s tense face. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry all this happened, Sherri.”

Tim tugged at Sherri’s sleeve, and she turned to him, lip quivering.

“Um... what just happened?”

“Quinn came back. I don’t know where Sam is now.” She looked towards John, whose shock had turned into a grave determination.

“It’s all up to us now, I guess,” he choked out.

Sherri shared a look with him, as they both steeled their gaze. “We need to get to that Manta ship.”

She turned to Tim. “If nothing else, we can set them back, right?”

Tim nodded. “I... yeah. I’m with you to the end this time, Sherri.”

Quinn put a shaky hand on her shoulder. “Yeah, me too. Should’ve listened to you the first time.”

Sherri hurried to the door, and swung it open.

*Oh, crap.*

The commander stood in the doorway, staring intensely at them and aiming his blaster at Sherri.

“I told Kasyr we should have just done away with you,” he said, voice low and dark. “It appears she should have listened.”

Sherri’s blaster was in her hand, but she knew that if she tried to aim it, he’d shoot.

“Hey, ugly!” came John’s voice from behind the Kromagg. It was enough to split his attention for a precious second, as she raised her weapon.

But it was not long enough for her to aim.

As she realised her error, and as Commander Kerrick pulled his trigger, Nexus Quinn stepped between them, and the particle beam hit him in the stomach.

Running on pure instinct, Sherri fired a shot past Quinn, into the commander’s head.

Almost simultaneously, the Kromagg and Quinn hit the floor, as wisps of red-tinged smoke rose from their respective wounds.

“Oh my god...” said Sherri as the events finally registered in her mind as having happened.

Quinn’s face was pained as he gazed up at her.

“It really is out of my hands now, I guess...” he croaked. “You’d better get going. Finish this.”

Sherris eye blurred with tears.

“I don’t know how I’m going to, but I’ll do as much as I can, Quinn. I promise.”

In the corridor, John stood with a look of hopelessness.

*How... how could Sam leave us and let this happen?*

“Oh no...”

Sherris absolutely did not expect to hear a voice from behind her in the office, and she furthermore did not expect that voice to belong to a complete stranger, but as she spun around, she was met with a man she’d never seen before, staring down at Quinn with his mouth hanging open.

“Who the hell are *you*?”

\* \* \*

*Several Minutes Earlier*  
*(Relative to Nexus Quinn)*

John tapped on his wristlink, and the Waiting Room door slid open. Nexus Quinn, who John saw as Sam, regarded him with surprise, before his mind caught up with his eyes.

“Oh right, you must be John,” he said, rising from the sofa. “Double of the guy in the mirror, right?”

He waved a finger over his face. John nodded.

“You got it,” he said, with an awkward smile. “*Your* double asked me to check in with you.”

“That’s thoughtful,” Quinn said, as John approached. “What you got for me?”

“Well, Sam’s managed to get Sherri out of the aura disruption field, so she can be retrieved when the mission is...”

He trailed off, as Quinn lurched back, eyes wide.

“You okay?” John asked. Quinn straightened, an amazed smile drawn across his face.

“I... I did it!” He let out a laugh, and clutched John’s arm with a tight grip. “I’ve never forced myself to leap at will before. But it worked. I can’t believe it.”

John squinted. “Uhh, *Sam?*”

Sam nodded, letting out a breath.

John stepped back as a new memory came to him.

*He abandoned us?*

“Uh, Ziggy?” Sam called up to the ceiling. “Honey, I’m home.”

“Yes, I see that,” replied Ziggy’s terse voice. “Quite a bit earlier than I had anticipated. *Why?*”

“She raises a good question,” John said, eyes narrow.

*I have to believe he has a good reason for this*, he told himself, but it was hard to accept as the recalled feelings of Sam’s departure washed over him.

Sam ran a hand through his hair. “I need you to activate the new code.”

Ziggy was silent for a moment.

“You were clear earlier that I must only activate it if retrieval fails.”

“Change of plans,” he said, looking at John. “It’s okay, I’ve got it all worked out. Do this last thing for me, Ziggy.”

“Very well.”

“Thank you.”

The door opened, and Al stepped into the Waiting Room, frantic.

“John, Sam just leaped out and I don’t know wh—”

“It’s okay, Al, I’m right here.” Sam stepped towards him, and swept him into a hug. Al looked at John through the embrace with confusion.

“We didn’t retrieve you, did we?!”

Sam let go of him, chuckling. “Nope, I came here all by myself. Isn’t that neat?”

He shifted his gaze between John and Al for a moment. “Guys, I have to get to the warehouse, right now. I... think Rembrandt needs me.”

John exchanged a look with Al. “Sam, Rembrandt is...”

“Thames.” Sam winked. “I know. Take me to him.”

\* \* \*

*Red light on.*

Thames clicked the button as Zoey emerged from her doorway, wearing a broad smile on her face.

“Good morning, Thames.”

*Hoo boy, this can’t be a good sign.*

“Well. You either had a double dose of your extra strength painkillers, or you’re about to cut a bitch. Which is it?”

“Which do *you* think?”



*Ah, shit.*

She held up her handlink, and tapped on it a couple of times, before sliding her finger slowly up the centre from the base. Thames's body filled with a buzzing pain that slowly climbed in intensity as her finger rose against the handlink.

"Uh, you plan on telling me what I did?" Thames said, through clenched teeth, as his muscles tensed.

Zoey loomed over him, her eyes burning with hurt.

"Thames, do you know what they're going to do to me when my *second* charge is found to be another traitor?"

She turned the pain up a little more, and he felt himself shaking as the fire raged in his veins.

"I've nothing left to lose. Either you start obeying me, or I might as well end you right here." She leaned over him, casting her face in shadow. "But not before you suffer a great deal, of course."

"I don't know what... you're talking about..." Thames spat out.

Zoey rolled her eyes, turning away from him and gesturing casually towards the camera.

"Your little signalling system had a design flaw: that of user error."

*Goddammit. Why the hell'd I trust these dorks to keep my secret?*

"W-well..." he took a laboured breath, "it was worth a shot."

Zoey lowered herself to the floor, with a wince. She moved her face close to his, turning down the pain.

"Listen to me," she said in a low voice, eyes wide. "If you just pretend this indiscretion never happened, and continue your mission as instructed, we can both come out of this... intact."

*I've never seen her this desperate. I must have broken something in her.*

“Gee, you make it sound so tempting. Almost makes me want to choose that instead of being tortured and killed. *Almost.*” He smirked at her, as her eyes twitched.

“Thames,” she continued, her voice losing her usually well-controlled temper, “don’t you dare fuck me over like this. What they’re going to do to me is a fate worse than death. Are you so swiss cheesed that you don’t know?”

Thames regarded her coolly. “Oh, I know.” He shot her a satisfied smile.

“But I guess Lothos taught me too well. I can’t seem to care.” He burst into laughter. “Torture me all you want, but it’ll never be enough, because I’m not the one you *really* want to hurt, am I? Must be tough seeing Alia every day and not even having her know you’re there. Unable to reach out and drive a knife into her. Seeing her hangin’ out and making friends while you can’t even walk without a handful of opiates.”

With gritted teeth, Zoey swiped a finger to the top of the handlink, and his body roared with searing pain. He could do nothing but scream.

And then the door opened.

The pain subsided, just a little, as Zoey stumbled back when she saw that two Sams had come in the door, with Alia close behind. And one of the Sams was looking her in the eye.

“Zoey, you look... even more angry than I remember,” he commented, before turning his attention to Thames. “I hear you’re a hacker. Want a job?”

“Uh... what?”

Sam crouched. “I’m offering you a chance to get out of here, but the only way this is gonna work is if you’re willing to do what’s right, no strings attached. Can you agree to that?”

He held a hand out. Thames looked back at him, screwing up his face.

“Dude, I’m like, in the middle of being tortured right now and you’re offering me a job?”

Sam glared at him like he was an idiot. “Just take my hand already.”

Thames glanced at Alia, who was looking on with wide eyes. She nodded to him.

Zoey let out a huff, and began raising the pain levels again.

*Do what’s right, no strings attached?*

He thought about Colin, and their time spent hacking for the greater good. He put himself in danger to help people he never knew back then; why not now?

As the roar and burning coursed through his body, he let go of the key fob, and reached his shackled hand to Sam.

“Okay, let’s do somethin’ good,” he laughed, and he landed his hand on Sam’s palm.

Together, they leaped, as Zoey screamed.

## 7.2 • JOINING FORCES

( *Wake up.* )

( *Huh?* )

( *We have work to do.* )

( *Where am I?* )

( *Come on, I'll show you.* )

( *I can't see anything.* )

( *Your eyes are closed.* )

( *I can't open them.* )

( *It's okay, I'll do it.* )

Sam blinked, finding himself in the exact position he'd left the commander's office: on the chair, hunched over, with his head in his palms. He turned his head to face the window, where he caught his reflection.

( *It really worked...* )

( *Well, that's my reflection, but what the hell  
are you doing here?* )

( *I leaped into you, but not in the usual way.  
We're both here at the same time.* )

( *That's wild. And where is 'here?'* )

( *Give me a minute.* )

Sam stood from his seat, and began to properly see his environment. Then he realised that Sherri and Tim were standing

over Nexus Quinn, and John stood in the corridor beyond, face pale as a sheet.

He moved in for a closer look, his jaw dropping.

( *I anticipated so much; how did I miss this?* )

“Oh no...”

He saw Sherri stiffen as he spoke, and she whipped her head around toward him, alarmed.

“Who the hell are *you*?”

Sam lowered himself to Quinn, eyes on his wound.

“Hey, let me take a look at this,” he said, gently pulling up Quinn’s shirt. Quinn, brow drenched with sweat, looked at him in confusion.

“Hey, I said who *are* you?” Sherri demanded, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him toward her.

In a blue spark, Sam was revealed to her, and she froze, unable to comprehend what was happening.

“I’m sorry I let this happen...” he said, and continued looking at the wound.

“Sam...?” Quinn mumbled, his eyes squinting.

( *If he can see me, that might be a bad sign for his condition.* )

“Hang in there,” he said, tearing off part of Quinn’s shirt and pressing it against the wound.

( *He’s not going to make it.* )

“Forget about me,” said Quinn. “Those blaster shots are... radioactive. I’m a goner... even if the wound isn’t fatal.”

“Sam...” John murmured, “what’s... um... going on? Who’s the guy you’re in?”

Sam glanced up. “You don’t know him yet. But he’s gonna help me hack into that server.”

( *What server?* )

He looked back down to Quinn. “I’ll find some way to help you. Just keep pressure on your wound, okay?”

He looked to Tim. “Can you do that? Let me know if he takes a turn.”

Tim, who seemed to have entered a fugue state where he was barely reacting to all the crazy stuff happening, nodded silently, and replaced Sam’s hand on the cloth.

Sam jumped up and dashed to the computer as Sherri pulled the commander’s body into the room, and shut the door.

John wandered around Sam in a circle, with a curious expression.

( *Okay, so this is all written in a code I can decipher, but I need your specific knowhow to crack the remote server and delete the sliding data. We need to work together.* )

( *Sounds fun.  
Just one question, though: um, how?* )

( *We need to psycho-synergise. Share our minds; blend our knowledge together.* )

( *I assume you can do that, then?* )

( *Uh... maybe? Follow my lead, okay?* )

Sam closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, thinking of all the times he’d taken characteristics from leapees throughout time, and how he’d leaped away with a tiny piece still inside him. That, deep inside himself, he wasn’t alone.

( *I'm not just Sam Beckett.* )

( *We are Sam Beckett, we're Tom Stratton,  
Samantha Stormer, Al Calavizzi, Magic  
Williams, Jimmy Lamotta, Maggie Beckett,  
Quinn Mallory, and many more.  
We're even Elvis Presley.* )

( *Wait, really? Don't tell Rembrandt.* )

( *We're Thames now, too.* )

( *We're...* )

They opened their eyes, blinking a few times as the combined knowledge flooded in and mingled. Two lifetimes of experiences flowed together. Beautiful, happy times, and brutal, unimaginably bad times. Suffering, and pleasure, and conflicting ideals.

( *Did you really almost shoot JFK? Holy shit.* )

( *Yeah, but the important thing is I didn't.* )

( *Only big wig I've nailed is a Senator.* )

( *So that was you.* )

( *Get it? Nailed? 'Cause of the six incher that  
stuck in his brain? Come on, it's funny.* )

( *No, it isn't.* )

( *Let's agree that murder is probably wrong,  
okay?* )

“Whoa,” John said, smacking the side of his handlink. “What did you just do? Higgins picked up a really strange energy surge just now.”

Sam and Thames rubbed their eyes, and gave their head a shake to clear the rush of thoughts.

“Hoo-ey, that felt like jumping out of a plane,” they hooted, as a shiver flowed through their body. They cracked their knuckles, and began typing at the computer as they felt both Sherri’s and John’s eyes on them. “We’ll be done here in... seven minutes, eighteen seconds. Give or take.”

( *We should have a couple’s name.* )  
( *Ziggins shouldn’t have all the fun.* )

( *Wow, that was all you, wasn’t it?* )

( *Does ‘Sames’ sound too pedestrian?* )

( *This isn’t productive.* )

( *What about ‘Theckett?’* )

( *Don’t make me regret this.* )

( *‘Becames?’* )

( *Uh, let’s put a pin in this for now.* )

\* \* \*

The hologram in the Imaging Chamber flickered to life as Al stepped inside. The same room as where they’d left.

*Okay, we’re back here. That’s a start.*

Sitting at the computer, he spotted Sam typing feverishly, with John and Sherri behind him.

“Sam?” he said, approaching the group. “Ziggy thought we’d lost you for a minute there.”

“Yeah, having a second mind mixing with Sam’s whole cloth will do that,” he said casually, without looking up from the computer.



“Don’t worry though, we’re not planning to assassinate any presidents this time.”

He paused, flashing Al a cheeky grin. “Well, never say never, I guess.”

Al, dumbfounded, looked to Sherri and John. “You two wanna fill me in here?”

John gave him a broad shrug. “I... I’m officially stumped.”

“Wibbly wobbly, timey wimey,” Sam mumbled. “We’ll explain in a minute, just need to crack this encryption.”

*Wibbly what?*

As he spoke, Sam’s eyes seemed to change at random between brown and green, and his speech wasn’t quite his usual cadence.

Al tapped on his handlink, trying to figure out if Ziggy knew any more than the rest of them. As her answer came, he scoffed.

“Wait... Ziggy... what do you mean he leaped *into* Thames? How would he even do something like that?” He glanced at John. “Any ideas?”

“Who or what is ‘Thames?’” John asked.

“We *said* we’ll explain,” Sam said, leaning in further to the screen and concentrating. “Oh, here we go.”

“What?” asked Sherri, leaning in to the computer.

“Quinn’s timer is inside the prototype ship,” he explained. “But security is tighter than a nun’s – oh my *god*, Thames, I will *not* let us finish that sentence.”

He gave a violent shake of his head, before looking up at Al. “He has a dirtier mind than you.”

His gaze returned to the monitor. “Anyway, the doors are operated remotely by security. They check your biometric data

before letting you in.”

He glanced up. “We can hijack it, but we’d only be able to open the doors from here... looks like we’ll need to stay behind. It’s gonna be hairy for you out there without us, though.”

“Sam, what about the data?” Sherri prompted.

“Oh, we already took care of that,” he replied, as if it were an afterthought. “The data’s gone, and we even added a booby trap in there. If anyone attempts to access the files, they’ll unleash quite a nasty virus on the whole network.”

Sam cackled in a way Al had never seen before.

“We said seven minutes eighteen, right? Right on the money!” He clapped his hands as if he were high-fiving himself, before toning down his irreverence and looking to Sherri.

“Alright, Sherri. You and Tim had better get going. They’re on high alert now, so you’d better be careful.”

“Wait...”

Al turned around, seeing Tim sitting beside a wounded Quinn, who was painfully rising to a sitting position.

“Carry me over there. *I’ll* work the doors.”

“Quinn, you look like you’re about to pass out,” Sherri said, her voice pitching higher than usual.

“I... I can do this,” he said. “I’ve worked with the Kromagg... systems a little, I’ll be able to figure it out. You and your... uncle... should stick together.”

John, Al, and Sherri all looked at Sam, who was looking at Quinn through bleary eyes.

“Thank you.”

He glanced at Sherri. “Let’s pick him up.”

As he moved around the desk, past Al, he paused. “Stay with him, Al. He shouldn’t be alone when he goes.”

Sam’s eyes didn’t change at all in that moment.

## 7.3 • BURDENS

*Excruciating pain. Unbearable, uncontrollable, unrelenting. Searing, violent, fiery pain.*

Rembrandt gasped as he sat up.

*No more!*

“Hey, Cryin’ Man...” Quinn’s voice cut through the panic, and Rembrandt finally came to realise that he was in his own bed back at the warehouse. Quinn was sitting in a chair he’d lugged out of the common room, and was smiling at him from his bedside, a look of unbridled relief on his face.

Rembrandt wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, and adjusted his position in the bed, his feet touching the tiled floor. His body wasn’t in the pain he’d been sure it was in before he’d awoken, but it wasn’t free of it, either. All of his muscles ached like he’d run a marathon, and his sense of balance was off. Every movement was difficult.

“You okay?” Quinn continued. “John’s just a holler away, if you need a doctor.”

“John...?”

*Does he mean Sam?*

“I guess he got here after...” Quinn hesitated. “How much do you remember about the past four weeks, man? Maggie says you should remember vague pieces from either side of the leap, or more if we can jog your memory. But I don’t know how it works for those guys.”

*Leap...? Wait, that rings a bell.*

“Well I definitely remember a whole lotta pain...” he said, rubbing his temple. “And some cold-ass British lady.”

Then, as he continued to recall, he found himself recalling actions and words spoken that he didn’t understand. Slicing open Quinn’s jeans to retrieve a Higgins crystal, only to throw it into the New Mexico desert. Eating tofu. Mailing a package. Being chained to a wall. Discussing hacking with Colin.

*Mailing a package?*

His eyes went wide. “Did I... build a *bomb*?”

Quinn grimaced. “No, that was Thames.”

*‘Thames,’ I know that name. And not just because I once took a leak over the side of the Westminster Bridge when I was on tour with the Tops back in ’76.*

“Four weeks, huh? This Thames guy was impersonating me all that time and you never...”

Quinn’s face dropped. “Sorry, Remy. I feel like an idiot. We all do.”

Rembrandt sighed. “He didn’t have to do much to blend in, did he? All I been doing round here is sitting around. I think the night it happened, I was feelin’ a little lost. Kinda useless.”

Quinn moved off the chair, and sat beside him on the bed, wrapping an arm over his shoulder.

“We should have noticed something was up,” he said.

“I shoulda said something.”

A light knock came on the door.

“Come on in, he’s awake!” called Quinn.

The door opened to reveal Sam – or John; Rembrandt wasn't sure – looking at him nervously. Around his neck hung a stethoscope.

*It's check-up time, huh?*

“Hey there,” he said with a warm smile, “you had us worried. How are you doing? Seemed like Zoey was putting you through the wringer there.”

*Zoey, that was her name.*

He crossed into the room, carrying a bag of medical supplies, and sat on the chair where Quinn had previously been sitting. As he prepared his equipment, Rembrandt recalled through Thames's actions that John had shown up with a woman named Alia on New Years Eve.

*Alia... yeah, she was the woman Zoey kept bringing up.*

And he recalled some conversations Thames had had with her, about a dystopian future.

“John, right?” he said, as John wrapped a blood pressure cuff around his left arm.

“That's me,” he confirmed. “Try to relax while we get your BP, okay?”

Quinn stood. “I'll leave you to your check-up, Doc.” He gave Remy a final pat on the shoulder. “Everyone's in the common room. Come see us when you're up to it.”

As Quinn left, John fiddled with the blood pressure monitor settings. “Guess we haven't properly met since 1978, have we?” he said, tapping buttons that responded with a terse ‘beep.’

Remy nodded. “Been a longer twenty years for you.”

The cuff pumped up, pressing uncomfortably against his aching bicep. Rembrandt winced.

“Are you in pain?” John asked, as he noticed the reaction.

Rembrandt gave a dismissive shrug. “It’s the kinda pain you get after a full body workout... dialled up to eleven.”

John nodded. “I see. I wasn’t sure of the nature of the pain you were in, but it seems like it might have been some sort of electrical pulse to your muscles, maybe.” As the cuff deflated, John pulled it away.

“Blood pressure’s a little high, but that could be stress from your ordeal. You remember anything about what they used to hurt you? It’s probably not something you want to remember, but it’ll help me determine what tests I might need to run.”

“I think they stuck things on me, attached to wires, I guess?” He shuddered. “Felt like I was back at the ‘maggot re-education centre.”

“Where did they put ‘em?”

“Arms, legs, chest...” he touched his temples. “Up here.”

John’s eyes widened. “How’s your psyche?”

Rembrandt raised an eyebrow. “As good as it can be for a guy who’s been locked up and tortured on two separate occasions.”

“Well, I’m glad that whatever they did doesn’t seem to have messed things around in your brain too badly. Leaping and high voltage shocks to the brain *don’t* pair well. You let me know if you have any unusual symptoms, okay? Hallucinations, illogical thinking, loss of identity...”

“If I feel like I’m tripping, come see you. Got it.”

John began to rummage through his bag, and pulled out a small hinged device. He took a hold of Rembrandt’s hand, and clipped it onto his index finger.

“I’ve arranged for Doctor Beeks to come see you, too,” he said, and chuckled. “She was so excited that I called, and I had to break it to her that I wasn’t calling about me.”

He glanced at the reading on the device. “O2’s looking good.”

Rembrandt tilted his head. “Why’s Beeks want to analyse *you*?”

John put away the gizmo, before smirking up at Remy. “I suspect it’s all the repressed trauma.”

*Oh, yeah. That old chestnut.*

\* \* \*

As Nexus Quinn was being scooped up and carried, he gazed up at the man he’d identified as Sam, whose appearance seemed to shift every other second. One moment, he’d look like what he recalled from the mirrors in that place he met his double, and another moment he looked like another man, with darker skin and wild brown eyes. He wondered if anyone else was seeing what he was, or if he was just hallucinating from his impending death.

Sam was explaining something to Sherri about leaping into a quantum superposition, which Quinn figured would all be fascinating to him, if he could properly process what the guy was saying.

“Then we opened up the separation between our two minds so that we could combine our skills. You’re talking to the both of us at once, and if that’s freaking you out, then join the club.”

“But how are you leaping around at will?” Sherri demanded. “I’ve never heard of anything like this.”



“We’ll let you know once we figure that one out,” he said, as the two of them gingerly placed Quinn on the chair at the desk. “Using the Accelerator with Ziggins *seems* to have done something to Sam. We’re still working on it.”

He glanced up for a moment, before answering a question it didn’t seem like anybody asked. “Yeah yeah, fine, we admit it: ‘Ziggins’ is a good couple name. Tell Tina she broke Sam on that one. Still working on ours, and open to suggestions.”

Quinn leaned heavily on the arm of the seat, as the Kromagg letters on the computer moved in and out of focus.

*My stomach doesn't hurt. It's fine. I'm fine.*

Sam pointed at a box on the computer monitor. “We’ve already got the access codes lined up. All you have to do is press here and you’ll gain complete access to the hangar security system. From there you’ll see a live feed of the doors. All you need to do is approve us when we show up in...”

He paused for a moment. “We wanna say twelve minutes and forty seconds. Does that seem right? Yeah, that’s the most likely outcome.”

He leaned over Quinn, his eyes green and twinkling. “Are you absolutely sure you’ll be able to do this? We know you want to help, but...”

“Leave it to me,” Quinn said, trying to sound cool. Though, it sounded closer to a whimper. “I’ve hacked... lots of systems. Listen, just get going, okay?”

Sam unlatched a digital watch from his wrist, and tapped on the side buttons a few times. “The hijack might be shut down after a few minutes, so don’t activate it ’til this alarm sounds.”

He placed the watch on the desk, as it ticked down from 00:12:30.

“If there’s one thing I’m... practised at, it’s pressing a button when a timer hits zero.” Quinn chuckled, and winced as the muscle contraction in his stomach sent a wave of pain through his body.

“Quinn, we won’t forget this,” said Sam, patting his shoulder as he headed for the door. “Let’s go.”

Sherri, Tim, and Sam left the room, closing the door behind them. Quinn was left in silence to contemplate his final moments as the timer ticked down slowly.

*I’m sorry, Stephanie. I was a dick. I’m sorry, Cory. I hope you grow up well. And Wade, you deserved better.*

He felt sweat dripping down his face. “So this is death,” he mumbled into the empty room. “Kinda peaceful.”

“Even with that dead guy on the floor over there?”

Quinn turned his head in surprise. “Huh? Who said that?”

“You heard me? Oh... that ain’t a good sign.”

The voice was coming from his left, but he couldn’t see anybody there.

*Just a hallucination. Part and parcel to dying, right? As long as I don’t see the white light ’til after I finish this task.*

“Name’s Al. Sam wanted me to hang back and keep you company in this... uh, difficult time. I didn’t get the chance to meet you when you were in the Waiting Room.”

*Oh.*

“Well... nice to meet you...” he smiled bitterly. “Maybe you can keep me alert enough to make it the next ten minutes.”

“The most I can do is yell at you, but I’ll be sure to do that if I see you nodding off. It’s a promise.”

“You must... hate me, for all this. Don’t worry. I get it.” He took a long, gurgling breath.

“Nobody hates you, kid,” the voice insisted. “Certainly not now. Playing keepaway with the grim reaper so you can make sure my pals have a chance? That’s downright heroic.”

“You don’t have to... humour me.”

“It’s just the way I see it.”

Quinn found himself losing strength to sit up, and his position had, over the past several minutes, become more and more slumped. His arms dangled over the arm of the chair, and he could no longer see the time on the watch.

*I’ll have to wait for the alarm. Need to conserve strength until then.*

*What if I rest my eyes...*

“Uh-uh, don’t you dare!”

Quinn groaned as Al’s severe-toned words startled him from the dreamlike haze.

“Mallory! You don’t have permission to close those peepers, you hear me?”

“R-right...” muttered Quinn. “I’m awake...”

He forced his eyes to focus as he looked up at the computer monitor.

“How long now?”

“Real soon. Think you can make it?”

The voice had moved closer now. Quinn rolled his eyes to the source, and saw a man standing there, looking down at him. A

grisled man holding a cigar and wearing a strangely shaped tie.

“I don’t know what I... expected, but... wow.”

Al smiled sadly at him. “What a shame the last mug you have to see is mine, huh?”

Quinn coughed, which flared his pain, and he took a moment to let it subside.

*Pain means you’re still alive.*

“Certainly the... weirdest-lookin’ guardian angel I ever saw,” Quinn joked, giving what he hoped was a smile, but he doubted the corners of his mouth had been able to rise far enough.

“Been called that more than once,” Al mused. “One time a kid called me Abraham Lincoln.”

He sucked on his cigar, looking down at the watch. “Showtime,” he said, right before the timer started to beep.

Quinn reached a quivering arm for the keyboard, and with a mighty effort, he activated the hijack. The screen switched to a camera feed. Immediately, a head bobbed into the camera’s view: the strange man that had been flickering in and out of Quinn’s perception of Sam. He looked into the camera, and waved.

“Damn, that was some impeccable timing,” Al commented.

Quinn took a deep breath, and pulled the keyboard closer, so he could see the keys better. With one weak hand, he tapped a command, and the door on the camera feed slid open. Sam and Tim could be seen hurrying in, and Sherri, as the old eyeless lady, paused as she lifted her head to the camera for just a moment, before heading in.

*Bye, Sherri. Sorry.*

“You did it, buddy,” said Al, crouching by the chair. “...Quinn?”

*Quinn? Oh... so long, kid.*

\* \* \*

Quinn felt his heart jump, and he realised he was no longer slumped over a chair, but standing up.

*Wha...? I must be dead, right?*

In front of him was some kind of bar, behind which a man was pulling a beer. He seemed to be ignoring the glares of two men sitting on stools. One of the men was awfully familiar.

“Al?”

Both the man and the bartender looked towards him.

## 7.4 • BOWELS OF THE SHIP

With a thud, another Kromagg soldier dropped to the ground as Tam rubbed their overused punchin' fist, which was beginning to show signs of rawness.

( *I object to this name. 'Tam' is too close to Tim.* )

( *'Tim and Tam' sounds like an Australian comedy duo from the nineties that people look back on fondly but then when they watch an old routine in 2017, they realise it was actually mega racist.* )

( *...Well, got anything better?* )

( *No... but it's also too close to Tom.* )

( *Oh for the... it'll do for now.* )

They turned to Sherri. "Okay, we decided to be called 'Tam,' unless we can think of a less derivative name."

Sherri looked at them with a puzzled glance – which seemed to describe all of her glances since they'd showed up.

"Does that mean *I* get to be Sam again?" John asked, as he followed Tam up the ramp to the Manta ship, which loomed large over the smaller ones around it, that would have been a third its size.

"No can do, Junior," said Tam, giving a smug look to John. "Sam's still right here."

They tapped their temple. “You wanna address him directly, use his name.”

John narrowed his eyes at Tam as they cracked open a panel at the side of the ship and began rearranging cable configurations.

“I’ll take you up on that. *Sam*, who the heck is this Thames guy anyway? Where did he come from?”

( *Step aside for a second.* )

( *Ugh, please don’t mention all the murders.* )

( *Believe me when I tell you I don’t want to dig around in there.* )

Sam shut the panel on the ship and crouched to open another, before locking green eyes with John. “Thames is from the 2020s, and is a leaper who worked for some bad people. That’s the, uh, sanitised version. I’m keeping his worst instincts in check, so don’t worry.”

John pursed his lips. “That doesn’t sound encouraging.”

Sam raised his eyebrows, giving a broad gesture. “We’ve got this far with him. He can’t hide anything from me like this, much as I wish I could unsee some of the things in his mind.”

( *And yeah, I see what Lothos wants now.* )

( *Sucks, right?* )

( *Didn’t stop you wanting a piece until you realised you’d never return, hmm?* )

( *I’m not disagreeing.* )

Sam cast an eye to Sherri, who looked wholly relieved that she was seeing only Sam. “We need to get inside, Sherri. In about two minutes, the hangar’s gonna flood with soldiers.”

Sherri nodded, and grabbed the wrist of Tim, who was still silent and wide-eyed.

( *Back to work...* )

Tam continued their work disabling the ship's locking mechanisms, as another part of their brain continued to work on the problem of what was happening to Sam.

( *Is this ship bio-mechanical? We recognise a hybrid system when we see it...* )

The outer door of the ship made a hissing sound, and popped open. As Sherri pulled it open, Tam looked up at her.

"You never mentioned these ships were partially made of living tissue," they said curiously.

"Does it matter?" Sherri stepped inside, pulling Tim with her. As Tam followed, they shrugged.

"Not really, but it just gave us a little more to think about." They pulled shut the door, and whispered: "Voices down."

( *Ziggy has a piece of Sam inside her.* )

The inside of the ship was dimly lit, and all around them, a humming sound filled the air. The red walls seemed to pulsate, like they were breathing. John phased through the walls, and visibly shivered as he looked back at the fleshy surface.

( *This is gross.* )

( *Shush.* )

( *... But... yeah. It's super gross.* )

Having come to a consensus on the ick factor, Tam frowned, sticking out their tongue. "Feels like we're conducting a colonoscopy, in the role of the camera."



“What next?” Sherri whispered, glancing first at John, then at Tam, with questioning eyes.

Tam squinted, as an array of possibilities raced through their mind.

( *Sam could trace John’s life string.* )

“This way,” they said, heading further into the ship.

“Listen... Tam...” Sherri said, tasting the name. “Not that I’m not impressed with how you’re handling all this...”

Tam paused, looked back at her with a crooked grin. “You’re worried that the thing that happened to you is gonna happen to us, right?”

Sherri gave him a sheepish nod.

“Don’t worry about that,” they said. “The code that Sam activated is specifically designed to circumvent the dominance trend.”

They looked behind Sherri, towards John. “You helped design it. Or, will. Anyway, this is not a permanent thing. When we leap next, we should separate into two forms again.”

“Should?” Sherri’s brow furrowed.

“Trust us, we’re a doctor.”

With that, Tam wrenched open a door to their right, and disarmed a soldier who had been waiting to ambush them.

“Not today, Satan,” they said, with a kick to the junk.

( *That was juvenile.* )

( *Fun, though.* )

Tam grabbed at the Kromagg’s collar, brandishing the blaster they had just acquired.

“Sherri, if you wouldn’t mind, there’s some rope in the storage compartment over there.” They nodded past the door, to the room in which the soldier had been hiding.

“My pleasure,” Sherri said, giving Tam the first proper smile she had permitted since they’d merged. They worked together to tie up the soldier, who snarled and gnashed, trying to sink his sharp teeth into someone’s arm.

“Down boy,” Tam said, chuckling. They looked up at John. “Better prepare a rabies shot if he breaks the skin.”

John tilted his head and regarded them through squinted eyes. “I... genuinely can’t tell when you’re joking.”

“Thames deals with everything by making jokes and referencing pop culture,” Tam said, pulling tightly on their final knot. “So assume we’re joking most of the time. Though that doesn’t necessarily mean the joke isn’t the outer layer of a truth bomb.”

They gestured to the tied-up Kromagg. “Like this li’l guy. If he’s the truth, the rope is the joke. Just unravel it a bit to see what’s inside.”

*( I’m kinda surprised how many jokes come out of Tam. I always thought you were a humourless guy. )*

*( I have a sense of humour, it’s just... I know when to be serious. Sometimes there is nothing to laugh about. )*

*( There’s always something to laugh about. )*

*( There’s usually something to laugh about. )*

“I think they’ll be trying to get into the ship in about thirty seconds,” Tam muttered. “This might sound disgusting, but the quickest route to the core of this thing is...”

They slapped a hand against the meaty wall, and it responded with a repulsive ripple. "...Through the flesh."

Sherry and John's faces screwed up with revulsion. Tim, standing in the doorway, seemed to finally realise just where he was in that moment.

"Are you serious?" he said, his jaw slack. "That is *nasty*."

Tam retrieved an axe from the wall, and swung it hard into the warm flesh, and a congealed black liquid began to ebb out.

"Oh boy," they said, as the foul smell filled their nostrils. "This is going to be messy."

As Tam dove into the hot, moist innards of the hybrid ship, the answer to their problem came to them like a cattle prod to a nipple.

*Sam has established some kind of  
transcendent connection between other Sams.  
He reached out to the one whose life has  
touched his own, and was able to see what  
was happening with Thames.*

*( My string theory... )*

*( Ziggy has a piece of me in her. Maybe I've  
been able to tap into it, somehow? Since  
Ziggins? )*

*( You've been making all these calculations and  
having the kind of probability insights I've  
only ever seen in a computer. )*

*( Sam is a hybrid now, too. )*

The revelation did not make the experience of crawling through pulsing, oozing flesh any more pleasant.

## 7.5 · DOWN WITH THE SHIP

As Tam thrust their way out of the viscera and tore their fingers through the ship's skin, like an infant xenomorph bursting through a chest cavity, they gave a sheepish wave to Al, who was on the other side, watching them emerge. His cigar smoke drifted upward, leaving his alarmed eyes looking through the haze.

"Welcome back," said Tam, climbing to their feet and giving Al a nod. "Be glad you can't smell this."

Tam wiped away the fluids from their eyes and mouth, spitting away the cursed flavours, and gazed around the cramped corridor they were now standing in.

( *Just a little further.* )

"Well I'm just glad I was on the clean end of the bed when Beth was giving birth," Al said. "I'd love to blow a few chunks, but there's a more pressing issue, Sam."

"Sorry, but hold that thought," Tam said, and reached a hand into the gaping wound in the wall, grasping the hand that awaited, and pulled Sherri out, followed by Tim, who was holding her other arm for dear life and screaming.

At this, Al was unable to hold back, and leaned over, retching.

( *What, he's never seen this much blood and  
gore before?* )

( *He was a prisoner of war, you know.* )

( *Then what's the problem?* )

Sherri took clumps of biological tissue that were stuck to her face, and threw them to the ground with a full body shiver.

“How many more of these walls *are* there?” she whined. “I once leaped into a guy living in a sewer and it wasn’t even this bad.”

“That’s all of them, we think,” Tam replied.

John blinked into the room, and his eyes popped open at the scene. “My god, I just stepped into a horror movie.”

( *But if we replace one of our arms with a chainsaw, it could become an action movie.* )

Tam threw an envious look at the unsoiled Willy Wonka coat wrapped around John’s slim frame. Then they found their eyes wandering a little too much.

( *Mm. He’s cute in that.* )

( *Could you not?* )

( *Oh come on, it’s like the rules of the universe that if you ever meet your doppelgänger, you have to sleep together. It’s in the Bible.* )

( *I’m not gay. I’m not attracted to myself. And it’s not in the Bible.* )

( *Aren’t you? And I submit that the Holy Trinity is a three-way.* )

( *Thames, would you stop dividing our attention with these tangents?* )

Tam shook their head, and turned to Al, who was still looking a bit green in the face. “Al. You said there was a pressing issue?”

“Yeah, I just watched a guy die, and that’s not even the shocking part.” Al looked up through the hair of his eyebrows with serious eyes. “Quinn leaped, Sam.”

( ??? )

Tam had no idea how to process this information.

“He... did *what* now?”

Al began gesturing. “He was there one minute, looking all... deceased – not like I could check his pulse, but he sure didn’t look like he was breathing – and then... blue light, poof, gone!”

Tam exchanged an astonished look with John, before relaying the message to Sherri.

“Well...” said Tam, after a moment, “That’s certainly a... development. But we don’t know what to make of it. Let’s put that one on the back-burner, because we’re running out of time here.”

Tam gestured to the group. “Keep on your toes.”

They crept, single file, down the warm, glistening pink passageway, dodging drips of some form of mucous.

“I don’t want to know what this tunnel is for,” Tim commented from the back of the line.

“I’m still trying to dig out gunk from my eye socket,” Sherri moaned.

“Don’t worry,” John said, “when you finish here, I’ll retrieve you, and you’ll leave all of this behind. Sound good?”

Sherri was silent as they continued trudging through the goop.

“What’s wrong?” John probed.

“I’m just gonna miss Uncle Sam. That’s all.”

( *I’ll miss you too.* )

Tam felt Sherri’s hand take theirs from behind.

“Sam... when you left before, I felt such a sense of loss. Even though I hadn’t seen you in twenty years, I...”

*Isn't this the same person who held you at  
gunpoint and chained you up?*

*How many people who you loved as family  
have you chained up or held at gunpoint?*

*Touché.*

*If you don't mind, I need a moment.*

Sam squeezed her hand. "Sherri, I promise you I'll find some way to see you again after all this is over. All of you."

He looked ahead at Al. "I don't know how, but I will."

"So you're not coming home?" Al asked gravely.

"I'm trusting my gut on this one, Al," he said with a smile. "This new... awareness... wouldn't have happened if I wasn't meant to keep going, even when the Project is gone. I don't need Ziggy's help now."

*That's not strictly true, but I'm not going to get into the  
weeds on being connected to her through spacetime.*

Al gave him a forlorn look. "Really gonna miss you, pal."

Sam felt tears welling in his eyes. "Y-yeah. Look, save it for when we're done. I uh... need to focus."

*We need to focus.*

As they rounded a corner, Tam pulled open a four foot grate at the end of the tunnel, before crouching and turning around, finger at their lips, and handing the blaster to Sherri.

"Wait 'til we mention the Commander, count to ten, then drop down after us," they whispered, before flinging themselves feet-first into the grate, their mucous-slathered shoes making contact with a Kromagg worker, who had been hunched over a large engine access panel.

The worker fell flat onto the hard, mercifully inorganic, floor, and Tam stepped off him, glancing casually at the handful of other workers who were staring at the fluid-covered man who'd just been deposited into the room through a slimy canal.

“Uh, hey fellas,” they said. “Listen, we recommend you flee for your lives, because we suspect this ship may explode within the next nine-ish minutes. Just a fair warning.”

The workers glanced among themselves for a moment, before one of them raised a blaster, aiming it at Tam. They raised their hands calmly, as John and Al blinked into the room on either side of them, watching them with curiosity.

“A guy falls out of your... mucous... ducts... and your first thought is ‘kill it?’ You guys are working on quantum probability translocation, aren’t you? Be smart about this. Don’t give us physicists a bad name.”

“How did you get in here?” barked the man with the gun.

Tam pointed at the grate. “Came through there.”

“You know what I meant!”

“You weren’t very specific. Did you mean in the military base, in the hangar, or in the ship?”

The Kromagg seemed to hesitate as he, too, tried to figure out what he meant.

“Actually, we’re here at the behest of Commander Kerrick. But we had to sneak in because he didn’t want anyone knowing he needed the help of a human.”

“I can tell you’re lying without having to read your mind. And why do you keep saying ‘we?’ Who else is—”

At that moment, Sherri plummeted out of the duct, landing in a crouched position as she held two blasters out at the workers.



Tam placed a hand to her back and ushered her forward, as Tim fell from the grate, landing much less gracefully.

“That answer your question?” asked Tam, as they looked up to the opening. “Wanna stick around and see how many more are gonna plop outta there?”

At that, the room cleared out, with the gun-toting worker bringing up the rear.

“Don’t forget to get out of the blast range,” Tam called to the fleeing Kromaggs. “And there’s a guy tied up in the storage closet; he might want to leave, too.”

Tam flashed a wide grin at Sherri, who seemed to be relaxing more around the dual leaper since seeing them show mercy for the second time.

“We agreed that murder is probably wrong,” they explained, before excitedly crossing the room to a small panel on the wall.

They popped it open, revealing Nexus Quinn’s timer, set into a panel, with wires protruding from its sides.

“They were so lazy they just adapted the existing timer,” laughed Tam.

Sherri eyed it with a furrowed brow. “There’s no time display on it.”

Tam nodded as they rummaged through one of the abandoned toolboxes in the room. “Yeah, seems the name ‘timer’ is antiquated for Nexus Quinn. He figured out how to use it at will. Meaning...”

Tam returned to the panel with a screwdriver, and began unfastening the timer from its place.

“We can use it to send Tim and Janet away,” said John, “while I retrieve Sherri.”

He stared a moment at Tam. “And you... I don’t know *what* you’re gonna do.”

“We’re gonna leap out of here, of course.”

John’s eyebrows met. “Of... course. The... both of you.”

Tam jimmied the screwdriver under the timer, leveraging it so it finally popped out of its recess. They inspected the wires, then flipped it and opened the back up.

“While we’re doing this,” they said, turning an eye to John, “would you walk Tim and Sherri through looping the power cells into the exhaust cores? We’re gonna go out with a fireworks show, just for funsies.”

“But that’ll only explode once the ship is powered up,” John said.

Tam nodded. “So we’ll power it up after you guys are out of here.”

“And you?”

“We’ll leap out before the kaboom. Don’t worry about it.”

Al, who had been quietly taking in the scene, finally piped up.

“How do you know that’s what’s gonna happen, Sam? Ziggy doesn’t even know.”

Tam looked at him with a sage calm. “We’re gonna make it out. And in the off chance we don’t... at least we saved a few people along the way.”

( *That’s the spirit.* )

( *No strings attached, right? Still, I can’t deny that my decision to join you was informed by a strong desire to stop being tortured.* )

( *Good enough.* )

As John assisted Sherri, and Sherri assisted Tim, Tam disconnected the external wires in the timer, and set the coordinates for Earth Prime.

*Gotta admit it, Nexus Quinn did have an intellectual edge on the one we know. This timer is a thing of beauty. Pity it was about to bring ruin to the multiverse.*

“Who’s ready to slide out of this dump?” they called out, and Sherri looked up.

“Just a sec, we’re almost done.”

John and Al were now standing back together, each looking at their handlinks with concerned expressions.

Tam sidled up to them. “Whatcha guys doing? Tweeting?”

*Stop confusing them with future stuff.*

Ignoring their puzzled faces, Tam crossed their arms, leaning to see the two devices, one of which looked a lot like a thick smart phone with a deep crack down the middle, and the other that looked like it could be a baby’s chew toy if it were made of silicone.

“Something’s interfering with Higgins,” John mumbled, in a low enough voice that Sherri couldn’t hear.

“And Ziggy,” added Al, slamming his hand on the side of the whining block as it flashed with red and yellow.

*Interfering?*

“What do you mean?” asked Tam, glancing at the readouts scanning past the displays.

*We’ve never seen anything like that before.*

Tam closed their eyes for a moment, as Sam accessed that new part of himself that allowed him to float above time. He listened, and searched. He traversed along his own lifetime, trying to understand.

And he felt a hand touch his shoulder; strong, and firm, but one that held some familiarity. And he was pushed away, back into his body, and combined back into Thames like two rivers meeting.

As Tam opened their eyes, one short message bounced around in their mind:

**( Trust me. )**

## 7.6 • SIGNAL LOST

As Al watched Sam's eyes flutter open, the hologram of the Kromagg engine room promptly fizzled out. His jaw dropped.

“Hey, what! *Not now!*”

The Imaging Chamber door slid open behind him, as he ran a hand over the top of his head. He spun around to see Gooshie nervously standing in the doorway, dripping with sweat.

“What happened?!” Al cried out, violently shaking his unresponsive handlink.

“We don't know...” said Gooshie, gesturing out into the hall. “Ziggy isn't talking, but she's sure doing *something*. She's turned off all her other major subroutines, and that includes the Imaging Chamber. She's overclocked and running *hot*.”

*I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.*

Al headed for the door, and Gooshie stepped aside. Immediately as he stepped out of the door, Al felt a wave of heat meet him.

“It couldn't be another security breach?” asked Al, but all Gooshie could do was shrug helplessly as they traversed the hall.

“Don't go near the mainframe,” said Donna, who emerged from the end of the hall, similarly drenched. “The temperature in there is over a hundred and fifty degrees, and rising.”

With pink earrings blinking against her cheeks, Tina appeared behind Donna, makeup running down her face with her perspiration. For a moment, Al thought she looked like a melting birthday candle.

“Gooshie, baby,” she said, scampering to the programmer, “I think we need to get out of here before we end up like that meatloaf I burnt last week.”

*I need to call John.*

Al dashed off toward his office, and upon reaching it, found his phone was already ringing. The caller ID told him it was exactly the man he wanted to speak with.

“John!” he said as he picked up the phone, and was met with John exclaiming his own name at the same time.

“Al, I just had a memory—”

“—Of being booted out of your hologram?” Al finished.

“Yes! It happened to you too?”

“Yeah, pal. And it gets worse.”

“Is Ziggy going nuclear?”

“So it happened to Higgins too?”

“Uh-huh. But my memory of what happened next is totally blank! I can’t remember a *thing* between then and walking in that bar with Will.”

*Cazzo.*

“Listen,” Al said, mind racing. “I gotta evacuate this place. Ziggy might catch fire or even explode at this rate. I’ll meet you over at the warehouse.”

“Okay. Be careful. I have no clue what’s happening, but I’ll try and come up with some answers.”

\* \* \*

Rembrandt, who was finally attempting to use his stiff legs, padded to his door, his jaw clenched as he forced the sore muscles to work against their will.

*At least they are working.*

As he opened the door into the hall, he was met with a flurry of activity. To his left, he saw John with his head down, pacing, the heel of his palm set against his forehead. Nearby stood Quinn, leaning against the wall, deep in thought. To his right, Sammy Jo was typing something on her Blackberry as she rubbed the back of her neck. Walking immediately past his door was Colin, who backtracked a few steps as he noticed Remy's presence.

"Remy, you're up!"

"Yeah, but..." Rembrandt smiled weakly. "What the devil have I walked into here?"

He gestured to the distracted people in the hall.

Colin grimaced. "Yeah, it's an all-out crisis. But don't worry about it. You get your rest, man. Let us handle it."

Rembrandt frowned. "Nothing I can do, huh?"

*What else is new?*

Colin seemed to notice his reaction, and returned a look of concern.

"Hey, don't take it the wrong way," he said. "I just heard you needed rest. I don't want you to hurt yourself or anything..."

"It's true though, isn't it?" Rembrandt said, shrugging. "No need for a washed-up singer unless there's a need to beg for change, is there?"

Colin's brow furrowed. "Who called you a washed-up singer?"

"Lots of people over the years."

Colin paused a moment, thinking, before placing a hand on Rembrandt's shoulder. "You wanna get a cup of coffee?"

"Don't you have a crisis to handle?" said Rembrandt, nodding in the direction of Quinn.

Colin shrugged. "They're currently in the process of figuring out if there's even anything we can do about it, so I'm sure if they come to a consensus on that, they'll come get me. Come on."

Rembrandt hobbled out into the corridor, eliciting smiles and nods from the otherwise distracted people around him. Colin took his arm, and slung it over his shoulder.

"Need a little help?"

"Thanks."

In the common room, Colin helped him to a couch, and he grunted in relief as he allowed himself to drop down onto it.

A moment later, Colin appeared with a couple of mugs and a pot of coffee, which he served on the coffee table.

"I used to drink so much of this stuff when I worked in the diner," he said. "And when I got home I'd be coasting on a caffeine buzz all night while I worked on projects."

He took a sip from his mug. "Well, that's what my altered history says. Don't remember if I even *liked* coffee in the original timeline."

"So what is this?" asked Rembrandt. "Some kinda pep talk? You wanna tell me I'm not useless round here?"

"No, I just wanted to talk to you, man. But if you *want* a pep talk, I might need some time to come up with one." He placed his mug on a coaster, and took a seat beside Remy. "So... are you doing okay?"



Rembrandt picked up the mug Colin had poured for him, and swirled it around thoughtfully.

“Maybe. Haven’t really allowed myself to think much about it.”

He sipped at the coffee.

*This is my first cup of coffee in weeks.*

“That’s the good stuff,” he said, feeling the warm fluid trickle down his throat. “I don’t know how the coffee you make in an automatic drip is so much better than Q-ball’s or Maggie’s.”

“Freshly ground makes a difference,” said Colin, chuckling. “And you at least need to keep the grounds airtight. Quinn doesn’t care about how his coffee tastes, and Maggie is just generally a disaster in the kitchen.”

Rembrandt watched Colin for a moment, who brought a foot up onto the couch, tucking it under his leg.

*I don’t remember a thing about his original history, not even that my nickname for him was once “Farm Boy” – except that I’ve been told that by Q-ball. What will it be like for me if the ‘maggs never invaded? Will I forget those months in the cell?*

“Hey, Farm Boy.”

Colin almost choked on his coffee as he heard the name. His eyes darted to the amused Rembrandt.

“Sorry, just wanted to see your reaction.”

“Uh...” With a wipe of his hand, Colin cleared his chin of the coffee that had involuntarily come out of his mouth. “Sorry, it’s just Thames called me that, and it was really strange.”

“Right... your... hacker name?”

“You remember that?” Colin’s eyes widened.

“A little. I remember saying and doing things, but not what I was thinking while doing ’em, if that makes any sense.”

“Yeah, Maggie had a similar story.”

“Except Sam never sent no shrapnel bomb to a US Senator.” Rembrandt put his coffee down, and slumped against the back of the couch, head tilting back as he stared at the ceiling. “I can’t catch a break. Least you had that weird cosmic bartender to guide you. I got nothing.”

Colin didn’t answer for about a minute. Remy figured he must have stumped him.

But, when Colin did finally answer, it made Rembrandt laugh.

“I think we need to find that bartender and sit there ’til he *gives* you a break.”

“Ha, yeah...” he said, before realising Colin wasn’t laughing with him. He turned his head and saw Colin’s unsmiling expression. “You’re... serious?”

“John had a tracer on the temporal anomaly, so presumably we can recreate that,” said Colin, gesturing. “We know where it last showed up in this universe. We just have to wait for it to come back, right?”

He took a swig of coffee, and stood. “I bet he’ll have all kinds of answers, too. We just have to make sure we have the right equipment so we don’t get trapped like John was.”

He grinned. “I’ll go tell the others. Thanks for the idea.”

## 7.7 • THE SLIDE HOME

When John and Al vanished before Tam’s eyes, they felt far calmer than they should have. They should have been panicking; Sherri certainly was.

“John?” she paced. “What happened? He needs to retrieve me. Oh my god...”

“It wasn’t just John,” said Tam, with a frown. “Al’s gone, too.”

“This isn’t happening...” Sherri gripped Tam’s arm. “How could both of them just disappear like that?”

( *We don’t know, but...*  )

( *Something’s happening. Something on a cosmic scale. I feel it.* )

“We don’t exactly know, Sherri. But we’re gonna need to adapt.” They bit their thumbnail, thinking for a moment, as Sherri inspected Nexus Quinn’s timer.

( *Who was that voice? And what did they mean, ‘trust me?’ Trust them with what?* )

( *Surely it couldn’t have been...*  )

( *God? Oh, please. If there’s a god, he abandoned us aeons ago. I don’t care what you think about your bartender friend, he ain’t a deity.* )

“As ill-advised as it is for a leaper to jump into a wormhole, we think it may be necessary for you to go with Tim to Earth Prime,”

Tam said.

Sherri pursed her lips. “What about you?”

( *We need to go with her.* )

( *Why?* )

( *Higgins’s leap equations may cause us to leap at random once our quantum photon forms leave the wormhole. We need to be holding hands when that happens, so we don’t end up lost in time and separated.* )

( *Well, sounds like another adventure is afoot.* )

Tam smiled at Sherri. “We’ll all slide together, okay?”

Sherri’s anxious face softened. “Yeah. Okay.”

As Tam started up the power cores, and the ship headed for critical overload, Sherri opened the wormhole, and gripped Tim’s hand.

Tam took her other hand, and the three of them slid away.

\* \* \*

*Outskirts of Albuquerque, NM*

*February 9, 2003*

Quinn tightened a screw in his newly configured timer, biting his lip as his nerves began to get to him. Was he ready to do this?

“Two hours in and out, right?” Colin asked, giving him a serious look. “Please promise me if the ’maggos are still around, you’ll find a nice, quiet spot to hide and wait out the time.”

“Colin, relax,” said Quinn, exuding a level of confidence he wished he actually felt. “We’ll be okay.”

Maggie completed her weapons checks, and secured her handgun in the holster on her hip. “I *really* don’t like that our memories haven’t changed at all.”

“Exactly why there’s no way in hell *I’m* going with you,” Rembrandt said with a resolute shake of his head. “If I never see another ’maggot, it’ll be too damn soon.”

“Sure do wish we had Ziggy to tell us this stuff,” said Colin with a huff.

Quinn cringed as he thought about the depressing fate of the world’s most advanced computer. Ziggy had never regained function before the Project’s power was shut down three days prior. She had been effectively pronounced dead. It had been a terrible day, especially for Al, who had stayed alone in his home, unwilling to see his and his lost friend’s dream end in such a way.

And so, the only way to actually find out if Sam and Sherri had accomplished their mission was to return to Earth Prime and see if the invasion had still happened. And given the state of their memories, Quinn was not looking forward to seeing the probable results.

He and Maggie were tapped to go and check it out, while Colin continued to monitor the sensor that he’d set up with John at the remote roadhouse where he’d emerged into 2002; the sensor made to detect the temporal anomaly that would signal the return of *Al’s Place*.

And so, Quinn set the coordinates to Earth Prime, and opened a wormhole. He and Maggie jumped in, holding hands, and praying that Sherri and Sam had accomplished their goals.

Quinn tumbled to the pavement, wishing that he'd been able to get a hold of the updated timer code that he lost when Ziggy shut down, which would have made the ride much smoother.

Maggie landed on top of him, and immediately scrambled to her feet, hands reaching for her guns. But, as the two of them surveyed the Albuquerque street, they realised that there seemed to be no need for alarm.

*It looks... normal?*

"You're seeing this, right?" Maggie said, as the denizens walked by, some having stopped to stare when they witnessed the wormhole opening. Quinn nodded as he climbed to his feet, and brushed off his shirt.

"Well, let's call home," he said, striding towards a payphone down the street.

"Y-yeah," Maggie agreed, following behind closely.

Quinn fed the phone some quarters, and dialled the California number to his home.

"Hello?"

"Ma..." Quinn's heart caught in his throat. She was okay.

"Quinn? Oh, hi sweetie. What's up?"

*That's awfully flippant for speaking to a son who's been missing, isn't it?*

"Uh... nothing, nothing. Just wanted to, um... check in on you. See how you are." He gripped the phone cord nervously.

“Quinn, that’s sweet. I’m just fine. But you’re gonna see me in three hours, aren’t you? Sunday night family dinner, right? Don’t tell me you forgot what day of the week it is again. You need proper weekends, honey.”

*What the hell? Did I enter the wrong coordinates?*

“Uh, right. Must’ve lost track. Well, I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Quinn.”

“Love you too, Ma. Bye...”

Feeling entirely off-kilter, Quinn grabbed the timer in his jacket pocket, and inspected the configuration.

*Those are absolutely the right coordinates to Earth Prime.*

*What the Hell?*

Frantic, he dialed another number.

After a few rings, a booming, agitated voice answered. “What? If this is a blasted telemarketer, I—”

“Professor!”

*He’s alive.*

“Uh, Mister Mallory?” the voice had lost its irritable edge, and was more curious than anything. “What can I do for you?”

Quinn met Maggie’s eye through the glass of the phone booth. He tried to convey his panic to her, but she didn’t quite understand, cocking her head to one side.

“Professor, are you... did we...”

“Oh, do spit it out, would you? I haven’t got all day, not even for you.”

Quinn dragged a hand over his mouth. “Okay, okay, I’m having a weird day, so I guess I’ll start with this: is Project Long Jump still going?”

There was silence on the line.

“Profess—”

“How do you know about that?”

“So I *have* got the right coordinates...? That’s even *more* confusing. Listen, can we talk?”

Arturo was silent again for a moment, before continuing. “Where are you right now? This number you’re calling from... 505...?”

Quinn grimaced. “I’m in Albuquerque.”

“I beg your pardon! *Albuquerque?*” Arturo let out a breath. “Well then, you’d better just speak with me now, I suppose.”

“Thanks.” Quinn leaned against the phone booth wall, relaxing a little. The Professor was alive, and the project still existed. That meant, at the very least, that the 1978 visit had still occurred, which was consistent with John’s memories.

It was unlikely, Quinn figured, that Arturo would remember their last encounter, in the abandoned facility. After all, that version of him had almost certainly perished.

But where had this second version of Quinn come from? Who else had spawned an inexplicable double?

“Do you... remember the notes I left you back in ’78?”

“...Yes...” Arturo’s voice was trembling now. “So, that was you. I had wondered if that version of you had been... erased. I think I might have an inkling as to what occurred, now. But, I’m afraid you may not like it.”

“Oh, I bet I won’t.” Quinn gritted his teeth. “Go on, then. Lay it on me.”



“Just a moment, I need to switch to the bedroom line lest my wife overhear. Don’t hang up.”

A click, then a tone, and Quinn shifted on his feet, as he beckoned to Maggie. She squeezed into the booth with him, and he held the phone between them.

“The Professor remembers us,” he whispered, “but my Mom thought I was some other version of myself.”

“What?”

Quinn held up a finger as the Professor picked up his bedroom phone. “Are you there, Mister Mallory?”

“Yeah, still here. You, uh... have a wife?”

“Yes, but I’d rather not waste time speaking on that matter when we have a much more important thing to discuss, if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“As you predicted in your notes, a Mister Mallory and Ms Beckett returned to this world some months after Miss Welles and Mister Brown. But, as no invasion took place, they remained here to resume their lives as normal. I believe you to be a divergence that has branched away from this Earth due to a paradox.”

“Wait, so we’ve become our *own* doubles?!” Maggie asked, looking at Quinn with panic.

“Yes, it seems so, Ms Beckett.” agreed Arturo.

Quinn felt his life slipping away. “But... we worked so hard to get our lives back...”

*Someone else got our happy ending...?*

“What about Colin?”

“According to my records, John had been working towards empowering him to slide after you. But it seems both vanished at points in 1998 and haven’t been seen since.” Arturo’s voice broke. “I’m terribly sorry, Quinn. My son was also a casualty of these disappearances.”

“Did Sherri ever return?”

“No, nobody seems to know where *anyone* went; not even Higgins.”

“Wait, Higgins is still running?”

“That he is. From the activity logs, it seems he was in an unresponsive state for several months before finally resolving, with a hefty update to the timelines of known Kromagg-occupied worlds. The changes brought about in that mission must have been exceptionally far-reaching.”

“That must have been what happened to Ziggy...”

“Well, would that you were in San Francisco presently, Mister Mallory; we could discuss this all evening.”

“I do have *one* piece of good news for you, Professor,” said Quinn. “Both Colin and John are alive and safe. At least, the versions of them *I* know.”

“That’s marvellous to hear. Can I expect to hear from John?”

“Count on that some day, but I couldn’t tell you when. We’re working on finding your son and Al. Long story, but we’re on their trail.”

“Is there anything I can do to assist?”

Quinn thought for a moment. “Well, all I know is that they were last seen trapped in a temporal anomaly that was bouncing around in time. Higgins first detected it, but it’s been in and out

of worlds. It may be under the control of this bartender that – uh, this sounds out-there, doesn't it?"

"I stopped being surprised by strange phenomena a *long* time ago, Mister Mallory. I shall review the Higgins logs for this anomaly."

"Please don't try and check it out, okay? It already swallowed up three people as far as we know, and only spat one back out."

"Why, then, do I suspect *you* intend to go after it?"

"Well, you got me there."

As he chuckled, Quinn noticed that Maggie was staring at something outside of the phone booth. He followed her eye-line, and almost dropped the phone when he saw that a wormhole had opened up in the exact place the two of them had appeared minutes before.

"Uh, Professor, can I call you back?"

Out of the swirling blue vortex tumbled two filthy, exhausted people: people Quinn had never seen in his life, but given the sewn-up eyes of the old woman, he had a pretty good guess as to who they might be.

## 7.8 • PARTY RESERVATIONS

*Donna's House, San Antonio NM*

*August 8, 2003*

John nervously tapped on the door of his double's former residence, a little suspicious about the reason she'd given for inviting him here. She'd claimed she had boxes of Sam's old clothes to pass on to him, but he knew the date. It was his birthday.

As Donna let him in, he gave a wry smile at the people who jumped out at him from all sides, yelling 'surprise!' A banner that read '*Happy 50th Birthday*' was raised by Quinn and Colin.

He cocked an eyebrow at Donna.

"You realise it's *Sam's* fiftieth, right?" he whispered to her. "*I'm* only forty-five."

"I know," Donna said, with a shrug. "But when you get back to your Earth, you'll *legally* be fifty. You don't want to miss your chance at a party, do you?"

"If you insist," said a resigned John, "fine, I'll play along."

He glanced around the living room at all the smiling faces who he'd gotten to know over the months, even with the Project long since shut down.

The last six months had been a strange change of pace. Everything had slowed down as they awaited the return of the anomaly. Nothing much to do but kick back and get to know everyone better.

And, as he scanned the crowd, he met eyes with Jack, Donna's younger brother, who approached him with a smile. He was forty-three, husky build, and had short, messy brown hair. John had gone on a handful of dates with him over the past couple of months.

"Happy birthday!" he said, extending his arms.

"Thanks, Jack," said John, as Jack gave him a peck on the cheek. John shied away from it, opting to give the man a brief hug instead.

The problem of this pairing, unfortunately, was that it was based on lies. He had been introduced to Jack as Sam's previously undisclosed twin brother, and now had to uphold that lie as a foundation of his relationship. He knew it couldn't last, and it made all their conversations feel like traversing a minefield. But could he really break it off at his own birthday party?

He wandered further into the room, and a waving hand caught his attention. He headed over to Al, who was standing by a window, his elbow resting on the sill as he let his cigar smoke billow out into the hot desert.

"Was this Donna's compromise?" John asked, gesturing broadly towards the window.

"Yeah. If wind starts blowing the smoke back in, I have to switch to the other side of the house," he said with a roll of his eyes. "How's everything going with tracking— uh, never mind."

John tilted his head at the sudden clamming up, as a pair of warm arms wrapped around him from behind.

"What you talking about?" asked Jack.

"Nothing much," John said, and gave Al an awkward glance. Al simply shrugged back.

“We’ll talk later,” he said, before leaning out the window and sucking on the cigar.

John let himself enjoy Jack’s hug; he figured he could at least do that. He tilted his head back, giving Jack a smile.

*He’s such a good guy. Under different circumstances...*

“Hey, happy birthday, Uncle... John!”

John turned his head to see Maggie.

“Hey there,” he said, pulling out of Jack’s arms and initiating a hug with his surrogate niece. As their heads came close, he whispered: “Thanks for remembering to call me John in front of him.”

“Of course.”

As they ended the hug, Maggie gestured behind her, where Tom awaited. He hadn’t been around much, so John was pleased to see he’d come to visit. The two shook hands, but after a moment, Tom relented and drew him into a hug.

The party continued as a blur of familiar faces and attempted conversations that continued to be thwarted by Jack’s presence.

After a while, John noticed someone sit at the piano against the wall and begin to play a familiar tune that made his cheeks burn. He trotted to the piano, leaning over at Rembrandt.

“Just who told you to start playing that?” he asked, setting his wine glass on the top of the piano. Rembrandt grinned up at him.

“Al. He said you’d know why.” And then he started singing. “*Every night in my dreams...*”

John sent Al a look across the room. Al winked, giving an impish smile. John laughed, shaking his head. As the chorus approached, he relented, clearing his throat.

*Well, my audience awaits. This one's for you, Sherri.*

*"Near, far, wherever you are..."*

\* \* \*

After cutting the cake, John chewed thoughtfully on his slice, and Jack, alone on the patio, caught his eye. He beckoned, and John joined him on a bench.

"Having a good time?" Jack asked as he took his seat.

"Yeah, it's been nice seeing everyone together," he said, then frowned as he thought about the people he wished were here.

"There. Right there." Jack pointed a finger to John's face. "It's that look you always get. You always go quiet."

"Yeah, I guess I do," John agreed.

*For good reason. I can't talk about these things with you.*

"John," Jack said, nervously rubbing his hands together, "is this working out? You and me?"

John looked at him in surprise. "Uh..."

Jack grimaced. "I don't want to bring down your party, but it just doesn't feel like you're very into me."

John smiled sadly. "You're a great guy, Jack, any guy would be lucky to have you. But you're right, I don't think we're gonna... go the distance."

Jack's shoulders slumped in relief. "I'm glad it wasn't just me feeling that."

"And I'm glad you said something," said John. "I was trying to think of a way to bring this up, too."

“This doesn’t mean we can’t be friends, right?”

“Right.”

*For as long as I’m still around.*

In John’s pocket, he felt his phone buzz twice in quick succession, followed by a long buzz: a sequence of vibrations he’d programmed into it for a very specific purpose.

Eyes widening, he jumped to his feet, and spun around, meeting the eyes of Colin, who was similarly startled.

Between them, they shared an unspoken moment.

John turned to Jack. “Listen... take care of Donna, will you? I gotta go. Right now.”

\* \* \*

“Okay buddy, you had your fun. Now would you take us home already?”

Al leaned across the bar at the bartender that apparently shared his name, staring daggers. In response, the undaunted barkeep threw him another cigar. Al took it begrudgingly, and placed it in his breast pocket, with a glare.

“You know there’s a party at eight,” the bartender said. “You don’t want to wait for that? I’ll be serving complimentary buffalo wings.”

The bartender gazed up at the wall clock over the door, which indicated that it was seven-thirty. Al looked at it with trepidation, not sure if he could trust any kind of timepiece since he’d been stuck here. Through the window, he observed a twilit desert expanse.



“What kinda party?”

“Think someone’s having a fiftieth,” the bartender said. “The big half century.”

“Who?” Will chimed in. “And is that the whole reason you’ve kidnapped us?”

“Kidnapped?” The bartender looked genuinely hurt, as he flipped a rag over his shoulder. “I haven’t even come out from behind this bar. *You* came to *me*.”

“Oh for the love—” Al grumbled. “This guy’s useless to talk to, Will. We’re better off just ignoring him.”

The bartender leaned towards him. “Our first guest is about to arrive. Excuse me.”

He moved to his beer taps, and started pouring one.

“Al?”

Al’s head whipped towards the door, where a man was now standing.

*Wait, isn’t that Quinn something?*

“Hey there, son. Thirsty?” The bartender placed the beer at the bar, where Quinn approached, looking lost.

“I thought the afterlife would look a little less run down,” Quinn said, glancing around, before fixing his gaze on Al. “Don’t tell me you really *are* a guardian angel.”

Al squinted. “I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about, kid. Where’d you come from just now?”

Quinn sat on a stool, grasping his beer. “I’m about ninety-nine percent certain I just died and appeared here like it was the pearly gates, so that’s how my week’s going.”

He took a sip of the beer. “Is this...? I dunno, it’s certainly not nice enough to be Heaven. Purgatory, maybe? Limbo?”

“It’s just a bar,” said the bartender, giving a shrug. “Though I like to think of it as a refuge for weary travellers.”

“I’m gonna go with Purgatory,” Al cut in. “Definitely Purgatory.”

He turned to Will. “What do you think, pal? Are we dead too?”

“Gentlemen, *nobody’s* dead.” The bartender turned to Quinn with a wink. “Not yet.”

Al reached a hand into his pocket to pull out the cigar, and felt a strange moment of confusion sweep over him. He looked up, and Quinn was gone, the beer glass empty on the bar. Puzzled, he glanced at the clock. It was eight.

*Uh... where did that half hour go?*

He slapped a hand on the bar. “What just happened?”

The bartender, now emerging from the kitchen doors with a large plate of chicken wings, looked at him with an innocent expression.

“What do you mean?” he skirted around the bar and headed for a table, where he set down the plate. “Help yourself, by the way.”

“Where’d Quinn go?”

He shot a look to Will, who frowned.

“Did we black out?” he asked.

“Oh, you mean the young man who was in here before?” the bartender asked, rubbing his chin. “He went to see his family, I think. Shame, really. He’s missing out.”

The bartender grabbed one of the wings, and took a bite. Outside, Al heard a few vehicles pulling up.

“Ah, right on time!” said the bartender, scurrying back behind the bar.

The first person to enter *Al's Place* was a man Al recognised as Colin. He cautiously poked a head around the door, and held up a spyglass in front of his eye as he gazed around, like a sailor in a crow's nest looking for land. As his eye line reached the bartender, he froze, and pulled it away from his face, wide-eyed.

The bartender held a finger to his lips, and winked. “You want some buffalo wings?”

## 7.9 • THE BAR AT THE END OF THE MULTIVERSE

The bartender licked his fingers as Colin cautiously approached the bar. He gestured to the table where the platter of wings awaited.

“Go on. They’re complimentary.”

Colin, to the bartender’s dismay, was uninterested in the catering. Instead, he took a seat at the bar, and stared intently at the bartender, silent and questioning.

“It’s been a while since you last paid me a visit,” he offered. “How’d things work out for you?”

“You’re...” Colin trailed off, turning the Reality Lens over in his hands. Al the Bartender gave him a serious look.

“Let’s keep that between the two of us for now, if you don’t mind.”

With that, he raised his eyes to greet John and Quinn, who were now coming in the door with greatly concerned looks. John’s eyes immediately locked onto Will and Al Prime, and he dashed towards them.

“Guys... oh my god. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Al looked his friend up and down, then gave a flick to John’s unruly hair. “You, uh, didn’t have hair this long two hours ago.”

“Yeah, it’s been more than eight months since I left here,” he said, drawing his friend into a hug. “It’s safe to say a lot has happened. I’m glad he hasn’t kept you here for that long.”

Will gave John a look of sincere relief. “We thought you might be gone forever.”

John put a gentle hand on Will’s shoulder.

“Seems this guy—” he gestured to the bartender, “—had somewhere for me to be. I don’t think he’s done any of this without... *some* kinda purpose.”

“Is that Quinn?” Al said, pointing a finger. “Coulda sworn he was *just* in here, but he wasn’t wearing that getup.”

“Another Quinn?” John asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah. He was convinced he’d just kicked the bucket. Had us questioning whether *we* were dead, too. Funny thing, he seemed to know me.”

“I see...” John scratched his head. “He might have been right about his... status... but where is he now?”

Al shrugged broadly. “Don’t know. Blinked and he was gone. Seems we lost a half hour in the process.”

John turned an eye to the bartender. “Was it Nexus Quinn? Did you bring him here when he—”

The bartender quirked a smile. “Sorry, I didn’t catch his name. Happy birthday, by the way.”

He pulled a bottle of sherry from under the bar, and handed it to him. “On the house.”

John looked down at the label, and back up at the bartender with a deadpan glare. “*Very funny*. Where is she?”

The bartender merely let a smile draw across his face, before turning away.

At the same time as that conversation was playing out, the bartender was also listening to Quinn ask his brother about what

he'd seen through the Reality Lens; and Colin, perhaps out of some sense of gratitude to the bartender for the help he'd once provided, evaded the question.

The next to enter was Al Calavicci, the third one around here to go by the name Al. The bartender was glad he was nigh-omniscient, or else he might have started getting confused.

Al strode to the bar, frowning. He slammed his hand down.

"Alright, listen, whoever you are: where's Sam?"

The bartender shrugged. "I don't know, but..." he looked down at his reservations sheet, letting his finger trace across the paper. "The reservation is under the name Sam, so why don't you have some wings and wait? He's bound to show up."

The bartender looked towards the door, where another car load was entering: Maggie, Rembrandt, and the one who'd driven them there, Tom Beckett.

The bartender's gaze shifted between Al Prime and Maggie, and he stifled a laugh as Al's cigar dropped out of his mouth at the sight of her.

"Holy cannoli," he breathed. Maggie paused for a moment, as she took in the two Al Calaviccis present. She wandered up to the Al she hadn't met with a raised eyebrow.

"Do I have a stain on my shirt, old man? My eyes are up here." she said, folding her arms, and pointing to her face.

Al Prime retrieved his cigar from the floor, and stamped it out into the ash tray on the bar. "I was just gonna say you have a lovely pair of... eyes."

At this, John gave a visible cringe, and placed a hand on Maggie's shoulder. "Look, he and Sherri were... you know. He never saw her this young."

Maggie relaxed a little as John turned to Al. “You might want to adjust your expectations on the state of Sherri’s eyes, Al.”

Al squinted. “I thought you told me she didn’t make it.”

John hesitated a moment. “Uh, things have... changed since then. Last I heard she escaped the Kromaggs, but I don’t know *what* happened to her after that. She never returned.”

The roar of a motorcycle heralded the next guest, and the bartender gave her a nod of greeting as she entered.

“Ah, the little lady with the big bike,” he said cheerfully. Alia responded with a scowl.

“I don’t have the patience for your games today,” she said, throwing her helmet aside. “Where are they? Sam and Thames?”

The bartender’s gaze moved around the room, finding every set of eyes looking at him, awaiting an answer.

“Nobody’s eating the buffalo wings,” he said, pointing at the untouched platter. “Come on, I worked hard on those. First wings, *then* answers. Deal?”

The promise of answers finally got the guests to descend on the platter. Several minutes later, just a few remained. The bartender smiled, knowing his dish was a hit.

“Okay, we ate your damn wings,” said Rembrandt. “Now we got questions in need of some answers.”

“Well,” said the bartender, “You only turn fifty once. So let’s all make sure Sam Beckett has a lovely birthday. Everyone get ready to yell ‘surprise,’ okay?”

The bar’s patrons all looked at each other, bewildered. The bartender frowned. “What, were my instructions unclear or something?”

He gestured a ‘shoo’ motion with his hands.

“Everyone hide and get ready to jump out, would you?”

Across the bar, he noticed John sighing heavily. But, reluctantly, the guests all moved to positions that had wildly varying levels of obscurity.

“Oh, good enough,” said the bartender, before ducking behind the bar.

There was a short moment of silence, before the door opened.

The bartender jumped up, arms outstretched.

“Surprise!” he shouted, a lone voice in the quiet room. The bartender gave a withering look at all his guests, who were silently peeking out from their spots.

At the entrance, Sam’s jaw was hanging open. “What—”

Behind him, Sherri and Thames poked their heads into the bar. Sherri’s single eye looked like it was about to pop out of her head to join its partner. Thames, on the other hand, looked highly amused at the strange situation.

“Sam! Buddy!” Al was the first to make a move, crossing to his friend and drawing him into a hug. “This whole stupid charade was worth it now.”

Sam, still trying to find his words, looked down at Al.

“It’s good to see you, but... what is all this?”

“Apparently this nutcase—” Al pointed a finger at the bartender, “—organised a birthday party for you. D’you know you’re fifty today?”

Sam’s eyebrows met with confusion. “I am? I swear it was January a minute ago.”

The bartender piped up, giving a sage look: “Time flies when—”

“Oh, shut up already,” said both Als in unison.



Sherri's eye fell upon John, Al Prime, and Will, and she crossed to them, hand over her smiling mouth.

"You guys..."

John's eyes immediately filled with tears as he pressed his arms around her.

"It took all of us, but we finally accomplished the mission."

Meanwhile, Thames had spotted Alia. She approached him with apprehension, as he traipsed towards her to meet her halfway.

"Hey, Alia," he said, whispering as if he was sharing a secret with her. He pointed towards the bartender. "Sam thinks that guy is God."

He stifled a laugh, and Alia rolled her eyes. "Yeah. I know."

Thames turned towards the bartender, who had his hands perched on his hips.

"I think if you're God, you should probably at least get some better ventilation in this dump. This place reeks of cigars."

The bartender stroked his chin. "Hmm, I guess I could get a few vents installed to improve the air quality. But listen, I have a job proposition for the pair of you. Talk to me later, alright?"

He let that sit with them as he grabbed a glass, and tapped a butter knife against it.

"Friends, can I get your attention, please?"

All eyes moved to him, and he smiled at his ability to herd these cats.

"I want you all to have a nice time tonight, but I need you to know that last call is at twelve-thirty sharp. So keep an eye on the time. Oh, and I wouldn't mind a chat with each of you tonight, so come say 'hi' at some point, alright? There's a lot to discuss."

He gave a crooked grin to his guests. “Drinks are on the house, by the way. But pace yourselves. Don’t forget the designated drivers.”

Sam took a seat on a stool, gazing at the bartender quietly.

“Happy birthday, Sam.”

“It was my birthday last time we met.” Sam’s face was serene, but curious.

“So it was. Fifty years went by in a flash, didn’t it?”

“Thank you for... whatever this is. I’m glad to see everyone.” He squinted. “Who *are* you?”

The bartender tilted his head, as he wandered to the beer taps. “Sam, we’ve covered this. I’m Al.”

Sam leaned forward. “You’re not, though... are you? You look just like a guy I met on my first leap. I assume there’s a purpose behind why you’ve chosen this face.”

“Someone’s got all their memories, I see.”

The bartender slid a schooner of Schlitz across the bar to Sam, and he picked it up with amusement.

“Yeah. I’m brimming with memories, even ones that haven’t happened yet. Why is that?” He took a swig of the beer, keeping his eyes trained on the bartender.

“Don’t ask me; it’s *your* string theory, isn’t it?”

Sam’s gaze intensified.

“This conversation isn’t over,” he said, picking up his glass and turning towards the rest of the party. “But I assume you brought all my friends together for a reason, so I’m going to try and suss out what that is.”

The bartender nodded. “Enjoy the party. And try the buffalo wings.”

## 7.10 • PARTY FAVOURS

The tinny, slightly fuzzy strains of *YMCA* by The Village People drifted from a poorly tuned radio on a wall shelf, as Sherri grasped John's hand, finally letting herself believe her ordeal was over. He squeezed her hand back, both relieved that they could feel the warmth from the other, and keep a hold of their entirely solid forms.

She glanced for a moment at Sam, as the implications of this being his fiftieth birthday dawned on her.

*Is it really the year 2003? It's been five years since I leaped?*

"Do you know what happened to Tim and Janet?" she asked. "Did they make it back?"

"Yes, they're safe now. Dropped into Earth Prime back in February."

Sherri bit her lip. "February of... two thousand and three...?"

"You got it. Right in front of Quinn and Maggie." John turned towards the bar. "Have a feeling Q had something to do with that."

"Q... oh!" Sherri remembered John's postulation about the nature of the 'higher power.' Then, she noticed he was gesturing a hand towards the man behind the bar.

"Sherri, I think this is our Q."

Sherri's brow furrowed. "What, the bartender?"

John looked back at her with a funny look. “Believe me, he’s no bartender.”

Sherri stared at the stout gentleman with an apron. He glanced at her, and smiled.

“Can I get you a drink? Seems like you might need one after what you’ve been through.”

Sherri raised an eyebrow. “And you know what I’ve been through because you’re...”

“I’m observant,” he said, pouring a glass of red wine, and placing it on the bar in front of her. “Doesn’t look like you willingly gave up that eye, for a start.”

Sherri felt herself becoming self-conscious about her eye socket, and took the wine before turning away from the strange little man behind the bar.

“I say all you need’s a pirate patch and you’ll look like the biggest badass in this joint,” said Al Prime, before lighting a cigar. “Not that you weren’t already, of course.”

He moved closer to her, inspecting the vacant socket.

“So it’s true those ape guys eat eyeballs?”

Sherri snorted. “Yeah. I’m still hoping mine will get lodged in the throat of whatever one of those jerks tries to eat it. But I’ll settle for ruining their invasion plans.”

“So you really did it, huh?”

“Yeah, but it seems like I may not have the first time around,” she said, looking questioningly at John. “Why else would Sam have shown up?”

John looked at the ground for a moment. “I only remember as much as you, now; my memory was changed when Sam leaped in. But, by all accounts, the original timeline was...”

“I remember the original timeline,” said Will. John looked at him wide-eyed.

“You do?”

“Yeah. No memory changes while I’ve been standing around in here.” Will looked at Sherri with sad eyes. “They did a thing that messed with your aura and stopped Higgins from being able to retrieve you, and then they killed you. I’ve been dealing with it for months.”

“Oh, Will. I’m sorry.”

She wrapped her arms around the tired man.

“Well this time, the only casualty was...” she swallowed. “Nexus Quinn. He died helping us.”

“Maybe not...” said John, looking at Al. “Apparently he might have... stopped in here.”

Sherri glared at John. “What...?”

\* \* \*

Alia leaned against the bar, as Thames pressed his back against it beside her, and leaned back to see her face, elbows resting on the bar.

“Hey, Alia...” he said, grinning. “I bet you never got as close to Sam as I just did. We just completely shared a mind. Did you know he’s totally in love with you? But that’s nothing special, because he falls in love like ten times a year. Dude is a hopeless romantic. I think if I sweet-talked him, he might fall in love with *me*.”

Alia didn't answer, opting instead to intensely stare at the bartender, waiting for him to pay her some attention.

*I don't think it's a secret that I'm also in love with Sam, but that's just too bad, isn't it? He's married.*

"Alia. Aliaaa... *Aliiii*, talk to me, babe."

Alia flicked him a warning look. "Shut up. We're not friends, Thames. You're free, so I've fulfilled my obligation to you. You don't have to pretend you care about me in the least."

She leaned further forward so she couldn't see his face. This prompted him to slide himself onto the bar, becoming almost entirely horizontal except for his lower legs, which wrapped around the bar stool for support.

"What if I *want* to be friends?" he said, pouting. "And what if I can help you take down Lothos? I never got to tell you what he wants, did I?"

This caught Alia's attention. "No, you didn't." She stared down at him as his mouth curled into a smile.

He pulled himself up to a standing position, and folded his arms.

"Okay, I want you to picture the most unhinged, but extremely unsurprising reason some rich-ass mother might start trying to rearrange their present by screwing around in the past."

"Uhh..." Alia scratched her head. "I dunno. Taking over the world?"

"Ha! That would at least be interesting! Think more mundane."

"... Money?"

"Ding ding ding!" Thames threw her a finger gun. "All about the Benjamins. Literally they are taking out competition, disgracing

political opposition, wrecking lives; everything merely for the benefit of a goddamn corporate monopoly.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“These people have the capitalist dragon sickness. They already had so much cash to throw around that they could build and run Lothos, but they gotta have more and more.” He shrugged. “Admittedly, I was in on it at first. Dollar signs in my eyes. Then...”

“Then you got stuck leaping and you realised there was no way you were getting a cent,” Alia finished.

Thames gave her a sheepish shrug. “Yeah. But, you know, back in my hacker days? I loved making rich guys squirm. I was a regular pinko. Would have wanted to break the kneecaps of the guy I ended up becoming.”

“And you want me to believe you’re not that guy any more?” Alia frowned.

“You can prove it, if you like,” came the voice of the bartender. Alia and Thames shifted their gazes toward him, expectant.

“We’re listening,” said Alia, leaning towards him. He met her eye, with a light smile.

“Ever wonder how Lothos never found you before that little contraption of yours brought you here?” His eyes twinkled. “I had you hidden away in a parallel dimension.”

Alia’s brows met. “What?!”

*Is that why everything felt so wrong all the time? Little things. Details were off. Like the Mandela Effect.*

As if he knew her thoughts, the bartender nodded.

“Makes sense now, doesn’t it?” he said. “I allowed the leap signal to leak through to you, and when you stopped in here, you



passed back into your original world.”

“So you really *are* God?”

The bartender laughed. “Don’t give me a big head. I’m just... clever. That’s all.”

Alia exchanged a look with Thames, whose eyes were like saucers.

“I want to offer both of you a choice,” continued the bartender. “I can send you back there, if you aren’t prepared to face Lothos. Or, you can face him with my support. Catch is, you’ll be leaping just a little longer. What do you say?”

“I’m in,” Alia said, without hesitation. She eyed Thames, who seemed a little less decisive.

*I mean... I won't blame him if he chooses to run. I wonder if he has a conscience for that decision to weigh on?*

“You know what,” said Thames, after a moment, “maybe it is time for the proletariat to rise up against the bourgeoisie.”

He slammed a fist on the bar. “Down with the capitalist pigs! Viva la revolution!”

Alia looked at Thames with a new respect.

“I think your time with Sam did you good,” she murmured, and the pair shared a grin for a moment, before he broke away.

“I think so too. Speaking of which...”

\* \* \*

As Sam finished his beer, he felt Thames grab his wrist and begin jerking him toward an empty corner of the tavern, a

cheerful spring in his step.

“So bestie, we gonna talk about it?” Thames asked, a playful grin on his face. Sam pursed his lips.

“About what, specifically?”

*As if I have to ask.*

“Mind melding like that was pretty intimate, right?” he put a thumb to his lips, performing a bashful expression that wasn’t at all sincere.

“‘Intimate’ is one word for it,” said Sam, frowning. “‘Disturbing’ might be another. For me, at least. Some of the things I saw in your head...”

“You know I had no choice in that stuff. *Most* of it.” Thames poked his fingers into his cheeks, mimicking dimples. “Anyway, I think you rubbed off on me, ’cause I’m joining up with Alia to take down Lothos.”

“You are? That’s great!”

“But I do this for the good guys under one *teensy* condition. A favour, if you will. One that won’t hurt anyone, and you can do it right now.”

Sam gave him a cynical eyebrow hike, suddenly knowing through his intuition what the request would be. Thames pointed to John, over by Sherri, and grinned.

“You and him gotta smooch.” He brought his hands together, and made a kissing sound as the fingertips touched. Sam glared at him from under a heavy brow.

“Thames...”

“Come ooon! Humour me! I wanna see you two handsome protagonists share a steamy moment.”

Sam glared at Thames, as the hyperactive leaper clasped his hands in a pleading gesture.

“You can tell him it’s from me.” Thames grabbed a hold of Sam’s shoulders and planted a wet kiss on his lips. As he pulled away, Sam wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, distaste written on his face.

“Thames, it’s not cool to just grab someone and do that, you know.”

“Then ask him, whatever. Get your consent. But I wanna see those tongues touch, baby.”

“I meant *you* shouldn’t just do that.”

Despite his displeasure at this whole situation, he nonetheless found himself beckoning his double over. John looked at the pair with curiosity as he approached.

“Did I just see you guys *kiss*?” he asked, eyebrows high.

“*He* kissed *me*,” said Sam, with a narrow-eyed glance at the man with whom he’d shared quite a lot more than just a kiss recently. “And now he’s holding me ransom. In exchange for taking down Lothos, he wants *us* to... *you know*.”

John’s eyes widened, and his cheeks went bright red. “Uhh, wow.”

Sam sighed. “I know. It’s up to y—”

Sam was cut off by John’s lips pressing against his.

*Wow, I actually didn’t see that coming.*

As the kiss went on, Sam’s mind began to start throwing up memories of John’s life, distinct from his own. Memories of living in San Francisco, of building a project not unlike his own, but sufficiently divergent to be unnerving. Teaching Quinn and Colin. Observing Sherri.

*Oh, this is unexpected.*

Moments of triumph, and harrowing moments of anxiously watching Sherri go through torment, unable to take her hand, only able to distract her from the pain as she endured it. The feelings of loss when she had disappeared, and even the divergent path where she had not survived.

And it made him realise how Al must feel.

Then it was over, as John pulled back, laughing.

“That was really weird,” he said, his face still flushed. He put a hand on his mouth, and looked away from Sam.

Sam was still reeling from the experience that he clearly hadn’t shared with John.

*For a moment there, it was like I was him.*

He began to wonder if every version of him out there could be reached in this way, and the idea of travelling the multiverse, kissing his doubles made him burst with laughter. The two Sams shared their moment of levity, as Thames watched on with the expression of a child cuddling their teddy bear.

“Aw, you guys,” he said, pulling the two of them by the shoulders towards him, “that was everything I could have hoped for. You two should open an *OnlyFans* together.”

John looked at him, puzzled. Sam just shook his head, eyes rolling.

*I know what that is somehow, but I won’t dignify it with an answer.*

Thames turned to Alia, gesturing for her to come over. She obliged, but kept her eyes trained on Sam.

“I didn’t know you swung both ways,” she said with a grin.

“Uh, me neither,” mumbled Sam, biting his lip.

*Do I?*

*... Nah.*

*Then again...?*

*Well I'm a married man. And I remember that this time. Dear god, what would Donna think of what I just did?*

*Is two of the same guy a turn-on for women?*

*Oh god, Thames rubbed off on me too. Or was it John?*

Sam's cheeks burned, and he figured he must look just as flustered as John. Alia just looked on with a tight-lipped smile, her eyes dancing.

Alia put a hand against Sam's cheek. “We'll meet again some day, won't we?”

Sam smiled back. “Count on it.”

She then moved to John, and took his hands. “Thank you for everything, John. I'm glad I stopped here for gas that morning.”

“Come on, bring it in,” he said, and hugged her.

Thames grabbed a hold of Alia's hand. “You ready to do this, babe?”

“Only if you promise never to call me ‘babe’ again.”

With a nod towards the bartender, the two of them vanished in a blue light, leaping to parts unknown to anyone but the man presently running a damp rag over the bar.

## 7.11 • SLIDING DOORS

As Sherri was discussing the topic of eyeballs with Al Prime, Quinn was ordering a glass of beer from the mysterious bartender. With the tech in his and John's pockets that they'd cobbled together as insurance for escaping this strange place, he figured he might as well make the most of the 'party' while they were all together.

As he wandered back from the bar, he came up behind a pensive Colin, seated at a table, and plucked a hair from his head. Colin jumped, taken by complete surprise.

"Jeez, what was that for?" he said with one brow low and a poorly veiled smirk.

"Just wanted to snap you out of whatever's going on with you," explained Quinn as he placed the beer on the table and took his seat. He flicked a finger across Colin's shirt pocket, coming into contact with the folded up Reality Lens.

"What did you see?" he said, gazing into his brother's haunted eyes. "You can tell me, Colin."

Colin looked down at his tightly clasped hands. "He asked me to keep quiet about it for now."

*Even to me?*

Quinn gave his brother a questioning look.

"I *want* to tell you," Colin continued, "but you know I owe him one. We'll talk about this later."

Colin's eyes wandered to the bar, where they locked with the bartender, who was silently polishing a glass. The gaze of the man then shifted to Quinn, and he gave an amiable nod that served only to make Quinn more uncomfortable, before turning to talk to Alia and Thames.

Rembrandt pulled a chair up to the table, staring with narrow eyes at the leaper who'd impersonated him.

"You *really* think that guy's on our side?" he asked. Quinn frowned.

"Don't know, man. What those guys made him do wasn't entirely his fault, if that helps."

Rembrandt sighed. "It doesn't."

Colin cradled his chin in his hand. "The Thames I know online has a pretty strong set of principles. But I suppose that doesn't count for much now."

Maggie was the next to join the group at the table.

"What do you guys make of all this?" she asked, frowning. Quinn was about to answer, when he spotted Thames kissing Sam.

"I can honestly say, I don't know what to make of *anything* right now," he mumbled, eyes wide.

The next thing Quinn witnessed was John approaching the pair, followed by another kiss between the doubles.

"Well *there's* an image I can never unsee," said Maggie, her mouth hanging open.

As the two Sams began to laugh, their faces beet red, Quinn relaxed a little.

"Meh, they're not the only ones around here to have made out with their doubles," he said, before taking a large gulp of his drink

as the eyes of Colin, Remy, and Maggie fixed on him.

“You did *what*?” Colin asked, eyebrows high.

“What? She was cute, alright?” He looked bashfully into the foam of his beer. “I swear to you, I didn’t know she was a murderer at the time.”

The conversation was cut short by the blue light emanating from Thames and Alia, and all eyes shot to them as they leaped away.

“I’m pretty sure that was...” Maggie bit her lip. “Oh, jeez. That bartender doesn’t plan on leaping *us* around, does he? Is that what he brought us all here for? To draft us?”

“Yeah, *no* chance I’m agreeing to that,” said Rembrandt, shaking his head. “Had about enough of this crazy time travel business.”

“You’ve got me all wrong,” said the bartender, as he approached their table. “I actually wanted the four of you here because I have a limited time offer for you folks.”

He grabbed a chair from an adjacent table, and sat on it back-to-front, leaning his plump arms on the top of the backrest.

“Don’t worry, it *doesn’t* involve leaping. But it’s gonna be a tough choice.”

“Out with it, then,” said Quinn, crossing his arms. “And don’t dress it up in your folksy crap.”

The bartender gave him a conceding look. “If you say so. Pay attention, okay? This might get complicated.”

He pulled a notepad and pen from his apron pocket, and placed the pad on the table. He drew two lines running parallel.

“So imagine these two lines as the timelines of your Earth, and Sam’s Earth, past to present. As you know, you jump from



universe to universe by opening a bridge from one to the other,” he explained, drawing a straight perpendicular line between the parallel lines. “These two worlds were once a single world, until a point of divergence occurred, at the observation of a quantum superposition.”

He drew a few branches from each line, that continued parallel.

Quinn leaned back. “Thanks for ‘*Baby’s First Quantum Mechanics Lesson.*’ Get to the point.”

The bartender chuckled. “Right, right. So, this divergence occurs naturally, until time travel is involved. Then things get a little caca.”

He drew a new branch, which looped back to the same line.

“So when you go back here, your alterations cause the original timeline to jump to a newly created branch, while the new timeline overwrites the old. That’s why your memories get changed around. That’s how it *normally* works, anyway. But you guys changed *your* Earth’s past from *Sam’s* Earth, with your changes undoing the need for you to have ever been here in the first place. The multiverse didn’t know what to do with you, since you have versions that never left your Earth after arriving back in 1998. Three out of the four of you have turned yourselves into cosmic loose ends.”

*Some bartender. This guy is a time lord or something.*

Quinn squinted at the paper. “If our alterations just created new branches, doesn’t that mean there must still be a version of the Kromaggs out there with the tech that could find their way to us?”

The bartender grinned. “If you can picture a third dimension to my drawing, that’s where the old timeline goes. It’s essentially an isolated pocket dimension. If someone attempts to open a wormhole from there, back to *our* axis, it’ll fail, unless they

manage to travel back in time to the point of divergence. And let's all pray they never figure that one out."

"So we already knew we've been... replaced," said Quinn. "The Professor and I already drew that conclusion. But how are *you* supposed to help?"

"Like I said, I have a one-time offer for you," the bartender said, grinning, and gesturing to the exit. "Out there, you'll find San Francisco, Earth Prime, 2003. Walk out there now, and you will seamlessly merge into the other version of yourself. You'll forget any of this happened, and continue on with your life happy and safe, with Wade and your parents."

*Wade...?*

Quinn's eyes shot to the window. Sure enough, the scene had changed from a dark desert to a thriving downtown street.

"So we'll just be assimilated into the *other* us?" asked Quinn. "How exactly is that distinct from us dying? The outcome is the same, right?"

"Well, how about your brother here? Did the old version of him die? Or is he still in there?" The bartender turned an eye to Colin. "What do *you* think?"

Colin looked at Quinn with wide eyes.

"I *think* we're the same guy..." he said. "I mean, I have fragments of memories from the old timeline. Not much, but they're there."

He squinted at the bartender. "*You* told me I'd be the same in here." He tapped a finger to his chest. "But how can I possibly know if that's true?"

"It's a philosophical conundrum, I agree. This is why I'm allowing you the choice. You *could* become the versions of

yourselves that you worked so hard to create, *or* you could choose a different path. You can keep your memories, but you won't have your old lives. It's a trade-off."

The bartender shrugged. "Think about it. Just make your decision before closing time."

He stood from the chair, popping the notepad back into his pocket.

"Wait a second, what about me?" Colin piped up. "I don't have a double."

"That's correct. You can do anything you'd like, Colin. You have a life to return to, or not. As far as anyone will know, you've been travelling with doubles."

Quinn frowned. "So let's just assume that all of us went through the door. Would Colin be the only one who remembered us as we are... and all this?"

The bartender nodded. "That's the way it is."

Quinn glanced at his brother. "As tempting as the offer is, I don't think I can give up these memories."

"No way in hell," agreed Maggie. "I don't want to forget Uncle Sam... or everything we've done. I don't care *how* blissful our lives on Earth Prime are."

Colin smiled. "Then it's decided. So what do we do now?"

"Wait a second, I haven't decided nothing," said Rembrandt. "Let me think about it some."

*I guess he's had a tougher time than the rest of us.*

Besides the recent experience of torture, Rembrandt's scars ran deep, dating back to the invasion. Quinn knew how much Remy had changed since then, and he had been banking on undoing it all for all these years.

“It’s okay,” he said, putting a hand on Rembrandt’s shoulder. “Your life, your choice. We’ll support you either way.”

Colin looked up at the bartender. “Give me one of your umbrella cocktails,” he said.

The bartender obliged, and as Rembrandt sat lost in thought, Colin dropped the paper umbrella into his shirt pocket.

“If you decide to leave us... here’s a little something to remember me by. Even if you don’t... *actually* remember me.”

*Rembrandt never did meet Colin before the invasion, did he?*

Quinn leaned his elbows on the table, and sat in a daze as he considered the choice, and the possibility of Rembrandt finding peace.

## 7.12 • TEAM BECKETT

“What are you gonna do now?” asked Will, as Sherri watched John returning to their corner of the bar. She opted not to bring up the kiss she’d witnessed.

“Me? Well, my mission is over. I think I’ve sacrificed enough of myself to justify retirement, don’t you?” she gestured to her eye socket, smirking.

“Retirement’s great,” Al chimed in. “Turns out you can just relax all day, and if anybody calls you lazy, you can just say you’re a war vet and they shut up about it.”

He eyed Sherri. “Nobody needs to know what you’re a veteran of. But you got the war wounds to prove it now.”

Sherri gave him a mischievous look. “Maybe we can move to Florida together and play shuffleboard.”

Al chortled. “I don’t think them geezers would be able to keep up with the two of us.”

“Sherri,” interjected John as he approached, “you *do* know your Dad’s here... right?”

He gestured to the far wall where Tom was alone, silently looking in their direction.

“Good for him,” she said, looking the other way, taking a nonchalant sip of her wine. The sip became a gulp, then she just turned it upside down, finishing it.

John frowned. “He’s been talking to Maggie quite a bit; I think you should give him a chance. Talk to him. This could be your last

opportunity.”

Sherri ran a hand through her half-shaved hair. “I don’t know what more there is to say to him.”

“You could start with ‘hello,’” said Sam, who’d appeared beside her. She jumped, and looked between the two Sams, who were giving her the puppy dog look.

“Family meeting?” Sam asked. John nodded and looked at Sherri expectantly, and she sighed; there was no fighting the immense guilt tripping power of two Uncle Sams.

“Ugh. You both owe me one,” she said, with one eye rolling, as they escorted her to her father’s table.

Tom looked up at her with wide, frightened eyes.

“You look like you’ve... been through the wringer,” he said quietly. Sherri glanced back towards Al Prime for a moment before answering.

“Yeah, I just got back from a tour of duty,” she said, taking a seat across from him and folding her arms. John and Sam flanked the two of them on either side of the table, silently waiting for the conversation to unfold.

“You’re a hero, Mag— uh, Sherri.” Her father smiled at her, and for a moment, Sherri thought she detected admiration.

*Did he just...*

Sherri looked at him, her eye welling with tears. “So, it took my saving the multiverse for you to give me unqualified praise.”

At that moment, Maggie leaned over Sherri from behind, placing a hand on each shoulder.

“Go on, Pops,” she prompted. “Tell her what you told me.”

Tom bit his lip, and avoided the eyes of the family members that surrounded him.

“I’m sorry for being more of a drill sergeant than a father to you,” he said. “And if I’d known about Billy, I probably would have come to Madera and kicked his ass myself.”

He looked up into Sherri’s eye. “I’m proud of you, and I was proud of you long before you saved the multiverse. I was just too stubborn to say it. I won’t ask you to forgive me, but I’m glad I had this chance to apologise. I love you, Maggie.”

Sherri was silent for a moment, as the lump in her throat threatened to let loose the urge to weep.

“My name is Sherri,” she finally managed to choke out, as a tear rolled down her cheek. She let out a chuckle, wiping it away.

“Right... sorry,” Tom murmured.

On either side, Sam and John were beaming at each other. Sam placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder, while John took Sherri’s hand.

“Thank you, Tom,” said John. “Sherri means more to me than anyone, and...”

He paused, getting choked up himself.

“What John is trying to say,” Sam continued, “is that he appreciates you opening up and giving Sherri much deserved praise.”

Sam looked across the table at his double. “Right?”

John nodded.

“Maggie?” Sherri said, looking upward at her younger counterpart. “Could you get me a glass of wine? I think I need another drink.”

As Maggie strode to the bar to fulfill Sherri's request, John stood from his seat, spotting the two Als engaged in conversation.

*Oh boy, I shudder to think what kind of chitchat is happening there. And yet, I must know.*

He scurried over to the part of the bar where they stood, shrouded in a cloud of tobacco smoke, as Will stood back, away from the polluted air.

"What are they talkin' about?" whispered John to the frowning programmer. He raised an eyebrow.

"Beth."

*Of course.*

John tuned his ears to their discussion, as the radio on the wall played a muffled *Purple Haze*.

"All daughters?" Al Prime said, gesturing wildly with his cigar.

"Yeah, and you know what? My youngest is a genius, just like Sam." The older Al leaned on the bar with one arm, while pulling his wallet out of his back pocket. As he showed his double some photos, John's attention shifted back to Will.

"Well, that's unexpectedly wholesome," he commented. Will nodded, and gazed towards the floor.

After a moment, he spoke: "Why am I here?"

John gave him an inquisitive look. "Huh?"

Will gestured around the tavern. "This Q guy brought all you guys here for a purpose. Even Al's got that other Al to talk to. But me? Why have *I* been trapped here?"



John furrowed his brow. “Huh, good question.”

He turned a head towards the bartender, who was already looking his way. The man tapped his hand on the bar, and gave a beckoning motion. John exchanged a glance with Will, and the two of them approached him.

“Could you hear us just now?” John asked him. The bartender nodded.

“A bartender’s always gotta be paying attention to the local gossip.”

John glared at him. “Aren’t we past your little routine at this point?”

The bartender frowned. “Why does nobody like my ‘little routine?’ What’s wrong with it?”

“We’re all very tired,” Will said as he took a seat on a stool, and slumped onto the bar with his arms. “So please, just be straight with us. What am I here for?”

The bartender placed a bottle of orange juice in front of Will.

“Here. I know you don’t drink.” He leaned on the bar, arms spread out, and assessed the two men. “Will, John... the two of you need each other.”

John tilted his head. “What?”

The bartender looked down at Will. “Focusing on work at the expense of your mental health.” He looked up at John.

“Ignoring your own needs.” He began pulling a beer from a tap labelled *Schlitz*. “You both need someone you can be completely open with.”

He placed the beer in front of John. “And I mean *completely*.”

“What are you getting at?” John asked, struggling to understand.

“This is what I’m talking about,” the bartender said, with an exasperated sigh. “You two are clueless. I couldn’t just let you two look past each other for the rest of your lives. John, Will would never say it, so allow me: he’s crazy about you.”

*He is?*

Will straightened at this announcement, his eyes popping wide open.

“H-hey...” he stuttered. “That... that’s not true—”

“Uh-uh-uh,” said the bartender, waving a finger, “I’m Q, remember? You can’t lie to the likes of *me*, kid.”

John looked down at Will with a crooked smile. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

Will, going red in the face, covered his eyes. “It’s not like I was planning to let you in on that,” he muttered.

“I saw the disaster that was your dalliance with Jack,” the bartender continued. “And there’s only a few people you can be honest with. One of them just happened to already have a crush on you.”

He winked. “Eighty-six percent chance of... *going the distance.*”

John raised an eyebrow, as he took a hold of the drink the bartender had given him.

“Thanks for that, *Higgins.*” He raised the glass to his lips, taking a drink of a beer that tasted familiar, but he had no idea why.

The bartender snorted. “Higgins may be a lot of things, but a matchmaker he ain’t. Good thing I’m here.”

“You said that like you and Higgins are pals.”

“Oh sure, we go way back,” the bartender said, chuckling.

John couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not. And as he took another sip of his drink, he sensed another presence beside him, on the opposite side to Will. His eyes met Sam, who was looking at he and Will with a grin.

“You two’ll make a cute couple,” he said, prompting John to glare.

“Were you eavesdropping just now?”

Sam shrugged. “Didn’t have to. I just knew.”

*Oh, right. What is the deal with Sam now?*

“You never did see Verbena, did you?”

John shook his head. Sam looked sadly at him for a moment, before pulling him into a hug.

“Holograms have it tougher than I realised,” he murmured.

“Having to just watch when someone you love is in pain or fighting for their lives. They get physical scars, and you get mental ones.”

John felt his words like a gut punch.

“Oh, you know, I can’t complain,” he said in a high-pitched voice. “Sherri’s the one putting her life on the line.”

Sam’s warm hand patted against the back of John’s neck, and he let go, pulling away and looking John in the eye.

“You owe yourself more kindness, Sam.”

*He called me Sam.*

With that, Sam turned to the bartender.

“So, are you going to tell me why I now know everything about my double, or are you going to wink at me and say something

enigmatic?”

*Everything?*

The bartender chuckled. “Know thyself,” he said, and winked.

Sam let his head drop to one side, as he glared at the man in the same exasperated way John had seen him glare at Al on occasion.

“What do you mean you know everything about me?” asked John.

Sam scratched the back of his head. “Well, when you kissed me, it was like I absorbed your whole life into me all at once. But it goes back further than that. I knew about Thames because I knew it *through* you. It’s like I can reach out to versions of myself, wherever and whenever they are.” He grimaced, struggling to form words. “And... Ziggy was built with some of me in her. You wanted to know why I had a sixth sense about things? I think I was tapping into her.”

He turned back to the bartender. “All this new awareness, and I still can’t figure out what role *you* play in all of this. Are *you* the cause of this?”

“No more than you are, Sam.” The bartender smirked, and leaned in closer. “Trust me.”

## 7.13 · LAST CALL

The clock struck twelve-thirty, and the bartender announced last call, as Al sat reclined on a chair, his feet hoist up on another. Beside him, Sam had taken a seat, and together they were looking upon the crowd. The radio played the song by Billy Joel that Sam had performed the night after he'd returned.

Sherri, sitting across from her father, was engaged in conversation, while Maggie hovered. Will and John were standing closely, talking about something or other. The other version of Al – clad in the most handsome of clothes – was speaking with Quinn. Colin and Rembrandt shared a quiet moment at the bar.

“Won’t be long ’til I have to go, I guess,” Sam murmured.

Al sighed. “You’re really doing it, huh? Leaving for good?”

Sam gave him a resolute nod. He was smiling, but his eyes glimmered with emotion.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t visit once in a while, does it? I’m getting better at controlling this thing.”

Al reached out to his friend, and grabbed his hand. “If you don’t, I’m gonna try to find you anyway, so you’d better just save me the trouble.”

Sam squeezed his hand.

“Al, thanks for all the support you’ve given me. When I first leaped I hadn’t even considered what I would be putting you through, y’know? Having to be on call day and night, able to do nothing but watch all the stupid things I did.” He chuckled. “I

thought *I* had it bad, but *you* had to put up with *me*. And you never complained.”

Al snorted. “Tell that to Beth.” He grinned, taking a cigar from his jacket pocket.

“Well, anyway,” Sam continued, “I just recently came to understand how tough it is to be the hologram, and I wanted to make it clear that I’m grateful to have had you there.”

*That’s thoughtful.*

“Sam, you’re gonna make me choke up,” Al said, as he lit the cigar. After taking a puff, he assessed his best friend, who he’d rarely seen this calm and self-assured. At least, not until recently. And he realised in that moment that Sam would be entirely fine on his own.

*Can’t say it doesn’t hurt, but he don’t need me.*

“What’ll *you* do now?” Sam asked.

“Guess I’ll hang up the handlink and retire, like my clone over there,” Al said, gesturing across the room to his double. “Quality time with the family, and all that cornball hokum.”

“Think you can give up those things, Al?” Sam said, pointing a finger at the cigar. “Every puff you take, I see minutes falling off your lifespan.”

Al looked sheepishly down at the smouldering cancer stick.

“Jeez, when you put it like that, it doesn’t seem worth it...” He stuck it between his teeth. “Then again...”

He breathed in some smoke, and gestured to the radio, quoting the song playing as the smoke curled out of his mouth: “*Keep it to yourself, it’s my life.*”

Sam sighed. “Yeah well, that’s what my Dad said. Just think about it.”

*For anyone else, I probably wouldn't.*

“Sure thing,” he conceded. “But you’re, I dunno, psychic or something now, right? Will I quit?”

“Psychic, huh?” Sam smirked at him, and held out his hand like he was holding something round. “Magic 8 Ball, will Al ever give up smoking?”

He shook his hand, and gazed into his palm.

“Reply hazy, try again.” He winked at Al. “You know as well as I do that things aren’t set in stone. I’ll leave it in your capable hands.”

*Damn, am I ever gonna miss this guy.*

“Listen, Al...” Sam leaned forward on his chair. “Make sure Donna and Sammy Jo are taken care of, would you?”

“Are you kidding? ’Course I will! Not that they can’t take care of themselves. Both of ’em got bright futures still to come.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sam. “I think you’re right.”

Al took a drag on the stogie between his fingers, and an ash tray appeared beside him, held by Tom.

“Now that’s service,” Al said, tapping his ash into it before taking it out of his hand.

“Just wanted to save that God guy some sweeping,” Tom said, before looking at his brother. “Sam, I’m about to leave, and apparently nobody’s interested in joining me.”

Sam gazed up at him. “John and Quinn have been planning their exit from this place for months. They only needed you to get them here. Thank you for doing that, by the way.”

“How do *you* know all that?” Tom asked, bewildered.

“Just call him Miss Cleo,” said Al.

Sam stood, and hugged his brother. “Take care of Mom and Katie.”

“So it’s true, then,” said Tom, “we’re never gonna see you again?”

“Keep an eye on your emails,” Sam replied. “Maybe I’ll send a ‘hello’ once in a while. Might not be in order, though.”

“Fair enough,” Tom said, smiling. He strode to the bartender.

“If I walk out of here, is it gonna still be August eighth, 2003?”

“Nope.” The bartender gestured to the clock. “Past midnight. It’s the ninth now. Your car’s out there waiting for you; go right ahead.”

Tom moved to the door, and turned for a final look.

“This has been a bizarre night. Goodbye, everyone...”

All at once, Al watched as John, Sam, Maggie and Sherri crossed to him. All but Sherri enclosed him in a tight group hug.

And finally, after the more affectionate three said their goodbyes, Sherri approached him.

“Catch you later, Pops,” she said, giving him a weak smile. Tom returned the look.

“Bye, Sherri,” he said, and turned to open the door. Before he proceeded, he looked back at her a final time. “I’m glad you chose your own path. You’re my hero.”

And then he was gone.

\* \* \*



The last time Rembrandt had to make a decision this big, it had been a lot easier than this one. He'd been tantalisingly close to staying put on that world where he was a beloved superstar, only to have the rug pulled out from under him at the last minute by his double.

Now, he was facing another life-altering choice. Could he really rewind the clock to before the 'magg invasion, and carry on like the last five years had never happened? Or rather, have lived those years in a completely different way?

Colin had been the only one to really understand the choice he faced, and the two of them had spent a solid couple hours talking about it.

It wasn't lost on him that the radio was now playing '*Cry Like A Man.*'

"Hey, it's not like you can't get to know me again *after* you've forgotten me," Colin said, shrugging.

"You'll be going back to Earth Prime?" Rembrandt asked.

"Of course!" Colin said. "Our parents are there, and they need to see I'm alright. But we're going to stop in with our *other* parents first. That's an appointment me and Quinn have been meaning to keep for the last twenty-five years."

Rembrandt grinned. "Hope no mad scientist gets in the way of that this time around."

"Don't remind me," said Colin with a cringe.

"Evening, Cryin' Man," said Sam, leaning against the bar. "I *would* ask if you've decided what you're gonna do, but I get the feeling you've had your mind made up for a while, haven't you?"

*Yeah, guess he's right.*

Rembrandt eyed the genius doctor scientist who'd swept into their lives four years ago, making life a lot more interesting, and wondered if any part of his mind would recognise the guy once he walked out the door.

"I think it's for the best," he finally said.

Sam gave him a light pat on the back. "You deserve a chance at happiness."

"I agree," Quinn said, approaching the bar. "We've all seen how miserable you've been since we pulled you out of the 'magg cell. You don't have to keep carrying that burden of something that no longer happened."

He wrapped an arm around Remy's shoulders. "Maybe we'll even get to see your 'stache again."

Rembrandt chuckled. "Q-ball, you can count on that."

He glanced at the bartender. "All I gotta do is walk out the door? That's it?"

The bartender nodded. "That's it."

He stood from his seat and faced the exit, as butterflies flitted around in his belly. He turned around, studying all the friends he was about to lose, and his eyes welled up.

"Ah, here come the waterworks," he said, wiping at his eyes. "So long, y'all."

Maggie rushed to him, eyes wide. "You're going?"

Rembrandt nodded. "Yeah, Maggie. Wish I could say I'll miss you, but there's another Maggie through that door who'll take your place, isn't there?"

She gave him a tight hug. "Goodbye, Remy. Promise we'll come visit some day and explain everything."

“Damn right you will,” he said, laughing.

After exchanging hugs and final goodbyes with Quinn and Colin, Rembrandt peered out the window, at the San Fran street where Colin had once stumbled upon a strange little bar, opened the door, and stepped through.

He passed into the warm night air, stretching.

*What a night*, he thought, before realising that he couldn't remember what he was doing here. He looked back, seeing a closed up bar.

*Didn't I just come from there?*

Rembrandt shook his head, feeling a little confused. As he felt around for his cell phone to check the time, he felt something small and thin in his front pocket. A little paper umbrella. He looked at it curiously for a moment, then returned it to his pocket. He didn't know why, but he wanted to keep it.

As he headed down the street, wondering why he didn't remember what brought him here so late at night, he hummed a tune; an old Bill Withers song, *'Lovely Day'*.

He finally found his phone deep in an inner jacket pocket. He checked the time: *12:45 am*, before noticing he had a voicemail.

He dialled the voicemail number and listened.

“Hey Remy!” came Wade's voice. “Just wanted to invite you to a get-together tomorrow night at my place. Quinn and Maggie will be there. Even roped in the Professor this time. We haven't all been together in a while, so I just thought it might be nice. Call me, okay?”

*Sounds good*, he thought, hanging up. It had been at least a year since he'd last seen Q-ball.

*Oh boy, where'd all the time go?*

## 7.14 • CLOSING TIME

Quinn cleared the tears from his eyes as he watched the scene through the window dissolve into darkness.

*He's not dead. He's just different. Happier. He still remembers three years of sliding with us.*

He turned back to the bar, where Sam met his eye.

“So, you’ve figured a way out of this place, huh?” he asked, his face serene and seemingly unflappable.

Quinn nodded, still a little choked up, as Colin placed a hand on his shoulder.

“In theory,” Colin said. “This bar is not exactly adherent to the normal laws of the universe, is it?”

“Maybe not.” Sam glanced at the bartender, questioning.

“We’ve accounted for everything the gaggle of us could think of,” John said, leaning on the back of a chair as he faced them. “Nexus Quinn’s timer was really useful to study.”

He reached into his pocket, and produced a sleek new timer, that looked similar to his old handlink.

Quinn, finding his voice, pulled out his own, and showed it to Sam.

“Instead of relying on the current world’s coordinates as a focus point, like the old designs,” he explained, “we’ve placed a homing beacon on your world and on Earth Prime that should let us snap back to one of them at any time. And it doubles as a temporal

stabiliser so the wormhole we open will always lead to our concurrent time, even if the vortex experiences the kind of issues that sent us to '78."

Sam nodded as he turned the timer over in his hand, grinning, and tapped a few controls.

"There's a direct link to Higgins? You guys knocked it out of the park." He looked at John as he gestured to Quinn and Colin. "These two showed you how to work on a shoestring budget, huh?"

John chuckled. "Felt like I was at college again. But they're resourceful, that's for sure."

"We did get *some* resources from the Professor," Quinn added. "But yes, we did raid a few junkyards."

Sherri approached the group, curious. "They look like... handlinks."

Sam inspected the touchscreen display. "To me, it looks like a cell phone, circa 2013."

Quinn raised an eyebrow, not sure if he was kidding. His face didn't give it away. Shaking his head, Quinn turned towards the bartender.

"You can control this stuff, can't you?" he asked, eyes narrowed. "You *will* let us leave using these timers, right?"

The bartender looked up from the glass he was polishing. "Who, me?"

"Uh-huh," continued Colin. "I don't think our timer flashing zero when we first met Sam was a coincidence, was it?"

"It needed a tune-up, didn't it?" the bartender offered.

*Huh. So it really was this guy. I need to get my hands on the Reality Lens.*

As Quinn eyed Colin's pocket, the bartender shot a look at the clock, which was about to hit one in the morning.

"Folks, it's closing time. You don't have to go home, but..."

John met Quinn's eye.

"Alright, everyone sliding out of here... it's time."

The bar sprang to life with movement. Will and Al Prime moved towards John, while Maggie stepped up beside Quinn.

Sherri moved to Sam, and scooped him into a hug.

"Bye, Uncle Sam..."

"Hold on just a moment, missy..." the bartender interjected. "I have one last task for you. Don't worry, it's an easy one."

Sherri furrowed her brow. "What?"

The bartender winked. "Just hang back, okay? I promise you'll be back home in no time."

Sherri exchanged a look with John, and then Sam.

"I... think you can trust him," said Colin out of the blue. Quinn glared at him, before aiming his timer.

"Let's go." He activated the vortex, startling everyone. Colin looked at him questioningly.

"Goodbye everyone," Quinn said.

As Colin approached the wormhole, Quinn leaned forward, snatching the Reality Lens from Colin's pocket, before shoving him into the swirling blue tunnel.

"Sorry, bro," he said, as he opened the Lens and peered through it towards the bartender.

*Oh.*

He slowly lowered it, and nodded at Sherri. “Yeah, I think you’ll be okay. Well, gotta run. We’ll keep in touch.”

Waving at the bewildered people around him, he gave a wide grin, before stepping into the vortex.

\* \* \*

Sam scratched his head as he watched Quinn disappear. What could he possibly have seen?

As Maggie gave rushed hugs to the two Sams, and jumped in after the brothers, Sam turned his attention back to the bartender, who was smiling. Of all the things he seemed to understand now, this man, who looked like ‘Weird Ernie’ from Edwards Air Force Base, was still a complete mystery; opaque to him.

The vortex closed up, leaving the bar windswept and silent.

“I guess that leaves us,” said John, gesturing to his entourage. He turned a worried eye to Sherri. “Look, you don’t *have* to do what he says...”

Sherri bit her lip. “For some reason, I have a funny feeling that I *do*.”

Sam stroked his chin as he realised that he, too, felt like this task – whatever it was – was a necessary one.

“It’s okay,” he said to his double. “She’ll be back in no time. Don’t ask how I know.”

John gave him a puzzled look.

“Alright then.” He placed a hand on Sherri’s arm. “Take care, Sherri.”

Sherri nodded. "Of course. I'll see you soon."

John smiled at Sam. "So, this is goodbye, huh?"

Sam opened his arms, inviting a hug. "Come on, then. No kissing this time."

John chuckled as the two shared a warm embrace.

When it was over, Sam gave a nod towards Will. "He's all yours."

Finally, Al Prime approached Sam, looking him up and down with curiosity.

"So, you're what coulda been if John had joined Starbright."

"That I am." Sam grinned, now intimately familiar with the friendship that this version of Al shared with his double. "But you two still managed to find each other, all the same. Maybe we're soul mates."

"Uh, sure," Al raised an eyebrow. "If only John had a heftier set of..."

He mimed holding up something heavy.

"Doctorates?" finished Sam.

"Exactly."

As Sam laughed, John's wormhole opened up, and the three men bound for Earth Prime congregated in front of it.

The first to jump in was Will, clearly desperate to get out of here. Then Al Prime gave a short salute, followed by a nod towards his counterpart, and stepped in.

"Thanks for everything," John murmured.

Sam smiled. "Take care of yourself. I'll see you again."

Sam knew that John knew that it was a promise he intended to keep.



As the vortex closed behind John, Sam gazed at the dwindling crowd around him. Sherri, Al, and the bartender were the last ones remaining.

“Guess I’d better skedaddle before I get stuck in here like the other me,” said Al, stamping out his cigar.

The bartender nodded, and gave a flourish towards the door. “Thank you for your patronage. Please come again.”

Sam approached him, and they hugged. The embrace lasted long enough that Sam sensed the bartender checking his watch.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Al said, poking a finger into Sam’s chest. “Or I’ll find some necromancer to resurrect Ziggy and hunt you down.”

“Al, you *will* see me again,” said Sam. “Count on it.”

And as Al drove away into the New Mexico desert, just two leapers and a strange barman remained.

The bartender locked the front door, before taking a seat at a table. He gestured for Sam and Sherri to come closer.

“The bar is closed,” he explained, “so I’m officially off-duty. Meaning...”

He gestured to his clothes. “I can change out of this getup.”

Sam’s jaw slackened as he watched the bartender’s appearance shimmer and shift into...

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.”

Sam burst into laughter as he laid eyes on an older version of himself. The older Sam looked to be in his sixties or seventies, with grey hair and deepset laugh lines.

“Are you serious? *I’m* God?”

Everything suddenly fell into sharp focus for Sam, as his own future became more and more accessible. And it occurred to him that, long ago, when the bartender said he was leaping himself around, it had been technically true.

The older Sam grinned up at the two shocked faces.

“Now you know why I laugh at the suggestion,” he said, shrugging.

Sam felt Sherri grab his arm, and her face rested on his shoulder. “God or not, this puts things into perspective.”

*It certainly does.*

Sam ran a hand through his hair, and he paced the room.

“I don’t know what to say,” he muttered. “I mean, it makes sense. All those times I thought God was being unfair to me... now all I have to blame is myself.”

He laughed, shaking his head, as Sherri stared at the older Sam, processing everything.

“So everything that’s happened...” she said quietly, “it was you. Bringing me to Earth Prime... John... the thing with the broken timer... even that crazy stuff with Tam?”

The older Sam nodded, his eyes warm and amiable. “It was a lot of legwork, but we all pulled it off.”

“Why all the smoke and mirrors?” Sam asked. “And how did you disguise yourself like that?”

“You like it? It’s a trick I picked up from one of the less bloodthirsty Kromaggs.” The older Sam chuckled. “As for why?”

He crossed his arms. “Would you have done all this if you didn’t think it was God? If you knew it was just you?”

Sam’s shoulders slumped. *No, probably not.*

“Now, Sherri,” continued the older Sam, “You’ve got something to do that you’ve been putting off for twenty-five years. You ready?”

Sherri tilted her head, and seemed to understand. “Yeah. I think I’m ready.”

She grabbed Sam’s hand, squeezing it. “See you round, Uncle Sam.”

“Enjoy your retirement,” he said with a wink.

And she leaped away.

Sam took a seat across from his older self. “So what happens now?”

“Got a special assignment for you.” The older Sam leaned forward. “There’s a newbie waiting to be shown the ropes. Up to it?”

As the words were spoken, Sam already understood what he had to do.

“Let’s do it.”

Sam didn’t need anyone to help him leap this time.

\* \* \*

Quinn had woken this morning from a really strange dream, but the details were pretty hazy. One thing he did remember, however, was that within the dream, he’d had a son named Cory.

Which was interesting, since he’d awoken to a Stephanie who hadn’t yet given birth to their baby.

And he was having some mega déjà vu, too. For example, the date he saw on the morning paper was the very date he remembered to be Cory's birth date.

Lo and behold, he was now holding Stephanie's hand at her hospital bedside, as she breathed through another contraction.

"Can you get me..." Stephanie said, before grimacing for a moment. "Can... you get me... a candy bar or something...? I'm famished."

Quinn gave her hand a squeeze before letting go. "Sure, babe."

He strode out of the room, still feeling an eerie sensation, like all this had happened before.

*Wade is about to come around this corner.*

And there she was, hurrying into the hospital, and spotting him.

"Hey! Steph doing okay?"

"Yeah, she's doing great," said Quinn, scratching his head.

"She's still got a couple hours 'til the delivery..."

*How would I know that?*

He shook his head. "I'm just getting her a snack."

Wade grinned. "Do *you* need a snack, too?"

Quinn's eyes widened as he glanced around the hospital. "It's a little public, don't you think..."

Wade bit her lip. "I'm just gonna go in the bathroom. Maybe I'll see you there in a minute?"

She winked, and headed towards the restrooms.

Quinn retrieved the chocolate bar from the vending machine, and wandered towards the door Wade had conspicuously left unlocked. He glanced around before scrambling inside.

“This feels wrong,” he murmured between kisses. “My wife’s literally having my baby...”

“I know. It feels so... *so* wrong...” Wade said, unbuttoning his shirt. “You’re such a bad boy...”

*Oh, what the hey.*

He grabbed at her shirt, pulling it off, and they shared another passionate kiss, and his eyes fell shut as he tasted her lips.

Then a strange electrical sensation against his skin made his eyes pop open. He felt a frantic shove as he bumped back against the wall, and he realised he was no longer looking at Wade. His jaw dropped, and panic rose in his chest.

“Oh, *come on*, how many more guys am I gonna have to kiss today?” said the man, wiping at his mouth in disdain. “Sorry to drop in on you like this, Quinn.”

Quinn squinted in confusion at this man that looked somehow familiar. “Do I know you?”

The man sighed. “Yeah, but it looks like I’m gonna need to jog your memory a bit. Sam Beckett.”

He held a hand out. Quinn didn’t make a move to shake, opting instead to stare and try to convince himself this wasn’t happening.

Sam pointed to the mirror, and Quinn saw the man’s reflection was of Wade. His eyes darted back and forth, and his knees became weak.

“I have a few things to explain,” said Sam, “but the first may be the toughest to swallow. See... you kinda... died. But you’ve got a chance to put a few things right before you ride off into the sunset. And I’m here to help you.”

*I get it, I’m still dreaming. That must be it.*

Sam peered into the mirror at his feminine reflection. “Given that you’re making out with a mistress while your wife’s giving birth in the other room, I’ll give you *one* guess what you and me are here to do...”

“Oh boy...”

\* \* \*

Sherri took a step back as she felt the prickling leaping sensation pass through her.

*Where am I this time?*

But it seemed the answer was right in front of her. She stood on a familiar sidewalk, in front of a familiar diner. And in the glass, her reflection looked back at her with two familiar eyes. Her *own* two eyes. And beyond her reflection, within the diner, she spotted three familiar figures.

She realised, then, what she was here to do. Confidently, she stepped into the diner, the bell on the door jingling, and approached two young Maggies sipping black coffee in front of Colin.

She grinned as the Maggies, one dressed in a Sheriff’s uniform, looked at her with disbelief.

“Ah, girls, I was hoping you’d be here.”

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**END OF PART 7**

## **EPILOGUE**

*Dr. Sam Becket  
never returned home.*

*...loljk*

## EPILOGUE

### *One Year Later*

It was a warm morning. Colin was already wiping sweat from his brow as he emerged from his bedroom to join Quinn and their birth parents for breakfast. The floor-to-ceiling windows of the apartment gave striking views of the technologically advanced city that surrounded them, but they were also letting in the searing sun.

Colin punched in a setting on a control panel on the wall, and the windows darkened a little, dampening the harsh heat.

No sooner than he came into view of Quinn, did his brother launch their timer towards him, leaving him scrambling to catch it.

“You’re not delicate with this thing, are you?” he asked, noting the various cracks on the screen.

Quinn shrugged. “Just look at the message.”

Colin glanced down at it, and turned on the display. On it was a message he and Quinn had been hoping to see for some time.

“Nice!” he announced. “A year to the day, huh?”

“Has it been a year already?” asked Maggie, coming up behind Colin, and peering at the timer. Colin nodded, as she continued to the breakfast table, leaning over Quinn and giving him a peck on the cheek.

“If you three are going to Earth Prime,” said Elizabeth Mallory, “could you bring me back some of those fruits I like? What are



they called again... ‘bonobos?’”

“*Bananas*, Ma,” Quinn said, suppressing a laugh. “I’ll try and make sure I don’t land on ’em this time.”

“Thank you, honey.”

Quinn wolfed down his cereal and Maggie stuffed a piece of toast into her mouth, as Colin grabbed an apple to go, and the trio bid goodbye to Elizabeth and Michael Mallory, bound for Earth Prime.

\* \* \*

Professor Maximillian Arturo emerged from the lift, striding into Project Long Jump with purpose.

As he walked past the various staff, each greeted him with a cheerful nod. Feeling in high spirits, he approached his son, placing a hand on his shoulder as he worked at his multi-screened terminal.

Will turned around, startled. “Oh, hi Dad.”

“I trust you’ve notified the off-worlders about the transmission Higgins received, William?”

Will smirked. “Of course.”

“Wonderful,” said Arturo, rubbing his hands together. “This time, I plan on seeing the anomaly for myself.”

Will cringed. “I’m not sure I’m game to go back there.”

Arturo scoffed. “William, take some initiative for once in your life! Nothing ventured...”

“Nothing gained...” Will said, sighing.

“That’s the spirit! Now, have you seen Mister Mallory?”

“Which one?” asked Will.

Arturo chuckled, as he realised that the iterations of his various companions were beginning to get a sight convoluted.

“Alpha,” he said, stroking his beard.

Within the Higgins system, they had decided to designate known doubles with unique numeric signifiers based on their home world coordinates – aside from Nexus Quinn, who had been so named for his pivotal role in a plethora of Earths. However, since the discovery of the temporal paradox doubles of his friends, it had become necessary to differentiate the branched offshoots of the very people he knew from Earth Prime.

Thus, they had decided to designate those who had *not* experienced the invasion of Earth Prime as ‘Alpha’ ( $\alpha$ ) and those who *had* as ‘Omega’ ( $\Omega$ ). It had seemed like the fairest categorisation that wouldn’t have deemed one more ‘original’ than the other.

Will pointed to a door across the room. “Over in the server room.”

“Jolly good,” Arturo chirped, and headed towards the door. As he walked, a chime from Higgins sounded over the intercom.

*Ah, excellent timing.*

Arturo changed his direction, and headed for a door on the opposite side of the room. He opened it to find a wormhole opening, and three sliders tumbling out.

“Good morning,” he said, as Quinn <sup>$\Omega$</sup> , Maggie <sup>$\Omega$</sup> , and Colin climbed to their feet.

“Mornin’,” said Quinn, brushing himself off.

“Mister Mallory, I shall let your counterpart know that he should adjust the entrance velocity parameters in the homing beacon. You came out of that one rather roughly, didn’t you?”

Quinn’s face lit up. “Oh, is he here? I have some probability readings from Earth 820H to go through with him.”

“He is indeed. I heard he was in the server room.”

“Great!”

Quinn dashed off to see his double, as Colin watched. The younger Mallory brother then turned his attention to Arturo.

“How are things ’round here, anyway?”

“Positively humming along.” Arturo turned to head back to the main area of the facility. “We’ve had more technological breakthroughs in this facility alone than any other university in the world for the past four years. I daresay John, Mister Mallory and I are collecting Nobel prizes at the rate I used to collect top pupil awards as a lad.”

“That’s awesome,” Colin remarked. “I’d say I’m jealous, but I live on an Earth that’s decades ahead of any other one I’ve seen, so I can’t complain.”

As they approached the main floor, the pair of Quinns burst out of the server room, with a giggling Wade Welles being piggy-backed by Quinn<sup>Ω</sup>. Quinn<sup>α</sup> launched himself at Colin, pulling him into the kind of unrestrained, semi-violent hug only a close sibling could get away with.

“How you been, bro?”

Colin laughed as the hug turned into more of a headlock. “Oh, you know. Chewing gum, kicking ass. The usual.”

Arturo stood back, watching the youthful exuberance with a smile.

Wade climbed off Quinn<sup>Ω</sup>, and sauntered up to Maggie.

“What are *you* doing down here?” Maggie asked, looking her up and down.

“I work here now,” she said in a terse tone. “I happen to be pretty good with computers, and I’m training to be Will’s relief. Turns out he’s been putting in fourteen hour days for like eight years.”

Maggie processed this for a moment, before grinning. “Sounds like my sister’s gonna be in good hands when she makes her first leap.”

Wade returned the grin. “She’s in the gym right now, if you want to lose a sparring match to her.”

Maggie flexed her bicep. “Hey, I’ve been training too.”

“Take it up with her,” said Wade with a shrug. “I heard she whooped your ass last time.”

“Yeah, well, Sherri still ran circles around the both of us.”

“She certainly did,” Arturo chimed in. “Now, Miss Welles, if you keep flapping your gums like a gossiping wife instead of getting back to work, the next person you’ll be chit-chatting with is the lady at the unemployment office. You have much left to learn, so do toddle off.”

Wade rolled her eyes. “I forgot how much of a grouch you are.”

She leaned in towards Maggie<sup>Ω</sup>, whispering. “He’s all bark and no bite. I know he loves having me around.”

*She is right, of course. But she’ll never catch me admitting to it.*

Wade headed over to Will, where she sat beside him, peering up at the screens.

“So, where are John and Sherri?” Colin asked, finally getting to the question Arturo had been anticipating.

“Presently, they’re off-world. I believe they are seeing one Doctor Beeks.”

Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> grinned. “Really? Finally. When will they be back?”

“John insisted that he would meet us at the anomaly.”

“Speaking of which,” Quinn<sup>α</sup> added, “I *may* have roped Remy into coming. Told him it was a gig.”

“He doesn’t remember anything, does he?” Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> asked.

“Nope, didn’t think it was my place to say anything, either. I’ll let the Omegas take the lead on explaining all that.”

Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> took a deep breath. “It’s not gonna be easy, but thanks.”

\* \* \*

Colin knocked on the door of his former home, as Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> stood further back, nervously shifting on his feet. As the door opened, Missus Mallory’s mouth broke out in a wide smile.

“Colin!” she cried, grabbing his face and showering it with motherly kisses, as Colin awkwardly laughed.

“Hi, Ma. Good to see you, too.”

“You really need to visit more,” she said, looking him up and down. “Your hair is looking a bit scruffy. I’ll get your father to book you in with his barber.”

“Hey, Mom,” said Quinn<sup>Ω</sup>, waving.

Missus Mallory leaned to one side to look beyond Colin, and smiled.

“Quinn, you’ve brought me quite the surprise today.”

“Oh, I have one more up my sleeve,” Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> said, face flushing. He turned, and beckoned over Quinn<sup>α</sup>, who was lingering at the bottom of the porch stairs. He trotted up the steps, and the two Quinns each gave her a sheepish grin.

Missus Mallory squinted at the pair.

“Oh no, not *more* of these parallel world doubles,” she said. “They give me a headache. Which one of you is my son?”

“Uh, that’s the thing,” said Quinn<sup>α</sup>, “we kind of... both are.”

“We’ve been, uh, sharing our role with you for about a year now,” Quinn<sup>Ω</sup> explained, “but we thought it might be time to give you the whole story.”

Missus Mallory rubbed her temples. “Oh, this is going to be more of a migraine, isn’t it?”

She stepped back, gesturing inside. “Come on in, then. I’ll put on some tea and take an aspirin.”

As the three entered, she called down to the basement.

“Michael! The boys are here, and they’ve multiplied, apparently!”

\* \* \*

“Well John, I think we’ve made some breakthroughs today,” Verbena said as she set down her notepad.

John stood from the psychiatrist couch, stretching. “Doesn’t feel as rewarding as a scientific breakthrough, I gotta say.”

“Regardless, I’m sure you’ll be seeing the benefits of your treatment in no time.”

“If you say so. Thanks.”

Verbena smiled. “I hear there’s another birthday party tonight at the... um, roadhouse.”

“That’s what Higgins told us,” John said. “You coming?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“Come on, you’re one of the team. I’m sure everyone’ll be delighted to see you.”

“Well, I’ll think about it.”

John nodded, and headed for the door. “Hope to see you. I know it’s a little weird, willingly stepping into what we can only describe as a pocket dimension. But I think all the kidnapping is over now, for what it’s worth.”

He left her with that thought, as he strode away from the Albuquerque office, and joined Sherri in a nearby park. Sammy Jo was sitting with her, tapping at a handheld device.

“Okay, the calibration is almost complete,” she mumbled, head down. “How’s... *that*?”

Sherri blinked a few times, moving her new bionic eye back and forth.

“Wow, this eye is so much clearer than my old one. Can I just replace *both* my eyes with these things?”

John chuckled as he looked down at the glass-coated robotic eye, which looked very nearly the same as her natural one.

“I wouldn’t do that until we’re out of beta phase,” he said, before giving Sammy Jo a pat on the back.

“It looks great, Sammy. I think you’re gonna be the next Beckett featured in Time Magazine. Sam is yesterday’s news.”

Sammy Jo grinned up at him. “Thanks for your help.”

Sherri stood from the park bench with renewed energy. “Alright, we’ve got a drive ahead of us. Let’s get something to eat before we bounce.”

\* \* \*

Sam whistled as he wiped down tables in his relatively new home, named for his best friend.

It had taken him a few years to carve out this little space beyond time, but it had been a necessary step in the life that stretched out before him, both full of possibilities, and somehow already known to him in some strange way.

But he was almost ready to open this place for his first annual birthday event; why visit everyone separately when he could bring them to him?

He moved to the kitchen door, and peeked inside, where a fifty-five year old woman put the finishing touches on a sheet cake.

“How’s it feel to be catering a party you already attended?” he asked her, grinning.

Donna glanced up at him. “Awkward enough that I intend to stay upstairs until it’s over.”

Sam moved behind her, and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her tied-back hair that smelled of citrus.

“Okay, but you’ve got to make an appearance next year, because by then everyone will think you’re missing.”

Donna nodded. “Fine. Now if you don’t mind, I need to finish this.”



She looked back at him with a grin. “I hope you have a lovely night with your friends.”

Sam headed back out into the bar, and peered out the window at the bustling Kearney Street of San Francisco. Reflected in the glass was the face of Al the Bartender — or Weird Ernie, as the case may have been.

“Alright,” he muttered, flipping the ‘Closed’ sign. “*Al’s Place* is officially open for business.”

As he unlocked the door, he grinned as he spotted a flustered Rembrandt Brown loaded up with portable musical gear. Sam pulled open the door.

“Funny, I never seen this place open before,” Rembrandt mumbled, as he struggled to lug the equipment through the door, and glanced around. “Though I’m sure I’ve been in here.”

“Welcome to my establishment, Mister Brown,” Sam said with a smile. “I’m a big fan. Do you need a hand with that?”

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∞ THE END. ∞

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## ADIOS!

Thank you so much for reading. I hope you liked this ridiculous labour of love. And even if you didn't, it doesn't matter 'cause it's not canon anyway!

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If you'd like, you can [check out \*Quinntum Leap on Archive of Our Own\*](#) and give a Kudos or leave a comment.

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