Time Twist

What if you were never meant to exist?

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Ghost Gum Publishing

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Five years of Philippa Harris's life sat in a grey metal box on the laboratory table.

She had checked every connection, repeated every calculation. Now she was standing over it with an iPad in her hand, looking for something else to do.

There was nothing.

She put the iPad down, carefully, before she could convince herself otherwise.

Laughter drifted through the open window. Outside, two students were crossing the courtyard, one walking backwards as he argued his point. Philippa watched them for a moment. Beyond them, the winter sun caught the windows of the opposite building.

She almost wanted to call them up. Come and look. See what she had done.

Instead, she turned back to the table and allowed herself a grin.

They could wait until tonight.

Five years. No going out, no time to herself, or friends for that matter, no, her whole life had been this one project. Her last thought at night and her first when she woke. Now, completed, she simply stared at it, trance-like, while it waited innocently on the table. It was a metallic device, no larger than a hard-cover book, dull, grey and appeared to be botched together from scraps. Flashes of memories cut through her mind like shrapnel, images of the past carefully preserved. Moments saved.

She knew what she was planning was risky, but it was now or never; she was tired of waiting.

As she stared, she became caught up in the moment. A moment she felt might last forever if she could somehow allow it. A lonely moment of emptiness stretching into a cold future. But if the evening's plan was a success, all that could change in an instant. She felt her skin tingle, while the curious sunlight crept further into her lab, finally reaching the shiny box, and giving it a magical orange glow.

A wave of nausea came from nowhere and snapped her out of her trance. Steadying herself on the nearby chair, she made it back to her desk to sit down. She was about to go over her checklist again when her assistant, Arjun, burst through the door with a train of words in an excited Indian accent.

"Slow - down - Arjun." Philippa couldn't help but grin at his excitement.

"Sorry, boss." Arjun took a breath and started again. He was pacing around the lab in excitement now. "The TV show. 6 p.m. They confirmed it! Philippa, you're going to be famous!" He finally found a chair and rolled towards Philippa's immaculately tidy desk.

Philippa's work for the last five years, or "obsession" as some around the university called it, had been about space-time and a theory of quantum gravity. The theory suggested space-time had a foam-like structure full of microscopic wormholes. In theory, she'd found a way to enlarge those wormholes using negative energy, and send particles through them to any other point in time. Now, she finally had a device to demonstrate it.

Arjun turned the tablet around so she could see the running order for the evening. There were coloured boxes, names, and little arrows connecting one thing to the next. He had even allowed time for applause.

"Two minutes?" Philippa pointed.

"It might be very good applause."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then we finish early."

She laughed, and for a moment it felt like an ordinary afternoon. There had been plenty of those, despite everything she told herself about these five years. Afternoons of calculations

that went nowhere, of lukewarm coffee and arguments over something so small neither of them could remember what had started it. Arjun would go quiet when he disagreed with her, which usually meant she had to ask him three times before he explained why. Annoyingly, he was often right.

He scrolled down the page. "I thought you could begin with the theory."

"You thought wrong."

"A little of the theory?"

"They'll all leave."

"They're coming to see a scientific demonstration, boss."

"They're coming to see something disappear. There's a difference."

He considered that, then shortened the first coloured box with a drag of his finger. She watched him shorten the box, then reached out to stop his hand. He had put work into this too, the sort of work she was inclined to forget because it didn't involve the device. Someone had arranged the chairs and answered the emails and made sure there would be people here to witness what they had done. Someone had remembered they would need glasses if they were going to offer champagne.

"Keep a little," she said. "You can explain the theory."

Arjun looked up. "Me?"

"You do know it."

"Yes, but it's your—"

"Our work. You've been here for quite a lot of it, if I remember correctly."

He looked pleased, then immediately worried. "How much do you want me to explain?"

"Less than you want to."

They sat with the running order between them while she read it properly. A question mark stood beside the word 'object'. Arjun had drawn up several possibilities in a note underneath, ordinary things they could borrow from someone in the audience. Philippa glanced at the list and then past him to the device. He was trying to make every part of the evening predictable. She understood the appeal of that. Most of her life had been arranged on the same principle, until the one thing she had most depended on had vanished without explanation.

"You haven't put yourself down to speak anywhere," she said.

"I'll be busy."

"So will I."

He moved the tablet back to his side of the desk. "Let's get through it first."

There was a little silence. Outside the lab, someone walked past laughing into a phone, and for a moment Philippa could hear the ordinary university going about its ordinary day. Assignments were overdue. People were wondering what to have for dinner. Somewhere a meeting would be running late, its

occupants watching the clock without the slightest suspicion that time itself might shortly require a different explanation.

Arjun stood and tucked the tablet under his arm. One of the chairs near the aisle sat at an angle, and he went over to straighten it.

"You know they'll want to interview you afterwards," he said.

"Who?"

"Everyone."

She looked at the modest little box on the table. It was difficult to imagine strangers being interested in it after so long spent trying to persuade people it was worth her time.

Arjun stepped back to inspect the row of chairs, then gave her another delighted grin. "I told you. Famous."

'Famous'. Arjun's words echoed in her head. Making such a monumental scientific discovery felt almost trivial to her. The idea of fame and fortune that would make most scientists fall over themselves with excitement held little allure for Philippa. Her motivation, known only to herself, was personal.

Arjun's grin faded as he noticed Philippa's discomfort. "Are you okay, Boss? Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you bursting in like that, but I just saw the email—"

"It's okay, Arj, just the usual nausea. I'll be fine. But yeah, great that the TV crew will be here too. No pressure at all." She instantly regretted her sarcastic tone. Arjun was genuinely

excited, and she'd let her nervousness and discomfort get the better of her. He had a right to share in the triumph. "No, I mean it. It will be fun. Lots of champagne! I hope—"

"No-no-no, boss, you can't drink." Arjun wagged his finger at her. "No champagne for you!"

It had been difficult for Philippa to give up the occasional drink completely, especially since losing her husband. It had been five years since he went missing, but IVF and her need to always plan ahead, meant she was finally carrying his baby.

"I'll just have a sip," she assured him. She clapped her hands together in determination. "Right, time to get ready. I'm heading home to freshen up, and I'll see you back here around five-fifty?"

"Everything will be ready!" Arjun waved her off, his attention already turned to his tablet.

Arjun shut the door behind Philippa and stood facing it, paused. He stood there for what seemed like a long time, listening to Philippa's retreating footsteps. Finally, he turned away from the door. His eyes travelled over the neat rows of chairs that were pointing to the room's main attraction—the device sitting innocuously on the table, its lights occasionally flashing.

With a deep sigh, he walked to the table, eyes fixed on the device. Such a small object, but holding the power to change so much. He paused, deep in thought as the power LED blinked back at him, green, blue, green, blue, before reaching for it.

Her books gave her comfort and company. Or at least tried to, but there was a gnawing loneliness they couldn't quite mask, just as there was a permeating coldness the heating couldn't touch, and the country music did little to drown out the silence which provoked her and echoed between the walls.

She went straight to the kitchen, eyeing the half-bottle of wine that stared back at her. For a moment, they were locked in a stand-off. Then she turned and went for the coffee machine. After spending too much time choosing dinner from the freezer, she placed a meal in the microwave and listened to Glen Campbell sing about being a highwayman as she waited.

The microwave hummed, counting down in green numbers. Philippa watched them for a while before realising she was doing it. Two minutes and forty seconds. Two minutes and thirty-nine. A machine telling her exactly how long she had to wait for one small thing to be ready.

If only everything were that considerate.

She opened the cutlery drawer and took out a fork. Two had caught together, and for a second she stood holding both before returning one to the drawer.

When Thomas first disappeared, she had continued buying enough food for two. It wasn't even deliberate at first. She would reach for the same things, put the same quantities in the basket, then discover at home that she had once again made provision for a man who wasn't there. Later, she had done it on purpose. Throwing things out was preferable to the feeling that she had stopped expecting him.

Now she bought meals in little containers and tried not to think too much about what that meant.

The microwave beeped. She peeled back the film and hissed as steam caught her thumb. The sting was brief and ordinary, and she welcomed it. She put the tray on a plate, although there was no sensible reason to add to the washing-up, and carried it to the counter.

Thomas would have taken the plate and tipped the food onto it. He had considered eating from the tray a terrible waste of a perfectly good plate. Once, she had argued that the plate was there to protect the counter, and he had asked what the placemat was for. She could still remember the pleased expression on his face when she ran out of answers.

She set down the fork and smiled, unexpectedly.

That was what she missed. It wasn't only the important moments, the occasions she had photographs of. It was having someone there to be mildly annoying. Someone who would ask a question while she was reading, or leave a cupboard open, or tell her the same story twice and act surprised when she remembered the ending. There were whole evenings she would once have called uneventful that she would now have given anything to sit through again.

Her phone lay beside the plate. She picked it up and found a photograph of them, one she had looked at so often she usually noticed the picture before she noticed him. This time she looked properly. There was his hand around hers, half out of the frame. Her own expression was almost smug. She had been happy and had assumed she would continue to be happy, a perfectly reasonable assumption at the time.

"You'd have something to say about all this," she told the photograph.

The music filled the pause after her voice. She turned the phone face down.

People had been kind, mostly. But kindness became more difficult as the years passed. In the beginning, they had known what to do. They brought food, offered help, sat with her. After a while, they began mentioning other things she could do with her time. A holiday. An invitation. A friend they

thought she might get along with. No one said she had waited long enough in quite those words, but she heard it anyway.

Perhaps they were right. Perhaps that was how a sensible person made a life out of what remained.

Her hand settled over her stomach. There was a life to think about now that wasn't hers or Thomas's, and sometimes that thought was so large she couldn't quite fit it into an ordinary day. She could make decisions about equipment and budgets without hesitation. Buying something for the baby had left her standing in a shop, unable to choose, absurdly close to tears.

In the end, she had bought a small yellow blanket. It had no scientific merit that she could establish, no advantage over the one beside it, but it was soft and she liked it. At home, she'd taken it out of the bag, folded it, and put it away. Then she'd taken it out again. She hadn't told anyone about that part. It was hard to explain how a folded piece of cloth could make something she'd planned for so carefully suddenly seem real.

It wasn't that she didn't want this. She wanted it so much that wanting frightened her.

She picked up the fork again. Her dinner was cooling, and there were things to do before she went back. She would eat first. One ordinary thing at a time.

She ate at the kitchen counter with only her thoughts for company as usual. How far they'd come with their project and how she missed her husband more than ever relentlessly

consumed her. But if tonight was a success, all that could change in an instant; she could have everything she wanted. Of course, if things went pear-shaped, it would have disastrous outcomes. She just hoped Arjun wouldn't try to stop what she was planning. He's so cautious. Unadventurous.

After dinner she rinsed the plate, put it in the dishwasher, then opened the machine again to move it to a different slot. She caught herself doing it and shut the door firmly. Apparently, this was what she did when she was nervous. She organised things that were already organised.

In the bedroom, she laid two blouses on the bed and looked from one to the other. The teal one, she decided. It was a good colour, and she knew she felt comfortable in it. There was no point adding an unfamiliar neckline to the list of things that could go wrong.

She changed slowly, listening to the music drifting down the hallway. Her lab coat was hanging over the back of a chair. She checked its pockets, transferring a pen, a folded tissue, and a receipt she couldn't remember keeping. The receipt went in the bin. The pen went back into the pocket. She hesitated over the tissue, then kept that too.

Such thorough preparation for something so small.

"Very thorough, boss," she said aloud, in her best imitation of Arjun.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her hands. They were steady now. At the lab, it was easy to keep going because there was always something in front of her that required attention. Here, with the evening approaching and nothing left to arrange, she had room to think about the choice she was making.

She could still change her mind.

The thought arrived plainly, without drama, and she let it sit for a moment. She could demonstrate what they had already prepared to demonstrate. Let everyone applaud. Answer a few questions, come home, wake up tomorrow and continue the work. It would still be an achievement. It would still matter.

But then there would be another test to perform, another calculation to check, another perfectly reasonable reason to wait. She knew how that happened. Caution could occupy as much time as she gave it, and time was the very thing she had spent five years trying to take back.

She disliked the impatient edge to that thought. Impatience wasn't evidence. She had told students that often enough.

"I know," she said quietly, answering an argument no one else had heard.

She rested a hand against her stomach again. She had thought wanting a child would make everything simpler, would give her one clear thing to look towards. Instead, she

could want the future and want the past with equal force. It felt unfair that they should pull her in opposite directions.

For a moment she imagined coming home after the demonstration. Turning the key, hearing the music begin, putting the lab coat back over this chair. Tomorrow the device would still exist. Whatever anyone said tonight, she would have proved that the years between two people needn't be an unbreakable barrier. That was enough to keep her moving.

She stood, put on the coat, and checked herself in the mirror. She looked like Professor Harris. That helped. Professor Harris knew what she was talking about, even when Philippa wasn't entirely sure what she was doing.

At the front door, she went through the little routine of checking her phone, her keys, her bag. Then she turned back towards the quiet house.

"Right," she said.

She wasn't sure who she was saying it to. She locked the door and went back to the university.

5:45 pm July 1, 2021

The university that housed Philippa's lab was alive with excitement. The TV crew was setting up, and Arjun was running around helping them wherever he could. A white sheet covered the time travel device, and rows of white fold-up chairs were arranged in a semi-circle around it. A small crowd had gathered already.

A cable had worked its way across the aisle, and Arjun stopped a man from stepping onto it just as a member of the crew arrived with a roll of tape. The man thanked him and continued to the front row. Arjun watched the cable being secured, then checked his own list again, though he could have recited it by now.

The room looked different with people in it. Earlier, the rows of chairs had seemed excessive. Now the lab was filling with coats and bags, the scrape of chair legs, the sound of people introducing themselves to someone they had seen in the corridor for years. Someone near the back laughed. Someone else asked whether this was the right room, as if there might be several time travel demonstrations taking place that evening.

"You're in the right place," Arjun assured her.

"Good. I wasn't sure whether I needed a ticket."

"No ticket."

"And will it take long?"

He nearly laughed. Instead, he showed her a seat.

One of the crew wanted a chair moved. Arjun moved it. Another wanted to know where to plug something in, and he directed her to a socket away from the equipment. He found himself enjoying the usefulness of these small tasks. Each had a clear answer and ended when it was done. The questions waiting for Philippa would be considerably harder.

A colleague from elsewhere in the department paused beside him, studying the sheet-covered shape on the table.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

"I thought it would be bigger."

Arjun looked at the small rise beneath the cloth. After so much time spent beside it, he had forgotten how unimpressive it might appear to someone seeing it for the first time.

"It's taken a fair amount of work to make it that size."

The colleague nodded, already turning towards someone else. Arjun resisted the urge to explain further. Tonight, for once, they wouldn't have to convince everyone with diagrams.

He straightened the edge of the sheet. His hand remained there for a moment before he withdrew it. Philippa had wanted this evening so badly, even when she pretended the attention was a nuisance. He knew her well enough to recognise that. He wished knowing a person meant always knowing how to help them.

The crew were almost ready now. A camera turned towards the table, and a red light caught his eye. He stepped out of its way and checked that the aisle remained clear. There was nothing left on his list that he could usefully do again.

That left waiting.

Arjun checked his watch, then looked around for Philippa, only to find her approaching him, wearing her lab coat over a teal blouse.

"You look great." Arjun gave her a relieved grin. "Are you ready for your big moment?"

"Of course. More than ready."

He took a deep breath. "Let's begin."

They made their way to the front of the table. The chatter in the room faded off, and people began taking their seats.

The TV personality, a young woman in her late twenties, approached them. "Hi, I'm Sarah Collins. I'll be running this story. You're Professor Philippa Harris, and this is your assistant Arjun Miller, is that right?"

"Yes, that's correct!" Arjun's grin was unable to hide his excitement.

Sarah shrugged, "I think we're okay to start if you're both ready?"

"We are," Philippa replied, giving Arjun a hint of a smile.

Sarah turned to one of the two cameras, held her microphone up to her face, waited for a nod from her producer, and began to speak:

"Tonight, I am told history is about to be made. We're at the University of Riverton, in the physics lab of Professor Philippa Harris and her assistant Arjun Miller. They claim they have achieved what—until now—was thought to be... impossible.

They have managed to send matter both forwards... and backwards... in time. I'll let that sink in for a few seconds."

Philippa was amused at the overly dramatic flair in Sarah's speech, with suspenseful pauses at odd moments.

Sarah turned to Philippa and pointed the microphone at her, "Professor Harris, I understand that you have been working on this for quite some time now?"

Philippa leaned in towards the microphone and appeared a little nervous as she looked around at the modest audience. "Yes, I, uh, have dedicated the last five years of my life to developing a portable device, um, to prove my theory."

"And," Sarah said, "is this what we will see demonstrated here tonight? I understand that you have been sending individual atoms or something through time?" Sarah's gaze theatrically darted from Philippa to the camera.

"Ah, yes, however, we have progressed a little," Philippa replied, "we'll demonstrate the process tonight with a much larger object. If all goes to plan, you'll see a duplicate of what we send back appearing a few minutes before you see us send it."

Sarah's eyes darted back to Philippa. "How much larger?"

"Well, I was hoping we could use your handbag."

Sarah laughed a little, unprepared for the suggestion. "Really? Well, if it helps science—" She motioned to her producer for her bag, "—then I don't see why not."

Handing her bag to Philippa, she smiled. “You’ll look after it, right?”

“Of course.” Philippa walked to the front of the table. “I’ll have it on me the whole time.”

“Er—“ Sarah began.

Arjun cut in, “Philippa, I don’t think—“

The crowd was silent as Sarah cut him off. “So, are you saying that you, yourself, will be the test object? With my bag?” Sarah’s eyes darted from Philippa to the camera with exaggerated drama and a hint of excitement.

“If you have no objections?” But Philippa didn’t wait for a reply. Slinging the handbag over her shoulder, she turned to address the gathering. “So, let’s say hello to ‘future me’ sent back in time from the future to about now!”

She checked the time on her wrist and made a mental note of it.

There was silence, then some murmuring from the guests. Arjun raised a finger and opened his mouth to say something, but stopped, his mouth frozen in the shape of an ‘o’, as a floating blue sphere of bright light appeared behind the table. It was no larger than a marble, shimmering energetically just behind the table.

The room fell silent, and some members of the audience looked alarmed as the sphere rapidly swelled to two metres in height and became more transparent. It now stood as a

semi-transparent membrane; the thin outer surface glowing electrically blue.

In the centre of the sphere stood a duplicate of Philippa. As quickly as it had appeared, the sphere's light faded, and then it was gone, leaving the second Philippa behind.

Second Philippa beamed with satisfaction as she looked around at everyone, enjoying their stunned faces. She was holding a metal box connected to a small iPad on top via a series of cables. Dangling from the box was a short lead with a plug on the end.

A few people who weren't so awestruck applauded as she walked around to the front of the table. "Hello, Sarah, I believe this is your bag?" Second Philippa grinned as she held the bag out to Sarah.

Sarah's jaw had dropped, and the room was still silent. Her eyes darted from the original Philippa to the new one and back several times. "I—" she began and stopped again. Visibly composing herself, she raised her microphone to her face and turned her newsreader persona back on. "I have to admit, I am shocked. I'm standing here looking at two Philippas and two bags." She glanced at the camera as she took her bag from second Philippa and began checking the contents.

"This *is* my bag," she announced, her eyes still wide.

First Philippa held out the bag she was holding. "And this one?"

Sarah put the bag down and looked at the one she had given to Philippa just a minute ago.

"Well, I just handed it to you, so—" She examined the contents. "Indeed it is. It's identical, they're—" Words were failing her.

Philippa looked at her other self while Sarah compared the bags. She had imagined this part so many times that she had expected it to feel familiar. It didn't.

There were small details a mirror never showed her properly: the way she stood when she thought no one was looking, the slight tilt of her head as she listened. Her other self shifted the device against her hip, and Philippa felt an absurd urge to help her carry it. The box was heavier than it looked. She knew exactly where its edge would be pressing into her fingers.

Someone in the front row leaned sideways to get a better view of them both. A chair creaked loudly in the silence.

"They're both real," the person whispered.

Philippa almost answered, then stopped. They could see that for themselves. Or perhaps they couldn't. Until a moment ago, she too had known only what the calculations told her to expect. Now she could see the faint crease on her own forehead and the familiar impatience with which her other self glanced at the table.

Sarah took a small object out of one bag, checked it, and put it back. Then she did the same with the other. The action

seemed to reassure her more than either of the women standing nearby.

"I know this sounds ridiculous," Sarah said, lowering the microphone slightly, "but I was sure I'd find something different."

"I'd be more worried if you had," the first Philippa replied.

A nervous laugh travelled through the room. Philippa smiled, grateful for it. The laughter made this a roomful of people again instead of a collection of astonished faces.

She glanced towards Arjun. He was watching them both with an expression she couldn't quite read. Of course he was overwhelmed. He had spent almost as long waiting for this as she had, and here it was, more complete than either of them could have demonstrated with a borrowed object alone.

For an instant, she wished there were no cameras. She wanted time to walk around her other self, to ask a dozen questions that would sound peculiar to anyone else. What had she felt? Had it hurt? Had there been any sense of movement at all? Did she remember being here now, wondering what it would be like?

There was something comforting about the thought that the woman opposite already knew the answers. There was also something unnerving. Her future had acquired a face, and it was looking back at her, apparently pleased with itself.

Philippa glanced at the bag on her shoulder, then at the matching one in Sarah's hand. In a few minutes, there would only be one again. It was such a small, ordinary thing to contain a fact so extraordinary.

She looked up as her other self began to speak.

"Okay," the second Philippa interrupted. "Let me explain what just happened. I sent myself back in time, from a few moments from now," she motioned to her other self, "and you're about to see me do exactly that."

The first Philippa, bag on her shoulder, walked around the table and uncovered the device.

Arjun had watched in stunned silence from the sidelines up to this point, but now he joined Philippa.

"This is amazing," he whispered, leaning in.

Philippa grinned at him. They checked the settings on the tablet connected by wires to the metal box under it. The same device that the second Philippa was still holding, except this one was still hooked up to the large power supply under the table.

Arjun had a concerned look on his face as he leaned in again. "Are you sure about this?"

"Not to worry, Arj. We know it will work." Philippa subtly nodded to the other version of herself standing there, beaming at the crowd.

Arjun studied her for a moment and looked like he wanted to say something but stopped himself. Finally, he nodded in agreement and moved away to the end of the table. Second Philippa joined him and leaned in to whisper to him. "Something very strange happened. I thought the whole test was about to fail, but then I arrived in the past. We'll discuss it later, but it's something that needs to be analysed. Everything is being recorded, right?"

Arjun was tense; beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead. He replied without looking at her. "Yes, boss, all events and data are now being logged as requested."

She gave him a thumbs-up and re-joined Sarah at the front of the table.

Original Philippa reached under the table and flipped a switch. She picked up the device, unlocked the tablet, and ran the app.

"I'm now entering the destination time of 6:11 pm on today's date. You'll notice that's about three minutes ago, when the other me appeared. The tablet will now perform the required calculations, store the correct time signatures to apply, and when it's ready, a 'GO' button will become active. When I tap it, you will briefly see the blue flash of a sphere surrounding me. I'll appear to vanish, but I'll actually just stop travelling forward in time with you all. I'll have escaped the flow of time

and be stopped at one point in reality—one single slice if you like—hidden outside of time!"

Philippa looked around to see if she'd lost anyone. Everyone's gaze was fixed on her, except for Arjun, who now fidgeted uncomfortably. She continued, her voice now a little shaky. "Then a gap in reality, a wormhole, will be enlarged around me, which will instantly transfer me to the point in reality that matches 6:11 pm and I'll be caught again in the flow of time, a time in the past. The loop will be complete, and my counterpart there—future me—will be the only one of me remaining in the room."

The room was still silent and wide-eyed in anticipation.

Philippa found her hands trembling slightly as she studied the screen. They had tested on mice before with no adverse effects. But this was her first test on herself, and she'd reasoned it had to happen sometime; so why not now, and really "wow" everyone. Besides, it had obviously worked. Her last memory of her husband Thomas smiling at her flashed through her mind as she stared at the tablet. She re-checked the settings one last time before she gently touched the 'GO' button.

A blue, glowing sphere instantly engulfed her. Inside the sphere, Philippa stared at her tablet. Worry spread over her face as she looked up at Arjun, then back at the screen. A second later, she vanished, only to suddenly reappear inside the sphere. As she did, a *third* Philippa appeared in the sphere,

also holding a device. Third Philippa was wearing different clothing than the other two, and her face was somehow slightly different.

The bubble was now growing larger as second Philippa briskly walked over to Arjun, but was now moving in slow-motion as time for her began to distort.

Several people in the room jumped up, looking bewildered. The calm demeanour that usually defined Arjun began to crumble. His movements had become frantic and beads of sweat trickled down his face as his eyes darted around the room. He took a few steps towards Philippa but kept retreating. No one could enter the sphere.

Inside the sphere, the original Philippa looked at something in slow motion, eyes wide with terror. Another figure, still faint, had begun to appear. Third Philippa opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came. The two Philippas in the still-expanding bubble looked at each other, wide-eyed.

With agonisingly slow movements, the first Philippa unplugged the power cable to the device. As she did, there was a loud explosion under the table, followed by a column of smoke. The sphere vanished, and with it, the two Philippas and the third figure inside. At the same instant, second Philippa, who was now frozen mid-step on her way to Arjun, also vanished, leaving the room silent except for a low hiss as smoke seeped from the power supply.

Twenty-three years later

"I'm just saying, if you can edit genes, you ought to be able to improve these."

Ben held up a blueberry muffin. A fragment dropped onto his open notebook.

Nina took the muffin out of his hand and inspected the middle. "That isn't a genetics problem. They've overcooked it."

"We won't know until you've sequenced it," Isaac said.

"I'll need funding."

Ben reached across the little café table and retrieved his muffin. "You two are going to do wonderful things for humanity."

"We try." Nina brushed the crumbs onto a napkin and pushed them towards him. "There's your sample."

Outside the window, a gust sent fallen leaves skittering along the footpath. Isaac pulled his coffee closer. The steam had stopped rising from it a while ago, but he took a sip anyway and tried not to make a face.

Ben noticed. “See? Another problem science could solve.”

“Hot coffee already exists,” Isaac said. “You order it, then drink it before someone starts explaining his assignment.”

“You asked.”

“I asked how it was going.”

“And I'm telling you.”

Nina put her chin in her hand. “I was younger when he started.”

Ben turned his notebook around. There were several lines crossed out, an unfinished diagram, and a coffee ring cutting through the middle of it all.

“The trouble is separating the signal from everything else.” He pointed at the diagram. “What you're trying to measure is tiny, and the equipment picks up all sorts of things you don't want.”

Isaac looked at Nina. “Like Ben talking?”

“Exactly like Ben talking.”

“Good. You've grasped the basics.” Ben pulled the notebook back. “Now imagine trying to do that precisely.”

“We've been practising all afternoon.”

He gave Nina a patient look. She smiled sweetly and reached for her cup.

Isaac leaned forward to see the diagram again. “So how do you tell which bit is real?”

"You can't just look at one funny reading and declare you've discovered something. You compare it with the other measurements. Work out what else could have caused it."

"Then remove the coffee stain," Nina suggested.

Ben glanced down. "That's going in the limitations section."

Isaac laughed into his cup. A drop escaped over the rim, and he hastily put it down.

"You see?" Ben said. "Uncontrolled interference."

Nina passed Isaac a napkin. "At least yours stays where you put it. We had someone swap the labels on two samples this morning."

"Someone?" Isaac asked.

"I'm protecting their identity."

He waited.

"It was me."

Ben grinned. "And how long before the Nobel committee called?"

"Fortunately, someone checked before I revolutionised the field."

She nudged Isaac's shoe with hers under the table. He lifted his cup in acknowledgement.

"You checked her work?" Ben asked.

"She'd written the sample numbers backwards."

"For about thirty seconds," Nina said.

"A thrilling thirty seconds for genomics."

"I was going to thank you. I've reconsidered."

At the counter, the coffee machine hissed. Someone carried a tray past their table, and all three of them shifted things inwards, despite the tray being nowhere near them. Nina rescued the last corner of her biscuit from beneath Ben's notebook.

"You're still avoiding my question," Ben said.

"Was there one?"

"Useful improvements. If you could change something, what would you change?"

"Your volume," Nina said.

"Genetically."

She looked at Isaac. "You take this one."

He broke off a piece of Ben's muffin while its owner was distracted. "You'd have to know what else you were changing."

"I'm talking about one thing."

"Doesn't mean it only does one thing." Isaac turned the piece of muffin over, looking for a blueberry. "You can't always pick a trait off a menu. Change something useful in one place, find out you've caused a problem somewhere else."

"Like updating your phone," Ben said.

"Except you can't complain until someone sends a patch."

Nina pointed at the stolen muffin. "And you haven't even tried changing the baking time."

Ben took what remained and moved it to the far side of his notebook. "Fine. My research programme has been rejected."

"We'll reconsider after lunch," Isaac said.

"It is after lunch."

"Tomorrow's lunch."

Nina laughed and pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across her face. "I would settle for people knowing the difference between having a gene and what it actually does in a particular cell."

"That would make a terrible superhero film," Ben said.

Isaac lowered his voice. "He's got the gene."

Nina leaned towards him. "But is it being expressed?"

"We'll find out in the sequel."

Ben shook his head at them. "You can mock me when they make a film about checking labels."

"We'd watch it," Nina said.

"We'd complain about the pipetting," Isaac added.

They were still laughing when a woman at the next table looked over. Isaac lowered his eyes to his cup. Nina mouthed an apology, which might have worked better if Ben hadn't whispered, "In a world where one decimal place changes everything."

Isaac pressed the napkin against his mouth.

The woman turned back to her book. For a few seconds they managed to behave themselves.

Ben tried the muffin again and gave up, wrapping it in the remaining napkin.

"Taking it home?" Nina asked.

"Building material."

Isaac's phone lit up beside his cup. A reminder sat across the screen, half hidden beneath Nina's notebook. He slid it free.

Dinner. Six o'clock.

He glanced at the time. 5:42.

"Oh, crap."

"What?" Nina asked.

He pushed his chair back, caught its leg on the strap of his bag, and nearly brought it with him.

"Dinner. I'm meant to be home at six."

"You've got eighteen minutes," Ben said.

"It's a twenty-five-minute walk."

Ben brightened. "Finally. A physics problem."

Isaac dragged his jacket from the back of the chair. One sleeve had turned inside out. He thrust a hand through it, missed the opening, and tried again.

"Distance over time," Ben continued. "Although in your case we should probably account for—"

"Shut up."

Nina freed the bag strap and held it out to him. "Tell Susan we kept you."

"You did keep me."

"Excellent. No need to invent anything."

He pulled the strap over his shoulder and checked the table. Phone. Notebook. His pen was still beside Nina's cup.

"Here." She held it up before he could ask.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow."

He made it halfway to the door before Ben called after him.

"Your coffee!"

Isaac looked back at the abandoned cup.

"Donate it to science."

He tapped his phone at the counter to settle his bill and pushed through the door, catching a blast of cold air in the face. Behind the glass, Ben held up the muffin in farewell. Nina was looking at the time too, now, and reaching for her bag.

Isaac turned towards home and lengthened his stride.

Orange leaves crunched under Isaac's feet as he zipped his jacket up higher against the wind. He checked his wrist. *Not late yet!* He was usually late for something, this time it was dinner at home. Dinner was at six, it was 5:44, and it took about twenty-five minutes to walk home. He'd been in town with a few university friends, and as usual, lost track of time. It wasn't that his aunt Susan would be annoyed that bothered him, it was that he would be annoyed with himself. Sometimes he'd swear less time had passed than what was actually the case, and he felt like he'd lost five or ten minutes somehow.

Isaac ran for several blocks then rechecked his watch. *That should do it*. He walked the rest of the dusk-coloured streets,

through the smells of dinners that seeped out of houses, and was occasionally illuminated by passing cars.

He rounded the last corner, reached his house, and opened the door at precisely 6 pm. "Ha!" he said out loud to no one. Taking a deep breath, he went through.

Inside, the delicious aroma of dinner and country music coming from the kitchen greeted him. He shrugged his coat off and hung it, then kicked his shoes off and placed them neatly on the shoe rack. Walking through to the kitchen, he found his aunt placing bowls of food on the table.

"Just in time!" She announced as she sat down.

Isaac went to the fridge and brought water before sitting opposite her.

"How was your day?" Aunt Susan glanced up at him while placing spoonfuls of mashed potato on her plate. She asked him this every day, and he usually had a lot to tell her. But some days, when he had too much to think about, answering questions felt like an unwanted intrusion on his train of thought.

"Meh. You?" Isaac grabbed the bowl of vegetables and started filling his plate.

"I managed to get some work done between the drop-outs, and I even had time for gardening."

"Internet still dropping out then? When's that going to get fixed?"

Drop-outs didn't bother him much now; he had one of the new phones, with Quantum storage and Graphene Super-Capacitor battery tech. This meant he could use 'Google Now', an app that could predict the information you might want in the future. It did this by analysing your usage and then pre-downloading and storing the data locally on your device. The idea was to help free up bandwidth bottlenecks during peak usage times.

"This week sometime, I expect." She motioned to the box on the floor with the large Starlink logo on it. "The replacement dish arrived today, which reminds me, a package came for you too."

Isaac looked up from his food. "For me? Who's it from?"

"I didn't look, I just put it in your room."

Isaac glanced towards the hallway, but Susan pushed the bowl of vegetables closer to him.

"It won't run away."

"That depends what's in it."

"If it's alive, you'll be feeding it."

He helped himself to another spoonful. Susan watched him do it with the satisfied expression she always wore when she had made exactly enough food to count as far too much.

"I found something of yours today," she said. "Behind the drawer where we keep the old cables. I was looking for the instructions for that dish."

"You found instructions in this house?"

"I found six sets. None for anything we still own."

She reached across to the kitchen counter and brought back a small photograph. It showed a row of children sitting cross-legged on a school floor. Behind them stood another row, including a small boy whose shirt collar was sticking up on one side.

Isaac took it an pointed to the collar with his knife. "You could have fixed that."

"I did fix it. You undid it before the photo."

"Sounds unlikely."

"You wanted to look like the man on the cover of your space book."

He brought the photograph closer. There he was, looking very serious about having his picture taken. He remembered the shirt. Or perhaps he remembered seeing the photograph before. It was hard to tell with things from that far back.

"Was that the day I wouldn't get out of the car?"

"One of them."

"I did it more than once?"

Susan raised her eyebrows and went back to her dinner.

He studied the faces of the other children. One boy had become a friend for years, and Isaac could remember his old telephone number more easily than his surname. It seemed

unfair that his head had kept that particular piece of information.

"I remember you staying at the gate," he said.

"For a little while."

"All morning?"

"No. It felt like all morning, though."

At some point she had stopped asking whether he wanted the hallway light left on, and he had stopped checking that her bedroom door was open before going to sleep.

He put the photograph beside her plate.

"Thanks for that."

"What, finding it?"

"The other bit."

Susan looked at him, then reached over and squeezed his forearm. "You did most of the hard part yourself."

"I think I mostly cried."

"You were very thorough."

He laughed. She let go and reached for her water.

Isaac picked up his fork, then put it down again. "Do you ever remember something really clearly, then wonder whether it actually happened?"

"Regularly. Usually an argument I was certain I'd won."

"I mean when I was little. Sometimes there's a whole afternoon I can remember. Other times it's just a room."

Susan considered that.

"You don't have to sort everything out at once," she said. "And you can ask me. You know that."

He nodded. She had always answered what she could. Asking was the part he sometimes found difficult. He might start with a small question about a photograph and find himself wanting answers to things neither of them could change.

Susan turned the photograph over to look at the date on the back.

"I'm keeping this."

"I thought it was mine."

"It was. You abandoned it with three broken charging cables."

"That doesn't seem legally sound."

"Then you can have it back when you've sorted out those cables."

He grinned and took the last of the potatoes.

Isaac set his phone down and enjoyed the rest of his dinner before clearing up the table and heading up to the room that he'd had since childhood. The room was large because that's how they built houses in the early 1900s. There were posters on the walls showing how his interests had developed over the years—Star Wars, the first Mars colony after the Tesla Robots had constructed a biodome, and the 2032 remake of Back to the Future, among others. A large bookshelf leaned against one

wall, filled with science-fiction novels, university textbooks, and a collection of cherished books from his childhood.

Flicking the light on, he grabbed the package from his desk. It was a box about the size of a cake tin. He was about to take it downstairs when he checked the sender—a law firm. He paused and decided it might be better to open it in private. *Why would a law firm be sending me anything?* He wondered, trying to recall if he might have done something he could be sued for lately. Nothing came to mind, so he began to open it, but stopped. *What if it's bad news? Maybe I should leave it for tomorrow, and just enjoy the evening.*

He set the box back down on his desk, pulled his phone from his pocket and messaged Chel.

Still ok for tonight?

Chel's reply came quickly:

Yep, but can I come to yours? I need to get out.

Sure, see you soon?

About 30, still doing dinner :(

Isaac smiled, knowing why she added a sad face.

He'd met Chel at university, around the science labs, and later found out her father worked there. The first time they

spoke, Isaac had been in the library reading a book, and she just sat down opposite him, took one look at his book and stated, "Well, you're wasting your time!"

Isaac had ignored her at first, the introvert in him annoyed at being spoken to by a stranger. She didn't let him off that easily, though.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. That book you're reading, it's rubbish. String theory is too flawed. Books on it should be re-classified as fiction." She leaned forward, trying to catch his gaze.

He'd looked up and studied her face. She was gorgeous, with long dark hair swept up in a bun and beautiful brown eyes that sparkled with attitude and intelligence. And, she looked serious, which was kind of endearingly cute, so he decided to have some fun with her. "It's okay, I'm a flat earther," he lied.

She'd narrowed her eyes at him. "No, you're not."

"Aren't I?"

"Nope. If you were, you'd be funny looking. Every flat-earther is funny looking, but you're slightly cute looking, ergo, not a flat-earther." Leaning back in her chair and folding her arms, the look on her face suggested she was proud of her line of reasoning.

It was somewhere between Isaac feeling his face flush with embarrassment and getting lunch with Chel that day, that he

decided he wanted her as a friend. Three years later, they were more than just friends.

He sent her another message:

How's your pizza?

She replied with an angry face emoji.

He stuffed his phone in his pocket before heading downstairs to join his aunt, who was catching up on her YouTube subscriptions on the TV.

"Chel's coming over."

"Okay. Don't the Millers go out for pizza on Wednesdays?"

"Yeah, usually, but her dad decided he wanted to cook tonight, which she's a little salty about, "Isaac grinned, "being the pizza lover she is."

"Well, I know I'd rather have his chicken korma over pizza any day."

"Yeah, he should put *that* on a pizza," Isaac suggested.

Aunt Susan got up and headed for the kitchen. "Now *that* is a brilliant idea."

She poured herself a coffee and settled back on the couch to her YouTube. Isaac joined her there, staring at his phone. He cancelled all the notifications without reading any of them and idly lost himself on Insta while he waited. Thirty-five minutes flew by before there was a knock at the door.

He jumped up and opened the door. Chel's sparkling eyes greeted him and he leaned in and pressed a warm kiss to her lips. As he pulled back, his gaze swept over her, taking in the casual jeans and long-sleeve jumper. She always looked radiant, no matter what she wore. Stepping aside, he let her in.

Chel walked through and greeted Susan while Isaac grabbed beers from the fridge, and they headed up to Isaac's room to study. His desk was an old wooden dining table—perfect for two people to study, spread out books, and still have room for snacks.

Chel slid two books out of her bag and nudged his loose papers into a pile.

"Which of these are important?"

"The ones you just moved."

"All of them?"

"Potentially."

She lifted a receipt from the top.

"That one's supporting evidence," he said.

"For what?"

"The price of lunch."

She placed it carefully beside his elbow and sat down. Isaac pulled his notes towards him, pleased to have her there. Studying alone meant spending half the evening deciding he ought to start. With Chel opposite him, he usually got something

done, even if she interrupted to complain about a sentence she had just read.

Tonight, she made it through nearly a page.

"Listen to this."

He waited while she read a passage aloud, stopped, and read the beginning again.

"They've used a lot of words to say they don't know," she said.

"Maybe they're paid by the word."

"Then I've chosen the wrong career."

Isaac leaned over to look. "Isn't that what your next paragraph says?"

"Yes, but mine's much shorter."

She smiled at him, then looked down at his notes.

"Have you finished that part yet?"

"Nearly."

"You said nearly yesterday."

"It's a very large nearly."

Chel held out a hand. He passed her the page, and she read it without speaking. He watched her expression change as she reached the middle.

"That bit," she said, pointing.

"What about it?"

"You've told me the result. You haven't told me why you think it follows from the evidence."

"It seemed obvious when I wrote it."

"To you."

He read the lines again. He could see what she meant, which was annoying because he had liked that paragraph.

"You could have just said it was brilliant."

"I could. Then you'd hand it in."

He took the page back and drew a line through half a sentence.

For a few minutes they worked quietly. Downstairs, Susan laughed at something on the television. A car went past outside with music playing loud enough to be heard through the closed window. Chel tucked one foot underneath her and bent closer to her book.

Isaac looked up. "Was dinner actually that bad?"

She sighed. "Dinner was lovely."

"So what was the problem?"

"He asked what I wanted. I said pizza. Then he explained why I didn't want pizza."

"Convincingly?"

"Apparently not."

Isaac grinned.

"I don't mind him cooking," she continued. "He's good at it. It's when he decides he knows what I want better than I do."

"Have you considered telling him that?"

"I did. He gave me more rice."

Isaac laughed, and she tried to look offended before giving up.

"He was pleased with himself, too. I couldn't be horrible about it."

"You could be slightly horrible."

"I saved that for you."

She stretched across and caught his hand before he could pull it away. Her fingers were warm. He turned his hand over and held hers for a moment.

"How much do we have to do tonight?" she asked.

He looked at the work spread between them. "Honestly?"

"Preferably."

"Too much."

"Then one bit properly. We can start with yours."

She released his hand, picked up a pen, and pointed at the paragraph he had crossed out. He began again, this time explaining it aloud while she listened. Halfway through, he stopped.

"Oh."

"There it is."

He scribbled a note in the margin. Chel leaned back, pleased, and he realised they had settled in for a proper evening's work without making the necessary preparations.

"We need snacks!" Isaac announced as he set the beers down. "Be right back!"

He raced downstairs while Chel got comfortable at the desk. When Isaac returned with a bowl of chips, she'd opened a bottle and was pouring two glasses.

"What's with the box?" She gestured to the package with her glass.

"No idea, it arrived today from some law firm, but I don't feel like opening it yet." Isaac sat down on the chair next to Chel.

Before he could stop her, Chel grabbed it and shook it.

"I'll open it!" She ripped at the tape, the excitement in her eyes reminding Isaac of a child on Christmas Day. He grinned at her over the rim of his glass as he took a sip.

Isaac remained quiet as she opened the box. Inside was a letter sitting on top of some bubble wrap. Chel ripped the tape holding it together and carefully unfurled it, revealing a metallic device and some cables. She held it up to show him, quizzically raising an eyebrow. Isaac shrugged. The device resembled an old mechanical computer hard drive.

Chel handed him the letter and he read it aloud:

"Dear Isaac—that's me," he said, trying to be amusing.

Chel rewarded him with a forced grin.

"Please find enclosed an inheritance item as instructed by your mother, Philippa Harris, on June 15, 2021, to be delivered to you after your 21st birthday. We apologise for the lateness of the delivery. We wish you well, blah blah blah."

Isaac frowned, placed the letter down on his desk, and took the device from Chel, turning it over a few times to study it. "That's nice. But what the hell is it?"

It had USB sockets and a three-pin power socket that fit a cable with a strange disk-plug end. Another cable was an ultra-thick USB to USB. There was a piece of tape above one of the sockets with the word 'phone' written in permanent marker. On one side there was a power switch.

Isaac pulled out his phone and connected it to the device using the USB cable, then flipped the switch. His phone popped up a warning about a high power drain, which he dismissed; his phone could handle anything. Another notification appeared, asking him if he wanted to install the 'S-T app'. He tapped OK, and the installation began.

"Geeze, it says two minutes remaining. That's one huge app."

He noticed Chel's confused expression.

"My mother was a physicist, remember? So, this is probably a log of all her work or something that she wanted me to have to continue in her footsteps. It does kind of look like an old hard drive."

"Maybe there's a personal note in there from her," Chel suggested.

Isaac shrugged. He barely remembered his mother. Physics didn't interest him that much, other than knowing it was his

mother's specialty. He was certainly not the right person to follow in her footsteps, but maybe he could find someone at the university who would be interested.

He picked up the letter again. The paper was heavier than he expected, with the firm's name printed across the top. Everything about it was ordinary. An address, a reference number, an apology for being late. He read his mother's name twice.

Chel rested her glass on a clear patch of the desk.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. It's just strange."

"What is?"

"She arranged this. Before I was born."

He turned the letter over. The back was blank.

There were things of hers in the house, of course. Books Susan had kept, photographs, a few objects that had become so familiar he no longer thought about who had owned them first. This was different. Someone had put his name on it and waited for him to grow up.

Chel watched him fold the letter, then unfold it.

"You don't have to do anything with it tonight."

"You were pretty keen to open it."

"I thought it might be something embarrassing."

"More embarrassing than my childhood photos?"

"That was the hope."

He smiled, but it didn't stay.

"What if it's just work?"

"Then it's her work."

"I know. I just—" He stopped, trying to decide how to say it. "I'd like to hear her say something that wasn't about work."

Chel shifted her chair closer.

"Maybe that's in there."

"Maybe."

He knew enough about his mother to answer questions when people asked. Her name, what she had done, where she had worked. Susan had told him stories about her that had nothing to do with a laboratory. Yet he sometimes felt he knew more about the woman in other people's stories than the one who had been his mum.

"I've got this memory of her laughing," he said. "I can't remember why. I can't even remember where we were."

Chel said nothing.

"I used to think if I tried hard enough, the rest would come back. But then I'd start filling bits in. I'd put us in the kitchen because I knew the kitchen. After a while I couldn't tell which part was real."

"Do you still remember the laugh?"

"I think so."

"Then you can keep that part."

He looked at her.

"You don't have to get the whole scene back before it counts," she said.

Isaac rubbed a thumb along the fold in the letter, then reached across and touched her hand.

"I feel a bit stupid getting worked up over an old hard drive."

"Well, you're not, are you?"

"What?"

"Getting worked up over a hard drive."

He let out a breath and nodded.

The phone was still busy. He tilted it, checking that the cable wasn't being bent against the edge of the desk.

"I could take this down to Susan."

"Do you want to?"

"Once we know what's on it, maybe. Otherwise she'll have to sit here watching the little installation thing with us."

"She might enjoy that."

"She gets enough excitement from the internet dropping out."

Chel smiled and picked up her glass.

Isaac flattened the letter and set it somewhere it wouldn't get beer spilled on it. He was glad he had waited for her. Alone, he might have put everything back in the box and found a reason to leave it there for another day.

"Thanks," he said.

"For opening your mail?"

"For staying."

She glanced at her books. "I'm fairly sure I was invited."

"You were."

"Good. Because I haven't finished criticising your assignment yet."

Setting the phone and device down, they sipped beer as they waited. After what seemed like longer than two minutes, the screen activated with the message of the completed installation. Isaac picked it up, holding the attached device behind it, and tapped the 'Open' button. The screen changed to pale blue, and in red, the words:

Gravity Space-TimeFlux ModulationV. 28a
May 2021

It went blank for a second before the word 'CALCULATING' appeared. After a few more seconds, it displayed the current date and time with the seconds counting up and 'SIGNATURE READY TO RECORD' written under it.

Under that was a live circular static pattern with rapidly changing numbers circling it. Another heading, 'DESTINATION', claimed a portion at the bottom of the screen. There was already a time and date set there, 23/6/2021, 17:30:00.

Isaac tried to alter the date, but the field was disabled. The word 'CALCULATING' alternated between white and red. After several seconds, it was replaced with a green 'READY', and a new button appeared that simply said 'GO'.

"What's happening?" Chel said, leaning closer to see the screen.

He showed her the screen to get her opinion.

"What does that do?" She asked cautiously, noticing Isaac's serious expression.

Isaac's heart was beating hard now. He had an idea what this was. His mother had worked on quantum theories of space-time wormholes. She'd been quite the authority on them in her day, although he didn't believe her work ever came to anything before she died. But a part of him was screaming, 'What if... ?'

Chel turned the phone slightly so the light didn't reflect off it.

"There's no explanation?"

"Not one I can see."

"What about that bit?"

He followed her finger. More numbers changed beside the circular pattern. They watched them for a few seconds.

"No idea," he admitted.

The date looked odd on his new phone. He had seen old recordings and photographs labelled with years like that, but a date on a screen usually told him when something had happened. This one appeared to be offering him a choice.

"It might be a demonstration," he said.

"Of what?"

"What she was working on."

Chel looked from the screen to the metal box. "That doesn't really answer the question."

"No."

He let her have it for a moment. She examined the connections, careful not to pull either end of the cable, then held the phone up again. The green button remained where it was.

"Whatever this does, she couldn't have tested it on your phone," Chel said.

"It seems happy enough."

"Your phone also seemed happy when you downloaded that game and lost your essay."

"That was different."

"It was definitely memorable."

He took the device back, a little embarrassed by how badly he wanted her to tell him it was fine.

For a moment he imagined taking it downstairs. Susan would clear a place on the kitchen table. They would put the kettle on and work out whom to ask. Perhaps there would be an email address on the letter. It was a sensible thing to do, and tomorrow it would still be sensible.

But if this was something his mother had made specifically for him, would there ever be a moment when he felt ready to find out what it did?

"There's probably nothing to it," he said.

Chel looked at him. “You don't look like you think that.”

He couldn't quite meet her eyes.

“No,” he admitted.

Her expression softened. “Isaac, being from her doesn't mean you have to work it out right now.”

“I know.”

He did know. The trouble was that the sensible part of him had begun to sound a long way off.

Chel moved her glass away from the cables. It was such a small, practical action that it made him feel steadier. They were still in his room. Their books were still on the desk, and Susan was downstairs watching television. He could hear the faint click of her cup being set on its saucer.

He looked at Chel and tried to smile.

“Imagine if it actually worked.”

She didn't return the smile at once.

“I am,” she said.

His fingers tightened against the edge of the device. He glanced at the screen again. The button was still green.

He stood and backed away from the table, staring at Chel. Neither of them spoke.

Grinning, he held his finger over his phone with the device under it humming slightly. Looking up at Chel, he felt the device getting warmer, feeling the moment.

He bit his bottom lip and tapped ‘GO’.

June 23, 2021

One week until the demonstration, Philippa thought to herself as she twirled the emptied wineglass absent-mindedly between her fingers. Knowing she shouldn't be drinking, she felt a twinge of annoyance at herself, but still wasn't sure if she could cope *without* a glass now and then. Every time she tried, the walls of her house seemed to smother her.

One week to make sure the device was ready. She considered topping up her glass, but something stopped her. "How long have I been sitting here?" She glanced at the kitchen clock, and found that what she thought was a few long moments with her liquid crutch, had in fact been nearly an hour. Dragging herself off the stool, she wiped a disobedient tear away with the back of her hand and was about to place her glass in the sink, when she heard the thud. She stopped and listened. Another thud and a creak. Was that a door handle? From upstairs!? She scurried to her pantry.

Everything around Isaac froze and was tinted blue. A white vertical line appeared in mid-air in front of him, before it grew wider and rapidly began to envelop him. His jaw dropped, eyes wide open. Fascinated, with only a small side of fear, a cold electrical buzz enveloped his body. Strangely, it felt kind of natural, as if it was as perfectly normal and as familiar as goosebumps.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the whiteness receded to just a line again and then it was gone. The blue tinge dissipated, and he was left standing in his room, holding the device. But the whole room was different, Chel was gone, and the late afternoon sun struggled to stream in through gaps in the closed curtains.

"What the..."

He looked at the device. The 2021 destination date and time were now at the top under 'Current date/time', and the destination time below now read the date he'd come from, in 2044.

"No..." he whispered. He slowly left his room and crept downstairs. The whole house was different. He reached the kitchen, now looking old-fashioned. There was a smell of coffee, and music was coming from a strange device on the

counter. His heart was still pounding when he heard a voice behind him.

"Who the hell are you?!"

Isaac spun around. The source of the voice was an angry-looking woman with a baseball bat poised over her shoulder, ready to take him out.

"Well?!"

But Isaac couldn't speak. He instantly recognised the woman from old photos. They stood staring at each other when her eyes flicked down and she noticed the device in his hand.

"Where did you get that?" She nodded at the device.

"Uh, wait," Isaac said nervously as his brain began to catch up with what was happening. "Uh... are you Philippa Harris? I'm Isaac Harris... and I think I'm your son." He was talking fast now, at a higher pitch, unable to hide his fear.

"I was just up in my room," Isaac continued, his words spilling out in a nervous logorrhea, "and I got this today from some law firm, so I hooked it up, and it had an app, and I ran it and pressed go... and then there was a white flash, and everything changed. I think I just traveled to the past!"

Philippa dropped the baseball bat to her side, edged closer, and carefully took the device from him. She pulled out a chair and sat down, examining the device, her eyes occasionally darting to Isaac to make sure he wasn't moving. She found

the engraved code on the back, then went to her wall safe and retrieved an identical device, holding them next to each other as if comparing them.

"Well, well. It worked. What year is it?"

"Mum?"

"Yes. It seems that you are my future son, and it also seems I went through with my plans for you to get here. Your name's Isaac? I was considering naming you after Newton... looks like it stuck!"

Isaac's shoulders dropped as he took a deep breath and nodded with half a smile. Philippa swapped the bat for a bottle of wine from the kitchen and motioned to Isaac to have a seat. Neither spoke as she poured a glass from the other side of the island counter and offered him one, which he gladly accepted. She took a sip, staring at him intently while thinking.

Her lips curved into a smile. "I had a son! It looks like you turned out okay. What year is it for you?"

"2044? My aunt Susan raised me in this house since I was four."

Philippa's smile faded. "This means one thing: I die." Her eyes glazed over as she took a sip of her wine, staring at a spot on the wall above Isaac's head.

Isaac awkwardly stared at his wineglass.

Her eyes finally came back into focus on Isaac's face. "Well?"

"Hm?"

"I'm dead, right? In your time?"

Isaac cleared his throat, then took a sip of his drink. He cleared his throat again. "Uh, yeah."

There was an awkward silence before Isaac asked what had been on his mind since opening the package. "Why did you do it?"

Philippa appeared lost in thought, but at Isaac's comment, she came back to the present. "Do what?"

"You arranged to have this device sent to me in the future, but why?"

She sighed, one eyebrow raised briefly. "In one week, we will demonstrate the device publicly. Not this one,"—She motioned to the one Isaac brought with him—"another one, at the lab. For the first time, I plan on testing it on myself. I haven't told my assistant because he'd probably talk me out of it. But I *need* to do it; I'm tired of waiting."

Philippa took a sip of wine before continuing. "I take risks, but that's how I progress so fast. But I do plan for all eventualities, so, calculated risks. That's the key. So, I thought, in case anything goes wrong, I'll arrange to have this copy sent to you or my sister—your aunt Susan—when you're older."

Isaac thought for a second. "But, why? Why send it to me?"

"Because, Isaac, "She leaned in, speaking softly now. Tears started to burn her eyes as she looked into what could have

been his father's eyes. "I wanted to make sure I got a chance to know you."

Isaac smiled and took a sip from his glass, trying to hide his own tears. Philippa went to where he was sitting and motioned for a hug. Isaac stood up and felt like he was about to cry as the realisation that he was with his mum again hit him. He hugged her for a long time.

He had expected something to come back to him. A smell, perhaps, or the way she held him. Something that would prove that the mother he had missed and the woman standing here were the same person.

Instead, she was a stranger who was hugging him very tightly, and somehow that was worse.

"Sorry," he said against her shoulder.

"For what?"

He didn't know. For being upset, maybe. For turning up with news like this. For all the questions he'd imagined asking her and now couldn't remember.

"I thought I'd know what to say."

Philippa pulled back a little, keeping her hands on his arms. "Well, that makes two of us."

She looked him over again, almost laughing. He was taller than she was. Her gaze stopped on the faint marks where his jacket cuffs had pressed into his wrists, then travelled back to

his face. She seemed to be checking small things, as if they might be easier to understand than the whole of him.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

Isaac let out a laugh that caught halfway through. "That's such a mum thing to ask."

"Is it? Good. I've had very little practice."

"Dinner, actually. Before I left. Quite a long time from now."

"Oh." She glanced at the kitchen clock. "This is going to take some getting used to."

He didn't let go of her straight away. He was thinking about the photographs Susan kept, and how he had looked at them often enough to know his mother's face without knowing how it moved. She frowned more than the photographs suggested. And she didn't wait politely for an answer when she thought she could work it out herself. Already there were things about her he hadn't known an hour ago.

"Susan looked after you?" she asked quietly.

He nodded.

"Properly?"

"Yeah. Properly."

"Good." Philippa blinked hard, then gave his arms a small squeeze. "That's good."

He wanted to tell her that Susan had done more than look after him. There had been school lunches and lost jumpers,

arguments over homework, and evenings when she'd sat beside his bed long after he'd pretended to fall asleep. He could tell her all that later. For now, he was glad that the answer had eased something in her face.

Eventually, she stepped back, and he found himself looking at her the way he had looked at those photographs.

"You look just like your photos," he said, wiping away a tear. "I can't believe it—I feel like I'm in some dream."

Philippa smiled back. "And you definitely have your dad's eyes."

"Wait," Isaac said, blotting his eyes and composing himself. "You said this means you die, which I know you did; you died when I was four, so is that me in there?" He motioned to her bump.

"I assume so, I have pretty much settled on the name Isaac, and he, you are due in November."

"That's so weird. "Isaac grinned as he looked at her bump. "November 15, 2021."

"Hold up, you said you were four when I died?"

"Yeah."

"So I don't die in the experiment next week..." She whispered, almost to herself.

Isaac tilted his head at her. This whole encounter was blowing his mind. As if it wasn't enough he'd travelled back through time and met his mother, he'd also revealed to her when she

would die and virtually met his own in-utero self. He suddenly felt dizzy and sat back down. "So... can we now prevent your death?"

"Maybe," she said thoughtfully. "But we'd need to know how and when I died exactly. And in doing so, we'd create a paradox which would cause space-time to twist to compensate."

"Hmm," Isaac looked away, "I was never told the exact details of your death. Twist?"

Philippa sat down across from him. "If we save my life, it will create an alternate timeline, one in which you never receive the device and come back to help save my life. If it works, then the fact that you're here now means the two realities twisted at some point in the future to allow both events to happen despite each other. I need to do more research on that side of things."

"Wild," Isaac shook his head slightly, now relaxed and enjoying being here. "You have to tell me—how does the device work exactly?"

Philippa lit up excitedly, "I'm glad you asked! Okay, reality, or space-time, has and always will exist. Its structure is like foam, made of infinite slices. Every second of time covers many thousands of those slices. Time behaves like a 'flux' around life, so we don't stick at one slice but instead, flow through reality and experience time."

Isaac leaned forward, fascinated.

"My device," Philippa continued, "produces a bubble of anti-time by reversing the time-flux field around you, causing you to slip out of time's grasp, and you're then experiencing just one single slice of reality."

She was speaking excitedly now, her passion for her work pouring out. "For you in the bubble, it appears as if time has stopped all around you, but in fact, it's you who has stopped! To everyone else, you vanished, left behind at a previous slice of reality."

"Like hidden outside of time..." Isaac said.

"Precisely! The device then inflates the nearest hole in the foam—a wormhole—to outside of reality itself. However, because the universe can't allow anything outside of reality, you are instantly transported back in if you go through it! But here is the fun part: Where you re-enter, will be at the slice of reality that matches your destination time!"

Isaac looked puzzled, "But how do you end up at the right time, or 'slice'?"

"It's simple: Before you go through, the anti-time bubble adjusts your current time signature to be the one you *would* have if you were in your destination time!"

Philippa raised her palms up in a sort of shrug, looking triumphant, as if she had just pointed out the obvious. She sipped her drink and for a second wondered if her future son

was able to grasp the concept, if he had inherited her intelligence, and her love of science to go with it.

"Pfft, yeah, 'simple'." Isaac gestured dismissively as if understanding everything Philippa had said. He did kind of understand it, but 'simple' wasn't the word he'd use.

"Yes." Philippa continued, "you automatically re-enter at the point that matches the time you set. Because, where else could you go?"

Isaac turned his free palm upwards in a dismissive gesture and rolled his eyes, as if to agree it was obvious that you couldn't go anywhere else.

"Then the device shuts down, and the bubble collapses. Time flux reverses back to normal, and you're caught up in the flow of time again."

Isaac had to process this for a moment. He slowly nodded as his eyes looked around the table while deep in thought, "So to Chel—my girlfriend—I just vanished?"

"Yes," Philippa smiled at the mention of a girlfriend, realising there was a lot she'd love to learn about him. "But don't worry, you can easily return to the moment right after you left."

"Of course... Wow. I can't believe you figured all this out. It's... crazy. But brilliant. And I get what you mean about time signatures too. I've always felt that each second has a different

feeling to it and sometimes I feel it changing through me when I relax enough."

"Ok... that's interesting." Philippa raised one eyebrow before continuing. "It was many years of mathematics, experiments, and failures. Plus your father said something once which strangely put me on the right path. I admit I was a little obsessed for a while, but it was life-changing when I discovered it."

Philippa let out a sigh. "I could never use the device outside of the lab because there is nothing small and portable that could perform the calculations fast enough *and* have the power to handle the device drain. It takes what I assume to be a quantum-based power supply from your time?" She nodded towards his phone on the counter.

"Yeah, my phone." He held it up to show her. "Graphene super-cap battery. Quantum-based storage, though... Wait! That's it! My phone likely downloaded all the university logs and events of the past one hundred years. Maybe what happened to you is recorded!"

Isaac disconnected his phone from the device, opened the 'Google Now' app and searched for his mother's name.

233 Results

Philippa leaned closer. "You've never looked it up?"

He shook his head. "Susan said there'd been an accident at the university. I was four. That was enough."

"But later?"

"She offered to tell me more." He rubbed his thumb along the edge of the phone. "I kept saying 'not yet'."

Philippa waited.

"After a while, she stopped asking." He looked down at the results. "I could've searched. I just... every time I thought about it, I found something else to do."

She rested her hand on his arm.

He glanced at her hand, then her face. "But you're here now. Maybe I can do something."

He added 'Death' to the search.

3 Results

His thumb hovered over the first one before he tapped it.

"Okay, so it says you were killed during a quantum physics demonstration of a space-time manipulation device on July 1, 2021, due to a hardware power surge..."

Philippa blinked at him. "July 1?"

"Yeah, it says the power supply was tampered with... hah, it mentions Mr Arjun Miller here, Chel's dad. He was your assistant? Wait! This is next week... How is that possible? If you die next week, I wouldn't have been born..." Isaac's words trailed off as he looked at her.

Philippa's gaze darted around as she bit her bottom lip, thinking about what he just read. She stopped and looked at Isaac. "It's possible... fascinating."

"How??" Isaac frowned.

Philippa got up and started pacing. "What I said before; you would be from a slightly different reality. An alternate universe. One in which the event of next week happened much later. One which was probably created from the demonstration going wrong. It's like whatever happens during the demonstration sends a ripple through time, and creates a duplicate reality at some point, which twists with this one for a while. It's probable, however, that realities would merge again sometime afterwards. Timelines with identical pasts likely could."

"Wild," Isaac said again, "so, what now?"

"Now, we have another drink, order some food, and enjoy the evening! I'd love to hear all about you, and then we'll try to figure out a plan." Philippa's excitement was growing. "We have one week to fix this, I'm no more prepared for my demonstration failing than I am for my death!"

She topped up their glasses "Now then, let's bring up everything available on the event of July 1 and the weeks around it."

Isaac turned the phone so they could both see it. Philippa leaned across him, then stopped and fetched her glasses from beside the coffee machine.

"Right. Let's have a proper look."

The article was short. He read it twice, hoping it might somehow say something different the second time. The date remained the same. So did his mother's name.

Philippa took a notepad from a drawer and wrote the date at the top. Beneath it she added a few words, paused, then drew a line through them.

"What?" Isaac asked.

"I wrote 'accident'. We don't know enough to call it that yet."

He looked back at the screen. Arjun Miller. It was hard to match the name in the article with the man who insisted there was always enough food for one more person at his table.

"Chel's dad didn't do this."

Philippa glanced at him.

"Not deliberately," Isaac added.

"You know him well?"

"Pretty well. He tells terrible jokes. He takes ages to explain things, even when you've already got it. If something breaks, he wants to fix it himself, which usually means nobody else can use it for a week."

She gave him a brief smile. "Yes. That sounds like Arjun."

"So you know what I mean."

"I do. But I also know he understands that power supply better than anyone."

"Including you?"

"Including me." She tapped the screen with the end of her pen. "That doesn't tell us why it happened."

Isaac searched again, adding the university's name. More results appeared, most of them unrelated. He scrolled past an old staff listing and stopped at another mention of the demonstration, but it linked back to information they'd already seen. He tried opening a link that hadn't been stored on the phone. A small symbol turned for a while before an error message appeared.

"Can't you connect it to my Wi-Fi?"

"Probably. But your internet hasn't got the future on it."

Philippa put the pen down. "Of course. Sorry."

He smiled despite himself. It was reassuring to discover she could overlook something obvious too.

The phone had kept a great deal of information he'd never asked for. Finding one useful thing in it was another matter. Every promising title made him sit up, only to leave him reading the same few facts in different words. He began searching for photographs, but Philippa put her hand over the screen.

"Enough for a minute."

"There could be something we've missed."

"There could. We can come back to it."

She was looking at him rather than the phone. He realised his hands were cold.

"It's weird," he said. "I've known you died for most of my life. Now I'm sitting beside you, trying to find out about it."

Philippa drew the phone gently out of his hand and placed it face down.

"I'm here," she said.

"For now."

She didn't answer immediately. He was grateful she didn't tell him everything would be fine.

"For now," she agreed. "And I'm hungry."

They ordered more food than either of them needed. Philippa couldn't decide, and Isaac found himself agreeing to things simply because she suggested them. He had already eaten one dinner, but it felt wrong to refuse the first meal his mother had ever ordered for him. Or the first he remembered, anyway.

While they waited, she cleared a space at the counter. Isaac picked up their glasses and followed her to the sink, then stopped with his free hand on a cupboard handle.

"What are you looking for?"

"Plates."

"Other side."

"Right." He opened the cupboard she indicated. "They live over here in my time."

"Well, whoever moved them was wrong."

"Susan."

"Naturally."

He laughed, and she looked pleased with herself.

The house was becoming more unsettling now that he'd stopped being frightened of it. He knew the distance between the counter and the fridge, where the floor creaked, and how the light fell through the window. But there was a chair where Susan kept a small table. The curtains were wrong. A familiar bookshelf held unfamiliar books, and a little mark near the kitchen doorway that had always been there wasn't there yet.

He ran his thumb over the unmarked paint.

"What is it?" Philippa asked.

"Nothing. Just something I remember."

She watched him for a moment, then returned to clearing the counter. He appreciated that too.

When the doorbell rang, Isaac automatically went towards it. Philippa caught up with him, holding her purse.

"I'll get this one," Philippa said, holding up her purse.

"I was only going to open the door."

"Good. I'm not sure your cards would work too well here."

She took the bags from the delivery driver, chatting about the weather while Isaac stood a little behind her. The driver glanced at him, then back at Philippa, and wished them a good evening. Nothing unusual. A woman buying dinner and a young man waiting in the hall.

Isaac wondered what the driver would say if he knew.

Back in the kitchen, Philippa opened cartons while Isaac set out plates. She stepped aside when the cutlery drawer stuck, and he gave it the small sideways pull that always worked. She noticed, but didn't comment.

They ate standing up at first, too busy making room for everything. Then Philippa fetched stools and insisted that he sit.

"So. University?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Am I really going to have to ask every question?"

He grinned. "Probably."

She shook her head and reached for another carton.

At first, he chose the things that sounded worth telling her. University, his friends, Chel. He tried to make his life seem reasonably organised, skipping over the assignments he left too late and the mornings he slept through an alarm. It was only when Philippa asked whether he actually liked what he was doing that he stopped trying to sound impressive.

"Most of it," he said. "Some days I wonder if everyone else knows something I don't."

"They probably wonder that too."

"Did you?"

"Occasionally."

He looked at her.

"Frequently," she admitted. "I got better at hiding it."

"That sounds more useful than studying."

"Don't quote me on that."

He told her about a presentation that had gone wrong when he'd lost his place, and about Chel helping him practise afterwards by interrupting with deliberately awkward questions. Philippa laughed at that. Then she wanted to know more about Chel, and he discovered how difficult it was to describe someone when every answer seemed to give away how much he liked her.

"She's clever," he said.

"You mentioned that."

"And funny."

"That too."

"You'd like her."

Philippa smiled at her plate. "I'm looking forward to finding out."

That quiet assumption of a future caught him off guard. He busied himself with the food for a moment.

She asked about Susan next. He told her about the garden, and how his aunt complained that he never noticed it until she sent him out to help. About the meals she made too much of, just in case. He was halfway through explaining her cur-

rent disagreement with the internet provider when he realised Philippa had stopped eating.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's strange, hearing about her being older."

"She'd hate you saying that."

"Then you'd better not tell her."

He hesitated. "She was really good to me."

"I'm glad."

"I don't want you to think I had a terrible life."

Philippa laid her fork down carefully.

"I didn't think that."

"I missed you. I mean, I missed having you. But Susan was there."

Philippa reached across the counter and put her hand over his.

"Isaac, you don't have to be unhappy to prove you missed me."

He stared at their hands for a moment, then nodded.

After that, it became easier to talk. He told her smaller things, which she seemed to enjoy just as much. How Susan still reminded him to take a jacket. How he could never find anything once he'd tidied his room. The terrible film he and Chel had watched because neither wanted to admit they'd lost interest twenty minutes into it.

Philippa offered a few stories about Susan in return, carefully stopping herself once or twice with a grin that made him curious.

"Go on."

"No. Your aunt has to maintain some authority."

"She manages."

"I'm sure she does."

He listened to his mother laugh and tried to remember the sound. That was harder than it should have been. The moment he concentrated on it, she stopped, and he had to wait for it to happen again.

Later, while he was putting lids on the cartons, Philippa asked what he remembered of her.

He kept working for a few seconds.

"Not much," he said. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologise."

"Some things. But I don't always know if they're memories, or things Susan told me."

Philippa nodded slowly.

"There's one with a book. I remember sitting beside you, but I can't remember the story." He looked around at the shelves. "Might still be here somewhere. Or maybe it isn't yet."

"You were four," she said. "That's very young."

"Yeah. People keep telling me."

She looked down. "Sorry."

He glanced at her and smiled a little. "You don't need to apologise."

She returned the smile, although hers didn't last long.

"I wish I could tell you more," he said.

"You've told me plenty."

She carried the cartons to the fridge, taking longer than she needed to rearrange the shelves. He let her. She moved the same carton from one shelf to another, then back again. He began gathering the plates.

When she turned around, he held out a clean tea towel.

"I can dry."

"Good. You can earn your dinner."

They washed up together, arguing mildly over whether a container was worth keeping. Isaac wanted to throw it away. Philippa rinsed it and put it in the cupboard.

"Useful size," she said.

"Susan does that."

"Clearly she learnt something from me."

***

By the time they returned to the phone, the kitchen windows had become dark mirrors. Philippa pulled the notepad between them and read what she had written earlier.

"We need to separate what we know from what we think," she said.

Isaac leaned on the counter. "We know you shouldn't do the demonstration."

She looked up.

"Come on. That's the obvious one."

"It's an option."

"You say that like it's a bad one."

"No. I say it because we've got a report of something that hasn't happened here yet, and you remember something different." She turned the notepad towards him. "If I simply cancel, what happens to you?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

He looked at the dates. "But doing it could be worse."

"Yes."

That stopped him. He'd expected an argument, something complicated that would make his objection seem silly.

Philippa rubbed at the mark her glasses had left on her nose. "I don't want to die, Isaac. I'm not treating this as an interesting problem in a textbook."

"You looked pretty excited before."

"I was. You're sitting in my kitchen."

He looked away, chastened.

She let him think for a moment before continuing. "I'm also frightened. But we've got time to find out more before I make that decision."

"A week."

"Then let's use it."

He nodded reluctantly and brought the article back up.

They read it again, more slowly. Philippa copied the references to the power supply, then asked him to show her exactly what the phone had done when he connected it to the device. He described the warning and the installation, and how he'd dismissed the high power drain message.

Her eyebrows rose.

"What?"

"You didn't wonder why it needed so much power?"

"I wondered. Then it worked."

"That's not quite the same as understanding it."

"I'm noticing a family resemblance."

She gave him a look, but there was a smile behind it.

The phone was ordinary to him. He was used to charging it and forgetting about it. Watching Philippa turn it over, reading the small details on its screen as if they were remarkable, made him feel oddly protective of it. She asked about its storage, its battery, and how hot it normally became. Some of the answers he knew. Others he had to look up.

"You can say you don't know," she told him after his third attempt to explain something he clearly didn't understand.

"You can too."

"Fair point."

They left the device switched off. Philippa set it beside the phone and rested her fingertips on its scratched casing.

"No more pressing buttons to see what they do," she said.

"Including you?"

She looked at him, then nodded. "Including me."

He drew the phone away from his elbow and laid it beside the notepad.

Before they finished, Philippa went back to Arjun's name on the page. Isaac found himself defending him again, this time more quietly.

"If you ask him straight out, he might think you've gone mad."

"He's thought that before."

"You'd have to tell him where the report came from."

"Yes." She clicked her pen and thought for a while. "I'd like to know what he really thinks about the project without him worrying about what I want to hear."

"Doesn't he tell you?"

"Usually. I don't always make it easy."

Isaac could believe that. He resisted saying so.

Philippa noticed anyway. "You've only known me a few hours."

"Apparently I'm a quick learner."

She laughed, then became thoughtful again. The unanswered questions were still there, but she closed the notepad.

Upstairs, she showed him where to find spare bedding. The room he knew as his own had nowhere sensible to put the device, so he set it on the floor beside the bed, with the phone disconnected next to it.

Philippa lingered at the doorway.

"You all right?"

He nodded. Then, because it seemed silly to pretend, he shook his head.

"Mostly."

"Me too."

He wanted to ask her to stay a little longer, but she was tired, and he had already kept her talking for hours.

"Night, Mum."

She smiled at the word as if he had given her something.

"Night, Isaac."

After she left, he lay awake looking towards the window. Somewhere beyond it, the university stood almost exactly where he knew it. Chel wouldn't be waiting for a message. Susan wouldn't be wondering why he was still awake. None of them knew he was here.

From downstairs came the sound of a cupboard closing, then the tap running briefly. Small sounds he had never thought to miss.

He listened until the house went quiet.

June 28, 2021

Arjun whistled quietly to himself as he drove. The sun glinted rhythmically on his face through the trees lining the streets of Riverton. He reflected on how fortunate he was right now, working with a genius scientist and being a major part of a breakthrough in manipulating space-time. Working under Philippa was a fantastic opportunity that would help his plan to become a physics professor and eventually teach at the university. He was also very protective of what they'd achieved together in the last few years.

Turning onto the road that led to the University, his mind drifted to the day before, when Philippa started with the whole outside funding thing. '*Arjun, I'd like you to meet Mr Jones, the Investor I was telling you about last week*'. Her words had been repeating in his head.

He'd seen too many discoveries bought and used the wrong way, either by the military or private enterprise with more money than sense. He knew it was inevitable, but he didn't

have to like it. But who was he to argue? It was Philippa's project. A familiar feeling of helplessness nagged his thoughts.

Stray gravel crunched under his wheels as Arjun turned onto the campus grounds and parked in the undercover carpark. Deep in thought, he pulled up the collar of his coat against the biting breeze as crispy brown leaves swirled around him, and made his way towards the elevator. He checked his watch as he entered and rode up to the foyer, then made his way to the lab to meet with the investor, Mr Isaac Jones. Isaac Jones was waiting in the row of chairs just outside the lab. Arjun couldn't help but raise an eyebrow as he held out his hand to Isaac—Philippa had set up the meeting, but she hadn't warned him just how young Mr Jones was.

"Mr Jones." Arjun shook his hand, then glanced at the empty chair beside him. "Is anyone joining you?"

"No, just me."

"Right. Of course."

Isaac stood, remembering too late to button the borrowed coat Philippa had found for him. He decided to leave it. Doing it now would make him look as if he had only just remembered.

Arjun opened the lab door and held it for him. "Philippa said to show you what we have been doing. She is busy this morning, but I can answer most questions."

"Good. Thanks, Mr Miller."

"Arjun, please."

"Right. Arjun."

That was going to take some getting used to. The man leading him across the room was missing a few lines around his eyes, and quite a lot of grey hair. Otherwise, even his walk was familiar. Isaac nearly asked whether he had always worked in this building, then stopped himself. There was no reason for an investor to be interested in that.

The lab was much tidier than Isaac expected. He had imagined loose wires everywhere and things balanced on other things. There were wires, but most disappeared into neatly labelled bundles. A row of small objects sat on a tray beside the covered device.

Arjun noticed him looking. "Our test subjects. Very cooperative. They never complain."

Isaac smiled. "Good working conditions?"

"Excellent. They get to leave early."

The pleased look that followed was so familiar that Isaac almost laughed before the joke had properly registered. Chel would have rolled her eyes. Her father would then have explained the joke, which usually made it worse.

Arjun pulled the cover away. Isaac kept his expression politely interested, hoping it looked like the first time he had seen one.

"This is the device itself. Most of the work, as you can imagine, happens where you cannot see it."

"And you're responsible for the power supply?"

"Among other things." Arjun's smile narrowed a little. "Philippa developed the theory. Making the equipment behave consistently has been a joint effort."

"Sure. That's what I meant."

Isaac put his hands in his pockets to stop himself fidgeting. He had been in the room less than a minute and had already managed to make the man sound defensive.

"Please, sit." Arjun pulled out a chair. "Before we begin, perhaps you could tell me a little about your interest in the project?"

"Well, it's time travel."

"Yes."

"That's fairly interesting."

Arjun waited.

"I mean, the possibilities. What it could become." Isaac sat down. "Philippa thought it would be useful for us to talk."

"She did mention that."

There was a pause. Isaac wished he had asked his mother for something more convincing than looking interested and asking questions. He was interested, but not for any reason he could share.

"What would you want to see happen with it?" he asked.

Arjun seemed to welcome the question. He sat opposite him, leaning forwards, and began describing the work still to be done. Independent measurements. Tests that could be repeated reliably by other researchers. A better understanding of what happened between leaving one time and entering another.

As he talked, the stiffness left his voice. He turned his chair to show Isaac a series of results on a screen, then fetched a notebook to explain why one set mattered more than the others. Isaac understood enough to follow, although he suspected he was supposed to be asking about money by now.

"You explain it well," Isaac said.

"I hope so. I would like to teach one day."

"You'd be good at it."

Arjun smiled, apparently pleased. "There is a difference between knowing something and helping someone else understand it. Philippa can see an answer before I have finished asking the question. I need to go through the steps. That can be useful when you are teaching."

"Or when the person listening has no idea what you're talking about."

"Also useful."

Isaac turned back to a page he had skimmed. Arjun had squeezed notes around the diagrams, then continued them in the margin. Isaac leaned closer.

"Sorry. Could you go through this bit again?"

Arjun reached for a pencil and took him back through the diagram, tapping each figure as he explained.

"I'd like to hear about the next steps," Isaac said.

He did not ask about money.

"So Thursday isn't the end of it," he said.

Arjun looked at him. "The end? No. Thursday is when everyone else finds out it has begun."

"And then there'll be people wanting to get involved."

"I imagine so."

"People wanting to use it."

Arjun closed the notebook. "That is a different matter."

Isaac glanced towards the power unit under the bench. "Wouldn't they need you and Philippa to make it work?"

"At present, yes. That doesn't mean we should rush to make it convenient for them."

"You'd still be part of it, though."

"Would we?"

Isaac had meant it as reassurance. He recognised the look Arjun gave him from dinners at Chel's house, usually when Isaac had offered an opinion without thinking it through.

"I don't see why you wouldn't," Isaac said.

"Have you worked with researchers before, Mr Jones?"

"Not like this." That was at least true.

"Then perhaps you haven't seen how quickly the people who make a discovery can lose their say in what happens to it."

Isaac shifted in his chair. "I'm not suggesting anyone takes it away from you."

"Good."

Arjun got up to put the notebook back. Isaac watched him straighten it against the edge of a shelf. He felt he had missed something, but wasn't sure what.

"Could I see how it works?" he asked.

"I can show you the preparations. Philippa and I carry out the actual tests together."

"Of course."

Arjun demonstrated the connections and brought up the readings from a previous test. He was careful, checking the state of each switch before touching a cable. When Isaac leaned closer, Arjun moved the tray so he could see properly.

Isaac moved his sleeve away from a cable before Arjun had to ask. He waited until Arjun had finished pointing out one of Philippa's calculations.

"And if the supply stops working?" Isaac asked.

"We have protection against faults."

"But what if it doesn't stop completely? What if it just isn't doing what it should?"

Arjun looked up from the screen. "Is there a particular concern you have?"

"No. Just wondering how much more testing it needs."

"More testing is always useful. We've done a great deal already."

"I get that. It's just, if this goes well, people might want something they can use straight away."

"Then those people would have to wait."

"Yeah. Of course."

Isaac studied the results again, mostly to avoid looking at him. He had meant to find out whether a failure could happen accidentally. Instead, he seemed to be arguing for the thing Arjun disliked.

"What would you do with it?" Arjun asked.

"Me?"

"Yes. If we handed it to you today."

Isaac looked at the grey box. "See someone."

The answer came too quickly. He considered adding something about historical research, but Arjun's expression had softened.

"Someone who isn't here anymore?"

Isaac nodded.

"I understand." Arjun lowered his eyes to the device. "I think most people would have someone."

For a few seconds, neither spoke.

"Mr Miller, I—"

Arjun looked up.

Isaac opened his mouth again, then rubbed his palms on his trousers. The borrowed coat had fallen open. He caught its edges and pulled them together.

"It must mean a lot to her," he said instead. "All this work."

"It does."

"I don't want her to lose it."

"Neither do I."

Arjun's reply was quiet enough to make Isaac look at him. The earlier excitement had gone. Isaac wondered whether he had made him think about someone of his own.

He tried a different question, one about how the measurements were recorded. Arjun explained, and soon they were talking easily again. By the time they reached the lab door, Isaac felt sure the meeting had gone better than its awkward start suggested.

"Thank you," he said. "You've been very helpful."

"You're welcome. I hope I've made it clear how much still needs to be understood."

"Definitely. I'll talk to Philippa."

Arjun nodded, though Isaac couldn't decide whether he looked relieved.

They shook hands again. Isaac nearly told him to say hello to Chel, caught himself, and pretended the interrupted word had been a cough.

"Cold weather," he said.

"Yes. Take care of yourself."

Arjun watched him head towards the lifts before going back inside. He stood beside the uncovered device for a while, thinking about the young man's questions. Then he fetched the notebook again and opened it to the power supply results.

Isaac made it back to Philippa's home later that evening and went through to the kitchen where dinner was being made.

"Well, that was weird, hanging out with a young Mr Miller," he said. "I've had dinner at his house with his daughter Chel many times, so it was difficult to keep in mind that he doesn't know me."

"I can imagine." Philippa handed Isaac a beer bottle and a glass. "I know we agreed it's a long shot, but he's the only one that would know *how* to make the experiment fail. As much as I hope it's not true."

Isaac twisted the lid off his beer bottle. "Well, I didn't find anything out. If anything, he seemed genuinely excited by the work. I really don't think he'd do anything malicious. I know him—well, future him—but still, the Mr Miller I know wouldn't hurt a fly. He's kind, generous, and pretty funny." He tilted his glass and poured the beer.

"Funny, eh?" Philippa asked, amused at the thought. "He's quite brilliant too."

They sat in silence while Philippa sliced some cheese, placed it on a cracker, added a red grape to the top then popped the whole thing in her mouth.

"Remember," she said, covering her mouth, "he doesn't know I plan on using the device on myself at the demonstration, so it's safe to say he didn't... won't... set out to hurt me. But if it was him, I want to know why."

"Okay," Isaac idly rotated his now half-empty glass on the table and looked up at his mother. "So what do you want to do?"

"That's easy," she grinned, before taking a long sip of her sparkling water.

"We stop asking whether the whole thing works," she said. "We know it does. You are sitting in my kitchen."

"That's a pretty good result."

"One of my better ones." She put down her glass. "We look at what was different when it worked for you."

Isaac followed her gaze to his phone, lying next to the inherited device at the other end of the counter.

"That?"

"Among other things. We compare everything before deciding."

"And if we find nothing?"

"Then we keep looking."

She said it simply, as if the next few days could stretch to whatever length she needed. Isaac wished he found it as reassuring as she seemed to.

By the following evening, a corner of the dining table had become a smaller version of the lab. Philippa had brought home measuring equipment, leads, and several pages of notes she insisted on keeping in a particular order. Isaac had been given the important job of not putting his drink on them.

"I have a coaster," he reminded her when she checked again.

"You had one last time too."

"It was condensation."

"It was wet."

She moved the nearest page out of reach and returned to the readings.

They had started with the connectors, comparing the device Isaac had inherited with its younger counterpart. Then Philippa had checked the app and the available records of his journey. She worked slowly, repeating measurements that Isaac thought they had already finished.

"Is that bad?" he asked when she frowned.

"No."

"You keep doing the face."

"What face?"

He tried to demonstrate. She watched him for a second, then burst out laughing.

"I don't do that."

"You just did it again."

"I'm thinking. You should try it."

He grinned and went to refill her water. When he came back, she was still studying the figures, but the amusement remained at the corners of her mouth.

That was becoming familiar now. Being useful in small ways. Knowing which cupboard held the glasses, knowing she would forget to eat if he didn't interrupt. He tried not to think about how little time he had left to get used to it.

Philippa tapped the screen. "Your phone is doing an impressive job."

"I told you."

"You told me it could handle anything. That isn't a measurement."

"It's been right so far."

"So have people who cross roads without looking."

She turned the display towards him and showed him two sets of readings. He needed her to explain most of the differences, but he understood the point. His phone had supplied

what the device needed without the separate equipment in the lab.

"That's how it was designed?" he asked.

"In part. I wanted it portable. Wanting something and having a suitable power source are different things."

"Until someone brings you one."

"Until someone brings me one." She smiled at him. "Twenty-odd years of progress in something people carry around in their pockets. Arjun would love this."

Isaac looked down at the phone. "We could show him."

Philippa's smile faded slightly. "I know."

She disconnected a lead and placed it carefully beside the others.

"I hate having to suspect him," she said. "Especially after what you've told me."

"Then tell him what's going to happen. Let him help us."

"And if he hasn't done anything? We would be asking him to defend himself against an event that hasn't happened yet."

"We already are, kind of."

She looked at him for a moment before nodding. "Yes. We are."

Isaac took a breath, then let it out. He looked from her to the disconnected lead.

"We don't need to prove it was him to look at the supply," Isaac said.

"Exactly."

"So we can deal with a possible fault without blaming anyone."

"That's the idea."

She drew another box on the page and connected it to the others. Isaac watched her pencil stop above the paper.

"But," she added, "we mustn't decide the supply was responsible just because it's the part we can do something about."

He glanced at the devices. Until that moment, he had been doing precisely that.

On Wednesday night, Philippa finally put the notes down and announced that she was finished for the evening. Isaac had heard this twice already, so he waited before clearing the table.

She noticed. "I mean it this time."

"Good. I was going to start hiding things."

He helped her pack the leads, following her instructions about which ones needed to stay together. Nothing had travelled through time during their tests. Isaac was glad of that. He hadn't liked the idea of using either of them to find out whether the readings were right.

"We could still postpone," he said.

Philippa laid her hand on the closed notebook. "We could."

"I'm serious."

"So am I." She pulled out a chair and sat again. "But postponing doesn't explain why the event happened years later in your life. It may only move it. I'd rather understand what we can change than spend the rest of my life waiting for something I avoided."

"I'd rather you had the rest of your life."

Her expression softened. "So would I."

Isaac sat opposite her. He hadn't meant the words to sound like an accusation. Now that they were out, he was glad he had said them.

"Tomorrow isn't just a demonstration to me," he said.

"I know."

"You keep talking about what you'll show everyone. I keep thinking about what happens if it doesn't work."

She reached across the table and put her hand over his. "I've thought about that too. More than you might think."

He nodded, looking at their hands.

"I can't promise we've explained everything," she said. "I can promise I'm taking you seriously."

"Okay."

They sat quietly for a while. Then she released his hand and pushed the notebook away.

"Right. Food. And a conversation that has nothing to do with time travel."

"What would you like to know?"

"Something embarrassing."

"About me?"

"Of course. I have years to catch up on."

Isaac shook his head, but he was smiling as he got up. For the next little while, he was happy to let her ask.

July 1, 2021

"No, it's okay Arj, just a little nausea," Philippa replied to his concern, "I'll be fine. But yeah, great that the TV will be here too. No pressure at all."

It was the day of the demonstration, and Arj was excited.

"No, I mean it Arj, it will be fun, lots of champagne! I hope—"

"No-no-no, you can't drink boss," Arjun shook his finger at her, "no champagne for you!"

"I'll just have a sip," Philippa assured him, getting ready to leave the lab. She picked up her bag and headed for the door. "Right, let's get ready. I'm heading home to freshen up, and I'll see you back here around five-fifty pm?"

"No problem. See you then!"

He closed the door behind her, paused for a second, still facing the door, then turned and breathed a long, loud sigh before heading over to where the device sat, now fully bathed in the late afternoon sun. He picked it up and lovingly turned

it over in his hands, admiring its beauty, then placed it back down silently.

Arjun closed his eyes for a few seconds before he sat on the floor in front of the power supply under the table and removed the front cover. Sighing, he opened his tool kit that waited next to it and began soldering a connector onto the output circuit board.

"Sorry, boss," he whispered.

A minute later, he pressed his lips together, replaced the cover, and put away the tools. After covering the device with a white sheet, he arranged chairs in a semi-circle between the table and the large windows. Satisfied that everything was ready, he let out a sigh as he stood at the window to watch the sunset and wait for the catering team to arrive.

At 5 p.m., guests began drifting in from the lobby, chatting amongst themselves. By 5:30, the TV crew had arrived and started setting up with Arjun's help. Philippa didn't show up until well after them, despite saying she'd be there by 5:50. She joined Arjun as he was checking his watch.

"You look great," he said acknowledging her rare use of makeup. "Are you ready for your big moment?"

Isaac had arrived a minute before Philippa and found a seat at the back. He watched as his mum and Arjun walked to the front of the table, and the room went quiet. The TV lady went to them and chatted before starting her monologue.

"Tonight, I am told history is about to be made..."

Isaac stared at Arjun, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He seemed nervous, but that was to be expected. He was on camera and this was a big deal. Isaac looked around at the other people in the room, scanning for anyone behaving suspiciously. Suddenly, he felt like there was someone else watching the proceedings, someone hidden from sight, A familiar presence maybe... but couldn't see where anyone might hide. He downed his champagne and set the glass on the floor next to him, dismissing his paranoia. The room remained hushed, every gaze fixed on his mother as she spoke. He sat up a little straighter, warmth blooming in his chest with pride.

"How much larger?" The TV lady asked.

"Well, I was hoping we could use your purse."

Isaac shivered and shifted in his seat as he suddenly realised he might be about to see his mother's death play out in front of him. He wondered if maybe there was something he could do now if things went as recorded in history, maybe there was some other way to save her? His attention snapped back to the demonstration in time to notice Arjun's demeanour suddenly change. He had started fidgeting, adjusting his tie, scratching his neck.

"Philippa, I don't think—" Arjun began.

The TV lady cut him off, "So are you saying that you, yourself, will be the test object? With my purse?"

Isaac smiled, his nervousness put on hold. He was looking forward to seeing his mother time travel. Even though he'd already done it himself, he was curious to see how it looked to others from the outside.

A blue sphere of light appeared behind the table. The sphere grew, flashed white, and then faded away. In its place stood a second Philippa.

Isaac smiled. *That was pretty lit*, he thought, looking around at others in the room. Most people looked shocked. Even the security guards looked quite entertained by what just happened. *We could sell tickets to demonstrations like this*.

He watched his mother as she walked around the table where she and Arjun checked the screen. Arjun looked concerned. He checked under the table and said something to Philippa. Philippa replied and motioned him away to the end of the table.

Philippa picked up the device, unlocked the screen, and ran the app.

Isaac sat up in his seat, not wanting to miss any of what was about to happen. He was a little nervous again now. *What if it wasn't the power supply that was the problem?*

He forced himself to not think about it.

"Then a gap, a wormhole, will be enlarged around me..."

Philippa checked the settings one last time. She looked up at the audience, then at Arjun. Turning, she found Isaac's face at the back of the room, pausing for one last look.

What if it was because of some interference? he thought. *What if timelines...*

She smiled at him, giving him a moment in time he'd never forget before she gently touched the 'GO' button.

Instantly a bluish translucent sphere enveloped her and she was frozen inside. The sphere flashed to white and vanished, taking Philippa with it. At that instant, Isaac, sitting quietly by himself in the back row, also disappeared.

The lab subtly changed—a few people were now in different seats, and items on benches at the back shifted as the silence erupted in applause, with several people jumping to their feet.

Arjun joined Philippa next to Sarah, grinning widely as cameras flashed. Sarah waited for the applause to die down before wrapping up with a concluding monologue.

The caterers uncovered canapes and began walking around with refilled trays of champagne. After much handshaking with various attendees, Philippa pulled Arjun aside to chat.

"Arjun, I'm afraid I have a confession to make."

Arjun looked surprised. "You have a confession? Does it have anything to do with how you did that without being plugged into the power supply?"

"Yes and no. The investor... Mr Jones? Well, he's not really an investor. He's my unborn son. Isaac." Philippa patted her bump.

Arjun was silent for several more seconds, his eyes darting from Philippa's face to her bump and back again. "W-what?"

"He's my son. From the future."

She proceeded to explain what happened a week ago—Isaac showing up, finding out she had died during the demonstration, how they had to suspect Arjun because there could be no one else, and that she used Isaac's phone instead to prevent the accident.

Arjun went to the nearest chair and sat down, leaning forward and putting his hands on his head. "I feel sick."

Philippa retrieved a glass of water from one of the tables.

Arjun sighed and gulped some water. "Philippa, you know I have the utmost respect for you. I live for the work we have done together, and I would never, ever put you in any danger. I never thought you would use yourself in the demonstration."

Philippa nodded, waiting for him to continue.

He took another sip of water and continued. "So I now have a confession for you. I did try to make it fail today. After you left this afternoon, I adjusted the power output of the supply so that it would output erratically. That *should* have caused the safety routines to kick in and shut down the whole procedure. But if what you say is true, it seems it might not have happened

that way, but instead had terrible consequences... in another timeline. I am very sorry."

"Arjun, why?" Philippa was in a bit of shock to hear him confess it, "why did you do it?"

"Well—" he began but was interrupted by his thoughts, eyes wide.

"Wait, this is a paradox!" he said, his expression full of wonder. "I thought a harmless failure will keep everyone away for now... give us more time to work on the power supply. I did it because I felt strongly about outside investment, but *you* arranged that, to try to find out what happened! If you'd never sent Isaac, I would never have been motivated to tamper with it. So, Isaac was the cause of your death, AND the reason it was prevented—a temporal causality loop."

Philippa shook her head slowly at the realisation that what he'd said was true.

"So, where is Isaac now?" Arjun asked, looking around, "I saw him at the back during the demonstration."

Philippa scanned the room to make sure he was gone. "I believe he, too, would have vanished when his phone did, as soon as the demonstration succeeded. The reason for him to come back in the first place ceased to exist the moment I didn't die. Oh! But wait, if he now never came back, If there is now no need for him to, then he won't, so why do we remember him doing it?"

Arjun stared at her as she returned the stare. “This is huge, Boss. There is more to learn, but I’m thinking alternate realities.” Arjun looked sheepish. “I really am sorry, Philippa. I was reckless.”

“You were doing what you believed was right. I can’t fault you for that, but in the future, talk to me instead, okay?”

He nodded, still looking a bit green.

“But believing something doesn't make it safe,” she added quietly.

Arjun looked up. “No. It doesn't.”

Across the room, somebody laughed loudly. Philippa glanced towards the sound, then back at the water glass held between his hands. The celebration felt strangely distant now.

“I should have listened when you tried to talk about what would happen afterwards,” she said. “I was so busy proving it worked that everything after that seemed like something we could deal with later.”

“You might not have agreed with me.”

“Probably not.”

He managed a brief, unhappy smile.

“But you didn't give me the chance,” she said.

Arjun nodded at the floor. “I know.”

“And I didn't give you the chance to argue about using myself.”

“I would have argued.”

"Yes. You would."

She pulled the neighbouring chair closer and sat down. Her feet had started to ache, and she was suddenly tired enough to feel every minute of the past week.

"When everyone has gone, you will show me exactly what you changed," she said. "Before you put anything back."

"Of course."

"We need a record of it. The settings, the connections, everything. Then we work through why the protection didn't do what you expected."

Arjun drew a breath. "I thought it would just stop before—"

"I know what you thought." Her voice was sharper than she intended, but she let the words stand. "We need to know why you were wrong."

He turned the glass in his hands. "Yes."

For a moment she imagined the lab empty, the chairs pushed back, Arjun alone with the equipment he had trusted to fail harmlessly. Later, he'd smiled at her and asked if she was ready for her big moment. She looked down at the glass turning between his hands.

"We can isolate the supply," he said. "Keep it exactly as it is until we've recorded it. And neither of us uses it."

"Good."

"Philippa, I don't expect you to just forget this."

She looked at him. “I won't.”

He nodded again, accepting the answer without trying to soften it.

“I want to be able to trust you,” she said. “That means you tell me when you think I'm making a mistake. Even when I'm too busy to listen. Especially then.”

“And no making decisions for you.”

“Correct.”

Another guest approached with a smile and a raised glass. Philippa thanked him, answered a question about the demonstration, and waited until he had wandered away before getting up.

Arjun stood too, still holding his water. He drew a breath, stopped, then put the glass down and looked towards the bench.

“I'll write it all down now, while it's fresh,” he said.

“In a few minutes. I don't think either of us should be touching the equipment yet.”

He looked back at her and agreed with a small, serious nod.

She patted his arm. “It’s time to celebrate. Let’s get a drink.”

“No-no-no, you can’t drink, boss!” Arjun started wagging his finger, then stopped, “well, maybe just a sip!”

May 6, 2044

Chel watched Isaac hold his finger over his phone with the strange device under it now humming slightly. He looked up at her, bit his bottom lip, and tapped the screen.

A mesmerising blue sphere of electricity swirled around him, engulfing him before snapping closed, taking Isaac with it. At the same time, Chel also disappeared, swallowed by the fabric of time. The whole room convulsed and changed. Two different timelines began twisting together, merging back to the one single timeline they used to be. The one time had planned for.

Downstairs, Isaac swayed, suddenly feeling dizzy. The room around him started warping and altering. His aunt Susan vanished. Furniture changed or disappeared, and some other pieces appeared, as reality reorganised itself. Isaac sank down. Years worth of new memories flooded him, existing alongside the ones he already had.

Then he saw her.

Standing in the kitchen was his mother. Now 23 years older than when he'd seen her just one minute ago, yet her appearance was completely familiar.

Philippa caught him staring, his face white, mouth open. "You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Uhh... this is going to sound weird, but I think I saved your life..."

Philippa suddenly realised what was happening. She cleared her throat. "You just missed out on some good canapes." She gave him a knowing grin.

Isaac tilted his head at her. "You've planned to say that for the last twenty-three years, haven't you?"

"Totally." Philippa beamed at him. "Although hearing it now, it sounds a little lame."

"Mum, it's incredible." Isaac got up and looked around. "I have two sets of memories now, although the other ones are starting to feel... less real, or old. A minute ago, I was at the lab, at your demonstration... it was 2021."

"I thought that part would be a bit weird for you. I've been waiting twenty-three years for this day. This moment must be the other end of the time twist, where this timeline first became tangled with the one where I died—the exact moment you used my device to go back. Although I'm surprised you still have both sets of memories intact. I was certain one would fade within a few seconds, if there at all, leaving you with the

memories from the timeline that took over." Philippa trailed off and studied him quietly.

"Can someone please tell me what's going on?" Chel asked timidly from the couch, her eyes darting between them.

They spent the evening with pizza—at Chel's request—and revealed the entire story to her. Philippa retrieved the device from her safe to show Chel. She was dubious at first, suspecting a prank, but her suspicion was soon replaced with amazement. Philippa also explained what happened after Isaac vanished from the lab, including Arjun's confession and the whole paradox of the events.

Chel put down the crust she had been about to eat.

"Dad did that?"

Philippa nodded. She had told it carefully, without trying to make Arjun's decision sound better than it had been.

"He thought he was stopping the demonstration," she said.

"Then he should have stopped it."

"Yes."

"He could have told you."

"He should have."

Chel sat back. For a while, she stared at the open pizza box. Isaac could see her trying to put the man she knew into the story they had just told her.

"He gets an idea in his head," she said eventually. "And sometimes he decides he's the only one who's thought it through."

Philippa glanced at the device on the table.

"He wasn't the only one who made decisions without telling anyone that day."

"That doesn't make it all right."

"No. It doesn't."

Isaac waited for Chel to say more, but she picked up her glass instead. He slid his chair closer until their knees touched.

"Are you going to ask him about it?" he said.

"I don't know. Not tonight."

"That sounds sensible," Philippa said.

Chel gave her a brief, tired smile. "It's been a lot for one night."

Isaac knew what she meant. He had been hungry when the pizza arrived, but now he couldn't remember whether he had finished his second piece. There was half a slice on his plate. He wasn't sure whether he had put it there.

He looked towards the kitchen.

"Where's Susan?"

Philippa followed his gaze. "At home, I imagine. I spoke to her this morning."

"No, I know. I mean—" He pressed his palms against his eyes, then lowered them. "I know where she lives. I can remem-

ber going there last weekend. But I also remember her being here tonight."

"Before things changed."

He nodded.

"She was asking about my day."

Philippa pulled a chair out and sat opposite him.

"You can call her."

"What do I say?"

"Hello would probably do."

He gave her a small smile and reached for his phone.

Susan answered from her own kitchen, looking surprised to see him. He recognised the cupboard behind her. He remembered helping carry a table through the doorway beside it, although he was also certain that had never happened.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Just wanted to see how you were."

"You saw me on Sunday."

"I know."

He heard how strange that sounded and tried again.

"How's your week been?"

"Fine. Busy." She peered at him. "You're looking very serious. Has something happened?"

Across the table, Philippa waited. He could tell Susan everything, but he wasn't sure he could bear to hear himself explain that she had raised him in a life she no longer remembered.

"Nothing bad," he said. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

Susan's face softened.

"Well, you've got it. Shall I keep talking?"

"Please."

"All right. The delivery people finally brought that book I ordered. They managed to bend the corner of every page without damaging the box. I thought that was quite an achievement."

He laughed, unexpectedly and with relief.

She asked about university. He told her about a piece of work he had almost finished, and she asked whether 'almost' meant it would be finished before it was due. It was such a familiar question that he found himself answering before she had reached the end of it.

When they said goodbye, he kept the phone in his hand for a few seconds.

"She's okay," he said.

Philippa nodded. "She is."

"I knew that. I just needed to check."

Chel took his free hand.

He looked at his mother. She was older than she had been in the laboratory, but now he could remember seeing those changes happen. He remembered arguments at this table, ordinary mornings, her calling up the stairs when he had slept

through an alarm. The memories arrived without any sense of being new until he tried to place them beside the other ones.

"I'm scared I'll lose things," he said.

"From the other life?"

"Some of them. Not everything was bad."

Philippa's expression changed, and he hoped she understood.

"You could write a few things down," Chel suggested. "While you can remember."

"Would that help?"

"I don't know. It gives you something to look at later."

He opened a blank note and typed Susan waiting at the school gate. Under that he wrote dinner, potatoes, photograph. They looked unremarkable on the screen. He knew why they mattered.

Chel watched him finish.

"In the other version of tonight," he told her, "you opened that package before I could stop you."

"Was it addressed to me?"

"No."

She winced. "That does sound possible."

"You looked very pleased with yourself."

"Well, there you go. Independent confirmation."

He put down the phone. Philippa offered him the last piece of pizza. He shook his head.

"Mum?" Isaac asked, "what drove you to invent the time travel device in the first place?"

"Your father, Thomas," Philippa said. "It was his sudden disappearance that motivated me all those years. I had to know what happened. I wanted to go back, find out, and maybe save him somehow."

"But you never did." Isaac looked away to the floor.

"A return trip was the problem. The device was meant to store enough power for a return trip, but after that demonstration, we found it wasn't reliable enough. If I had used it to go back, it would have meant a one-way trip. Two of me running around for five years wouldn't work, so without a portable high-capacity power supply, it simply wasn't an option. Too risky. So I waited, hopeful that Arjun would discover the answer one day. Eventually, other work came and went, we moved on, I had you, and the project was shelved." Philippa sighed, "Life happened."

Isaac bit his bottom lip and smiled. He picked up his phone and held it up. "Wasn't an option... until now..."

Philippa grinned back, looking from Isaac to Chel and back again.

"Did I ever mention the exact date he went missing?" She asked, also biting her lip, as Isaac plugged in his phone and powered up the device.

Turn the page for a Sneak Peek of the next book in the series, Time Slicer!

The story continues...

Preview of Book 2: Time Slicer

Chapter One

The Cleaner was five seconds away, and Isaac was still sitting on the couch.

He pressed his palms against his knees.

Wait.

Beyond the open window, someone laughed. A car door slammed. The curtain lifted in the sea breeze and brushed his arm.

He flinched, then caught himself.

The pressure at the edge of his mind sharpened. It knew where he was.

Isaac stood. One step backwards, then another, until his heel touched the skirting board. He kept his eyes on the empty room.

Stay in time.

Outside its flow, the Cleaner would be faster. Here, he had a chance.

The presence surged towards him.

A hood filled his vision.

Isaac jerked back against the wall. Wisps of white hair hung across a face so pale and smooth it scarcely looked alive. An arm unfolded from beneath the cloak.

Don't let it touch your forehead.

The hand shot towards him.

Isaac *jumped*.

The room changed around him. The voices in the street cut off. A television murmured through the wall.

One day forward.

He had time to draw half a breath before the Cleaner appeared again, its hand already reaching.

He jumped a minute further.

It followed.

Closer.

Isaac slipped backwards through a second, then forwards through half of one. The television broke into fragments of sound. Light shifted across the curtains. The Cleaner kept

appearing in front of him, reaching for the place his head had occupied a moment before.

He could still run properly. Put years between them. Keep moving until he lost it.

Instead, he shortened the next jump.

The Cleaner's fingers filled his vision.

Gone.

Back again.

He had heard what happened when they caught you. A touch could hold you still. Once that happened, wanting to jump wouldn't matter.

He cut backwards through time.

The hand followed.

Too close.

Isaac twisted away and jumped again, landing awkwardly with one shoulder against the wall. The Cleaner materialised before he had straightened.

For a fraction of a second, he saw beneath the hair.

Then the hand came up.

He vanished.

His breath was coming in short, useless pulls now. Six years of practice had made each jump little more than a thought. Keeping them this precise was something else.

A second. Half a second. Less.

He stopped trying to watch the hand. He felt for the Cleaner instead, sensing it enter each moment he abandoned.

Behind them, the wormholes were changing.

Each passage they forced open grew hotter, stretching under the repeated jumps. Their edges no longer closed cleanly. Isaac could feel them swelling towards one another.

Almost.

He moved through another sliver of time.

The Cleaner followed him into it.

For the first time, its hand was waiting higher than he expected.

Isaac ducked as he jumped. His knees struck the floor in the next moment.

He had to get up.

No time.

He jumped again from where he knelt.

The Cleaner appeared above him, its arm driving down.

Isaac threw himself sideways and sliced through another fraction of a second.

The wormholes strained together.

One more.

He could feel the opening he needed. Narrow. Closing.

The Cleaner came for him.

Isaac jumped several milliseconds ahead—and stopped outside the flow of time.

Silence.

He held himself still.

The wormholes joined.

A pale hand flashed through the faint distortion in front of him. A sleeve followed, then the edge of the hood.

Gone.

Isaac waited.

The hand appeared again.

Same movement. Same reach.

The Cleaner was following him through the last few jumps, over and over, each passage feeding into the next.

He was no longer in them.

It passed again.

Only then did Isaac let out the breath he was holding.

His mouth pulled into a grin.

"Bye."

He watched it complete another circuit before slipping back into the moment he had left.

The curtain brushed his arm.

Laughter drifted up from the street.

Isaac stood beside the couch, one hand braced against its back. The room hadn't changed. Nothing had fallen. No one below had stopped talking.

He looked down at his other hand.

It was still shaking.

Chel would have had something to say about that.

The thought came so readily that he glanced towards the empty couch.

His grin faded.

He sat down, slowly this time. His shoulder hurt where he had struck the wall. He rolled it once, then left it alone.

There was no one here to ask what he'd done.

The apartment looked much as it had when he moved in. Bare walls, a table, furniture chosen because it was there. He had never quite managed to treat the place as somewhere he intended to stay.

He rubbed his palms over his face.

He could move through years with a thought. He could make something like that chase him into a trap.

He still couldn't get home.

In this timeline, Chel had never existed.

He had searched anyway. Her name. Their address. The places she worked. People who should have known her had listened politely, then shaken their heads.

Isaac leaned back and closed his eyes.

The beach returned.

Chel was walking beside him, carrying her shoes. The wind kept blowing her hair across her mouth while she tried to finish a story. She stopped, pulled it away, and gave him a look.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're laughing."

"I'm listening."

"You can apparently do both."

She nudged him with her shoulder and continued. He remembered that small collision more clearly than the story. The warmth of her arm. The way she glanced at him to check he was still paying attention.

He kept his eyes closed a little longer.

When he opened them, the light at the window had thinned. Soon the apartment lights would come on.

The wine bottle stood within reach.

His hand moved towards it, then stopped.

There was something to do tonight.

The last twenty-four hours had given him questions he hadn't known to ask before. He needed them written down, along with the answers he'd found.

He moved the bottle aside and picked up his tablet.

First, the trap. How it worked. Where it could go wrong.

If a Cleaner caught him next time, someone else needed to know.

Isaac opened his blog and began to type.

Blog date: April 4, 2052 — 18:12

If a Cleaner catches me, here's how to trap one.

Let it chase you through shorter jumps until you're moving through milliseconds. The Cleaner keeps following. Round and round. The wormholes stretch and join into a loop. Get out before it closes.

But be warned: You only have to get the timing wrong once.

Changing the past creates alternate timelines. Most should eventually rejoin, but Slicers like me prevent that. Apparently, we're the mess the Cleaners are sent to deal with.

Thomas got one talking. Somehow, he froze time, and it couldn't restart it. Turns out they strip away our ability to

slice and send us back where we belong. The brain damage is apparently our problem.

I met Thomas ten days ago, using the same trapping trick. He's from my future.

He's also my grandson.

And my father.

He married my mother during his trips to the past. When he returned to his own time, something stopped him travelling back before his birth. He couldn't get back to her.

Years later, Mum used their last frozen embryo.

Me.

He'd known who I was before we

met. He'd been waiting for me.

Which brings us to Chel.

Two years ago, I came home from travelling and found strangers living in our house. Her friends didn't recognise me. They didn't recognise her name either.

As far as this world was concerned, my wife had never existed.

But I remembered her.

The records said Mum had died while pregnant with me, too. Yet here I was, standing outside someone else's house with my key in my hand.

I've been trying to get home ever since. I don't know where

I branched off, and every wrong turn gives the Cleaners another chance to find me.

Thomas thinks I have to get back before Chel and I are due to conceive our daughter. She becomes his mother. If she's never born, neither is he.

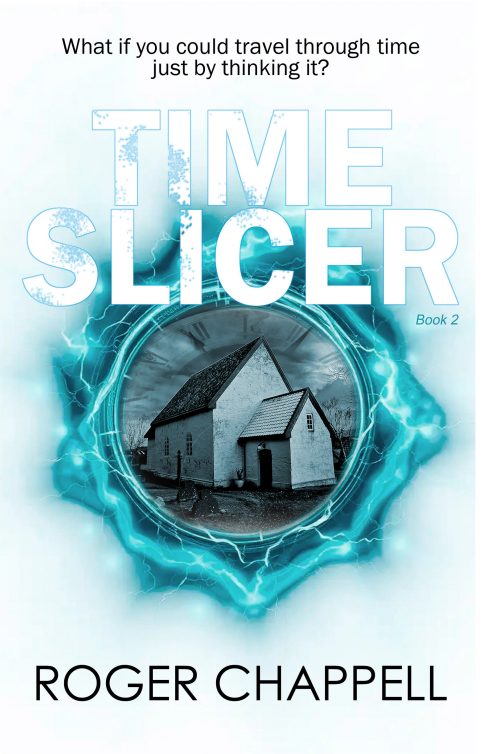
And without him, there's no me.

I nearly asked why we were both still here, then. This timeline had already managed to do away with Mum and Chel. But Thomas had been slicing for much longer than I had, and he sounded certain. I nodded and let him finish.

Maybe he knows something I don't.

We're meeting tonight to work

out a plan. Whatever happens to the family tree, I still need to get home to Chel.



Time Slicer Trailer