

THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

ABBIGAIL FORREST

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ABSTRACT

These Uncertain Times

Abbigail Forrest
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Research Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lowell M. White
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Texas A&M University

This work is a creative thesis and focuses primarily on the reactions people have when in times of crisis, as well as introspection on whether or not it would be the moral decision to change things in the past, if it were possible. The creative works portion of this thesis is the beginning of a science fiction novel, titled *These Uncertain Times*, which takes place in an alternate timeline to our own where the Cold War escalated in the early 1980s. The plot follows two different characters in different time periods: one of the main characters' story is set in the year 2024 and follows her as she attempts to discover how to change the past. The second storyline takes place in the early 1980s, and follows another main character as he makes his way through a world which has suddenly been plunged into chaos. Overall, my research focused primarily on science fiction works of a similar genre, as well as research into topics that are relevant to the themes of the story.

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Contributors

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question of this project changed drastically as it progressed. Originally, the theme was intended to investigate what causes regimes to slip into authoritarianism, but as I and the story changed over the tumultuous year that encapsulated this project, naturally, so did the research question and the themes of my creative artifact. Over the months I worked on it, the research question ended up becoming two different questions: first; how do different people respond when the world around them is suddenly thrown into chaos, and second; if we were able to change the past, should we? In my creative work, set simultaneously in the moments after the beginning of a nuclear war and nearly fifty years after the fact, I set out to explore both of those questions.

Research for the first question was fairly unconventional, as a lot of the things the focal character in the past version of the timeline thinks, feels, and experiences are based off of my own from the early stages of last year before it all fell into a ‘new normal,’ and also of my observations of the reactions of others. Even though this circumstance and the fictional one in my creative work are extremely different and are drastically different levels of severity, I still think it is valuable as a glimpse into the psyche of someone experiencing an event in which their world is permanently changed.

Early on in writing the work, I was concerned whether or not this particular focus of the thesis would land well (or at all) with readers. However, I was quickly proven wrong when I received feedback from showing it in a workshop: and in addition to my initial intended meaning, there was another common interpretation that I feel enhances the narrative in a different way. The scenes I showed in that workshop were from when, in the story, one of the

focal characters finds out that nuclear weapons have been launched at various cities in the United States and witnesses the panic of others around him in addition to avoiding processing his own feelings. Those I was workshopping with said it reminded them of their own stories (or stories they had heard from others) about 9/11, and even though that was not my intent, upon reflection I could distinctly see what they were referring to. And, through that, I was able to add an additional layer of meaning to the work as a whole.

As young as I am, I don't have any memories of that day or the events following it. I did, however, encounter the strange phenomenon of knowing that there was an event that changed the world for the worse, but only seeing the impacts of it instead of the thing itself. Until last year, that was the closest I came to knowing what a "world changing" event was like; and then, through the pandemic, I felt those feelings for myself. Even though the severity of each event is different, I think it is interesting to see how the feelings surrounding them can be similar: wishing to return to a world that doesn't exist anymore being one of the most prominent among them. When I continue this project past what is included in the creative artifact attached, I plan to delve into psychology and psychological analyses of people following historical disasters to deepen the meaning of this aspect of my work, as well as making sure that I do right by the seriousness of the subject matter.

Another aspect I wished to explore in my creative work was attempting to find what I think is an interesting way to explore time travel narratives in fiction. My original plan for the artifact was to have the first half of the novel be the characters planning out their journey to the past, and the latter half be what they did when they got there. However, I noticed that I wasn't interested in the second half; when I was attempting to write a summary of what I thought would happen, it ended up being something I knew I would get bored with. So, to fix it, I changed my

outlook on this part of the book: rather than focusing on how the characters would ‘fix the past,’ I decided to make it a question of whether or not they should. Because of this, a lot of the narrative revolves around the characters trying to discover what exactly happens with the world after they change the past, and also dealing with a group working against them to ensure that they are unable to change it, out of (logical) fears that it would destroy the world itself.

The creation of ‘time travel logic’ has been a project all on its own, but the narrative weight and decisions it brings in as a plot element are well worth it. In addition to the story, it also adds new questions and themes to the creative work; for example, how people use fear as a tool to manipulate others and trying to fix old mistakes that one was not responsible for. I plan on using more of the middle and end of my eventual final work to explore these themes more in depth than I have in the creative artifact for this thesis, but I believe the groundwork and influence is present in what is here.

My approach to the time travel narrative, not as a question of if one could but if one should, is what I think makes it stand out among other creative works in the same vein. Science fiction has always been one of my favorite genres, but even the stories that are more of a warning—for example, Bradbury’s “A Sound of Thunder”—do not feature much of a discussion on the possible impacts beforehand, let alone addressing the personal impact it could have on anyone outside the main character group. By having time travel be something debated upon and vehemently opposed by certain groups in the story—notably, one of the two characters I have as a point of view character—I have been able to explore new ideas and add new things to the genre.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

Finding and defining the exact sources of any creative artifact is difficult; the author writes things that are a combination of and influenced by all the works that they have read throughout their life. So, for my literary review, I have included most of the media that I have watched or consumed in some form over the time I was working on my thesis, as well as works that I have purposely drawn off of for inspiration in themes or topics.

Much of the historical context of my creative artifact draws off of science fiction; because I deal with a typical ‘nuclear apocalypse’ scenario as well as the main plot revolving around the use (and creation of) time travel, the amount of material preceding my work is immense. In addition to this, many of the creative works I have cited are not in any way similar to my own in terms of themes, plot, or otherwise, but they are all equally important in the establishment of a tone and background knowledge of literary writing for myself as an author.

In the context of genre, my creative work fits very firmly into the categories of science fiction and alternate history. It is an alternate history particularly in the storyline set in the past, as the event that creates the conflict of the setting, a nuclear disaster, is based on an event that very nearly occurred due to a Soviet computer error in late 1983, in which they falsely detected incoming missiles and almost sent out a counterattack, but thankfully did not. However, in the creative work, it is thought to be real and the attack is launched. Because of the time period and being based on actual historical events, much of my research (creative and factual) is centered on the Cold War and media that came out in that time period about it.

One research topic that is central to the narrative of the creative work is how time travel works in fiction. There are many different ways timelines and time travel itself can be presented, each with differing degrees of attempting to explain how it works, as well as amounts of how much impact a person can have on the past (or the future). This roughly breaks down into two different groups: one where the characters traveling to the past is something predestined, and happens no matter what occurs in the story, meaning that there is a single continuous timeline, and another where the time travel itself (or the actions of the characters) creates a different timeline.

The former is an interesting premise, but incredibly difficult to maintain for long periods of time. A good example of this single-timeline time travel is seen in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where time travel is happening on a small scale throughout the story as Hermione attends classes in her overloaded schedule, and happens on a large scale in the end when Harry and Hermione save Buckbeak and allow Sirius Black to escape. Throughout the story, the characters in the past unknowingly have interactions with their future selves—including Harry saving his own life at the end—and cause events to happen that had already occurred in the timeline they left, even though they were unaware of it. This results in an infinite cycle, the time travel creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, and often leads to less uncertainty about the stability of the timeline and whether or not events will come to pass—the characters are making things happen that have already happened, and unless they decide to not go back, the cycle will continue.

The alternative premise for time travel in fiction leads to more possibilities narratively but can also cause many problems when trying to create an underlying logic system that is the basis for the rules of time travel in a particular story. There are two sub-approaches for this

system, as well: the former, where the characters actively try to avoid creating different timelines, and the latter, where the characters create new timelines on purpose or on accident. However, even if the film goes out of its way to try and show the audience that no ‘split timelines’ were created, logical gaps in the previously established continuity can lead to doubt in the system.

A major example of the former, with the characters trying to prevent the creation of alternate timelines, is seen in the 2019 film *Avengers: Endgame*. The second act of the movie focuses on the group of superheroes as they travel back in time to gather things that were destroyed in the present, and they insist that returning those objects at the exact moment they got them will prevent anything from changing. However, this is shown not to be true—in going back to the past, they have interactions that change the events in ways that weren’t present in them originally. Despite this, in the end, one character is shown to have lived through one consecutive timeline to make it to the present, even though by going back to the past he certainly changed events of the previous canon. The film, understandably, decides to ‘hand-wave’ concerns of continuity away, but those elements still remain and establish the film firmly in the ‘going into the past is not a cyclical event’ camp.

Another example of this is in the *Back to the Future* series, but in it, multiple timelines are created (albeit accidentally) and repaired throughout. Interestingly, it can be interpreted as being a cyclical time travel story or as a non-cyclical one, depending on the interpretation. Marty McFly’s actions in the past permanently alter the present, but it is also hinted that his actions in the past were what allowed him to exist in the first place.

The infinite cycle model, of the past depending on the future and the future fulfilling the past, is an enjoyable depiction of time travel, and I think it works well when it is used correctly,

but in planning my novel I realized that it was not the best option for the story I was trying to tell. The ‘creating new timelines’ model fits my creative work much better, so it is the one that I have tried to make logically sound for my story.

An additional aspect to the creative artifact that I made sure to research thoroughly was the concept of split narratives set in different time periods. A few of the primary works I drew from when researching this were Chambers’ *A Closed and Common Orbit*, and Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*. Both are some of my favorite novels, and I had a great time going through and analyzing what each author did differently to make their stories work. While both focus heavily on telling a story and revealing information as it happens to characters in different time periods (but within the same timeline), the former is closer to the final vision of my own work. The overall structure of the novel focuses on a “mentor” character and a “mentee” character: the part of the narrative focusing on the mentor is set in the past, and the narrative following the mentee is set in the present, but both storylines have an equal amount of weight in the story as a whole.

Even though I drew a lot of inspiration from these sources, I feel like my creative work adds to the ‘canon’ of science fiction through certain changes I made to the narrative. The main factor which sets my work apart from the rest is that the timeline set in the past is actually following the development of a focal character as he transforms into the antagonist of the story. I’ve done this so far by including aspects of an unreliable narrator, and plan to lean more into this as I continue working on this project in the future. It isn’t unreliable in that the character’s point of view is lying to the audience, but more that the audience should be able to see the faults in his worldview, and know that the way he sometimes sees things isn’t the way they actually are.

One work that helped me figure out how exactly to do this kind of unreliable narrator is Clarke's *Piranesi*, in which the protagonist isn't lying about the things he sees, but through his observations, the audience is able to know much more about the truth of his situation than he is. Though it is far from my own work in its subject, it was an excellent way of seeing how an unreliable narrator can sometimes be unintentional; unreliable due to their view of things, not unreliable from an attempt to twist the story.

Overall, my creative work draws from a wide variety of works and genres: some things that I sought out to purposely try and use as inspiration or help on how to do a specific part of the piece, and some are simply works that I've loved so much over the years that they've become a major part of the way I write. My academic research for the project was essential to its success; building a solid structure of realism for the bedrock of the piece, and allowing me to explore topics that otherwise I would not have been able to.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

The exhibition of my creative artifact took place during the URS Symposium, hosted online beginning the final week of February. I did an introduction of my research and read a selection of my creative work, but due to the format of the Symposium a Q&A session following the presentation was not possible. However, I have received feedback based on my performance during the presentation, so I will be reflecting on that here instead. I did a screen recording of myself presenting my work and doing a reading, and posted it to YouTube as detailed in the Symposium instructions.

I believe this was a suitable format for my exhibit, given the circumstances that we find ourselves in making a physical public presentation unsafe. An online reading and receiving feedback from viewers was still able to give me the experience of presenting my work that I needed, as well as audience feedback that I can incorporate into my creative work and future presentations. Even though ideally, I would have been able to do a live presentation, I think I still was able to get a good amount of feedback and experience from presenting virtually. In some ways, this provided additional experience with presentations; I had never presented digitally while recording myself before, and now I have this experience to draw from if I ever need to digitally present in the future.

In preparation for the exhibition, first I had to choose a selection of my creative artifact that I was the proudest of, and that I thought would be the best display of my work for a reading. At the time I was giving the presentation, the creative thesis was not completely edited as it is now, but was still far enough along that I knew what the overall narrative would be. Due to its completion status, I chose from either the beginning section which I had revised the most, or a

chapter from later on that I liked despite it not being as heavily revised. The latter ended up being my favorite due to some of the more creative ways I wrote the perspective of the chapter, and so I decided on it for my presentation. Because this selection ended up being from the middle of the story rather than the beginning, I decided to include a slide in the presentation before the reading that gave context and a bit of background for that part of the story to avoid confusing the audience.

In addition to this, I rehearsed my presentation and reading a number of times before the final recording. I did an initial reading of the selected part of the artifact in order to see how much time it would take, and upon seeing that I went over the time limit, had to find a way to shorten the selection that still made sense. After finding a new ending point, I rehearsed the presentation in full, including the slideshow, while timing myself. Upon seeing that I was successful in keeping my full presentation under the time limit, I began to figure out the technical aspects of the presentation. I did a few recording tests over Zoom to ensure I would be able to present my work without any major technical difficulties in the middle of the presentation, and once that was complete, I recorded the exhibit and submitted it to the Symposium.

For the exhibit, I created a Google Slides presentation that briefly detailed my research for the creative artifact, as well as provided context necessary for viewers to understand the reading selection. The slideshow portion of the presentation also included an introduction to the work as a whole. Following the slideshow, I changed the formatting visible on my screen to make the video of myself more visible to the audience, and displayed the written format of the selection of my creative work as I read through it. After I finished recording myself presenting, I

saved the slides and the selection of the creative work into a PDF in order to submit it alongside the recording.

I believe that the selection of my creative work that I chose was appropriate because it reflected what I thought was a highlight from my piece, as well as showcasing some of the themes I am attempting to reflect upon throughout the work as a whole. The video presentation and reading worked well for my presentation, as it worked dually as an academic presentation in the beginning and allowed me to practice my dramatic reading skills for creative works. My presentation worked well as a showcase for my creative thesis, and allowed me to gain experience in presenting digitally, as well as gaining feedback from an audience.

4. REFLECTION

Looking back on where I was when I first started this project, it's astounding how much of it has changed. I started out with only a fraction of an idea; an image of what the time travel used in the story would look like: a door filled with nothing, that the characters step through to go to a different time. Like everything in art, this idea wasn't totally my own—I picked it up from the stunning visuals of a video game I played in late April of 2020, called *Return of the Obra Dinn*. It developed a small bit of a story along with it, but the early stages of the project led to a story that I was not content with. Continued work proved to help, but the early stages were very much just “throwing spaghetti at a wall to see what stuck.”

A change in genre and setting later, and I had something that resembled the final product, but was still a long way off. Through research, both academic and creative, I eventually arrived at the piece I present in this thesis: at the intersection of my favorite genre and a period of political history I enjoy learning about. Even though the latter ended up being less of a focus, without it, I would not have been able to reach the point I arrived at. The creative research I did for this project was arguably the most difficult part of it; while the academic research did take time, I've become accustomed to that variety of research through my classes over the years, and was able to find necessary sources to make the world of the work feel concrete whenever I needed to.

However, the difficulty of the creative research was not in finding sources. The sources I used for creative research were almost all things I enjoyed already; I found aspects of their narratives or characters that I wished to emulate in my own work and attempted to do so whenever possible. The difficult part came in actually crafting a story—and particularly

characters—based on those sources, and my own ideas. Writing the characters in the novel to have distinct personalities and to feel like “real people” was something that took the better part of a year in some cases; I was continually incorporating things from my research in the various drafts I wrote, keeping what worked and scrapping what didn’t. Following a long and arduous process, I eventually was able to reach the point of feeling satisfied with the characters I created, and deciding what happened in the story was much easier after that, because I knew what they would do in response to whatever they encountered.

Interestingly enough, the story itself has stayed relatively similar since the beginning of the project. While it has evolved into something that I think is a distinct improvement from the initial concept, and is much more intricate with more active characters, many of the original concepts still remain. This evolution is in direct relation to my creative research, as I realized that many of the stories I enjoyed featured complex character relationships, as well as split narratives within the same timeline but focusing on different characters. Through that vein of research I saw the artifact improve, and also began enjoying writing it more.

While the official public presentation of my artifact was unfortunately limited in the scope of feedback I received, it was still helpful but mostly in terms of my public speaking and presentation skills. However, I was able to receive feedback on my work through a different venue: workshops in classes, from a group of my peers. I presented an almost-final version of two different sections of my creative artifact to the same group different times over the course of a semester, and through hearing their responses over a video call and what they had written in response to my work, it allowed me to fix problems, make things clearer, and find parts that needed to be improved. Even things as particular as adding details to make sure the reader is able to identify what exactly is happening gathered up over time, and combined to make large-scale

improvements. I made many changes, large and small, thanks to the help I received from those workshops, and even though I wish I had been able to do a formal Q&A session following my presentation, I am grateful for all of the feedback I have received over the course of creating the creative thesis.

If I were to create my artifact again, I think I would have made a stronger attempt at the start to have a clearer creative vision. Even though it eventually worked out to be a product that has a strong sense of cohesion, it took quite some time for me to “figure it out” enough to achieve that standard. At the beginning of the Aggie Creative Collective program, I hardly had any idea of what I wanted to write—my initial plan was based off of a high fantasy short story I wrote in January of 2020, and I quickly realized that no longer appealed to me. I pivoted to a story based on time travel, but still set in a fantasy world—and, again, realized that there was a lot of work to be done for that specific genre that I either did not have the time for, or just didn’t work for me in particular. About halfway through the program I came up with the idea I ended up sticking with, a scenario of “if a historical event went a different way than it did,” focusing on a relatively small event that could have had extreme impacts had it gone wrong (the accidental almost-launch of Soviet missiles in 1983 due to a computer error). It wasn’t until later that I stumbled upon the emotional crux of the story, an ideological conflict between the two focal characters, and a story taking place across different periods of time.

Overall, even though my creative process eventually worked, were I to re-do this entire experience I would definitely have made more of an effort to have a concrete idea of what I wanted to do with the project as a whole. One obstacle to this was that the initial planning stages took place during the early stages of lockdown last year, and taking all the emotional stress I was under into consideration, I am not going to judge myself too harshly in my retrospections of that

time. Even though it took longer than I would have liked, the rough start did initially end up being an important factor in the end product as a whole.

The only grain of regret I have when it comes to this project is that it took me such a long time to grow to like it as much as I currently do. The narrative and characters took a lot of hard work to bring to a state that I was happy with, and even now I can see myself having to make quite a few changes by the time it becomes something I may attempt to publish as its own work of fiction in the future. I am excited to see where my creative process takes the work in the future, but in no way do I discount its merits as it is now—the labor I have put in over this past year resulted in something I have loved working on, and thoroughly enjoy as a work on its own.

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APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Prologue: It's the End of the World (As We Know It)

22 Sept. 1983, 5:22 PM, EST

Ernie Faulkner

One second.

In a single second, Ernie's life as he knew it ended. Everything he'd ever seen, everywhere he'd ever been, every aspect of the day-to-day that he had considered normal and realized far too late he had been taking for granted. All of it, gone forever, and never coming back.

That day, that hour, even, hadn't started that way. But then again, how could anyone have known that terrible thing would fall to smite the earth with a vengeance, for no reason at all? Not that a reason could've justified it, anyhow.

Everyone always assumes 'normal' is something permanent, ignoring how fragile it truly is.

After surviving a far-too-long lecture on quantum field theory, Ernie was on an expedition to explore downtown Cambridge. The remnants of his lecture's contents had lingered in his mind too long for his liking, and he couldn't think of a better way to clear his thoughts than to take a walk and grab a drink from wherever he ended up. On the way towards the river, through the fog of equations and leftover theories yet to be blown away by the crisp autumn breeze, he felt like he was forgetting about something that he had planned.

Ernie didn't have enough time to remember what it was, because something else caught his attention just before he came to that specific realization. A man wearing a suit was running right at him, very narrowly avoided a collision, and then continued sprinting without a word. He brushed it off as someone who was just late for a meeting and continued with his leisurely stroll.

Then the next runner *did*, in fact, run into him, knocking him over. Barely catching himself from getting a face full of cobblestones, Ernie landed with a thud.

“Hey!” He shouted at the woman who had just bowled him over, returning to his feet and dusting off his knees. “What the hell, lady?”

She didn't answer, regaining her footing before continuing her mad dash in the opposite direction. Before she ran off, she looked back at him for a split second.

That second was more than long enough for Ernie to see all of the terror on her face, and he got the inkling that something was very wrong.

A minute later, for the third time, he heard the rhythm of running footsteps on the sidewalk—now approaching from behind. Having grown tired of being run into, he grabbed the runner by their arm as they passed. The man he caught, also in a suit but with graying hair, pulled at his hand to try to keep on running.

“Get off of me!” the man said, tugging frantically.

“Look, I'm sorry for grabbing you, but will you please tell me what's going on?” Ernie asked, relaxing his grip a bit as their eyes met. His were the same as the woman's who had knocked him over before—scared and desperate.

Taking advantage of the loose hold Ernie now had on him, the man successfully pulled his arm free.

“It's the end of the world,” he said, not allowing a response before he bolted off.

Ernie, stunned for a moment, stood frozen in the middle of the sidewalk.

Then the sirens began.

He couldn't tell where the sounds were coming from—terrible, loud droning noises filled every nook and cranny of the city. In some corner of his mind he knew what they meant, but the rest of him was too focused on not panicking to process what could have been going on. One thing was for sure—he had to find a TV, radio, or something that would actually tell him what was happening, at the very least more clearly than a deranged man on the street claiming it was ‘the end of the world.’ They tended to do that a lot, deranged old men on the street. But most of the time, they weren't right.

He got the feeling that this wasn't ‘most of the time.’

Too focused on trying to avoid anyone running into him again, Ernie walked headfirst into the open door of a sports bar. The jolt from hitting the heavy wooden door knocked him back to awareness, sirens still filling his ears. A flash of a moving image across a screen caught his eye, so he went inside—both in his search for information, and for a way to escape the ear-splitting noise outside. A few more people ran by outside the grimy windows of the establishment, often looking just as confused as he was.

Everyone in the place stood around the counter; a small crowd about 20 strong, all with their eyes glued to any one of a dozen or so screens placed on the wall above an assortment of half-empty bottles. Peter Jennings stared back at them from each television; face solemn, but even his years of experience could not keep away the shadow of fear that was evident in his expression as he reported what, deep down, Ernie knew had happened.

“...I repeat, get to a shelter if you can. The latest reports say there are [FIVE]—” a robotic voice read out the number, as Jennings clearly mouthed a different word— “minutes until a

missile reaches New York. There are at least four others that seem to be heading towards Washington D.C., Chicago, Dallas, and Seattle. The information also indicates that the missiles are Soviet in origin. We have no reason to believe these reports are false.”

Someone in the crowd cried out at one of the cities listed. Ernie ignored them, craning his head to hear over the noise.

“The crew and I are going to a shelter, and we will be repeating this broadcast for as long as we can. Good night, good luck, and may God be with you all,” Jennings said, before the screen went blank for a moment then showed what was clearly the beginning of the report.

Standing behind the counter was the bartender, a round, balding old man, and after it started up again, he turned away from the screens to face his patrons.

“I suppose you’ll all be wanting free drinks, then?” he asked, ending with a nervous laugh before turning to the first person on his left, who just so happened to be Ernie. “C’mon, whaddya want?”

“Something strong, I don’t know,” Ernie mumbled, leaning forward onto the bar and dropping his head in his hands.

The old wood was covered in carvings from people who’d been there over the years, people who would probably never be back here again. He pushed the thought away again—no, no, this couldn’t be happening. It can’t be real. Names stared back at him—someone named Meghan had been in this exact spot in 1972. This hadn’t happened to her. The name and date silently taunted him with images of a world that was not about to fall to pieces.

Wait... Meghan... Meg.

He realized what he’d been forgetting.

They were supposed to meet up at a place on the river called Branaugh’s a half hour ago.

Shit.

Well, now things were doubly bad.

His spiralling thoughts were interrupted by the clink of a glass next to his ear.

“You alright there, son?” the bartender asked, finished placing what looked to be a double of some kind of dark brown liquor beside his elbow, and next to Meghan.

“Of course not,” he said. In one swift motion, Ernie picked up the glass and downed the drink. It burned on the way down, which was a good thing, for once. He set it down on top of Meghan with a satisfying thunk. “I’ll buy a round of whatever that was for everyone, including you.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but don’t worry about it,” the barkeep said, and set about filling glasses of whatever concoction he had made before, setting them down on the counter every seconds or so, where desperate hands snatched them up.

Right after the twelfth glass was taken, the signal from the TV went out and was replaced by static. The crowd went silent, all knowing what it meant.

Ernie’s heart dropped into his ass.

New York. Gone.

That’s where his new place was, that’s where he was going to work—or at least he’d hoped so—and that’s where his life was supposed to be happening.

Gone.

Millions of people. Just like that.

Everything he’d set up for himself and his future. Just like that.

The room was spinning. What was in that glass, anyway? He could hear the bartender saying something, but it sounded muffled, like he was underwater, or maybe he was talking

backwards. Ernie's field of vision narrowed and blurred, until the only clear things were the carvings. Meghan laughed at him from the writing on the bar—which was below him, then eye level, then above him, then gone.

Gone, just like everything else.

Chapter One: Working for the Weekend

11 October 2024, 8:20 PM, MST

Piper Moreno

Being in a room with herself stopped being weird after about ten minutes, Piper decided. She was standing over her own shoulder as her past self sat at a makeshift desk of crates in the dingy old storage closet, frozen looking at her watch with her pen to the page, about to start writing out the exact time. Piper knew what her doppelganger was doing because it was something she had done a few minutes before setting up the thing that brought her here and stepping into the unknown. The unknown, or this one at least, was just a little bit boring. They were stuck in a small room without windows, and with the only door in or out being the one the device was attached to, there was no way out other than going back to her own time.

Even though she was in an enclosed space, Piper could tell that the test had worked. The usual drone of air conditioning and general people noises in a large building that usually goes unnoticed was gone entirely, and the only sound she could hear was the increasingly loud ringing of the circulation in her ears. To distract herself from the roar of silence, she started down her own list of sub-experiments that weren't necessarily 'essential.' Most of the necessary things she hadn't needed to do—like she'd hoped, the math that she and Ernie had done seemed to have worked as planned. But there were still a few more frontiers to cross.

Bracing herself for whatever could go wrong, she tucked her notebook under her arm and put her pen between her teeth, leaning down with her pointer finger extended. She slowed and paused before she touched the top of her own head, hand shaking with something that may have been fear. After a few nervous seconds, she took a deep breath and shut her eyes, then lowered her hand the last fateful inch to the familiar head of brown hair that waited below it.

But nothing happened. She sighed with relief at the world not collapsing around her, and retrieved her notebook from her arm to jot down a note that making contact with oneself does not, in fact, destroy the space-time continuum, luckily enough.

In the middle of finishing up writing her findings down, something caught her eye from the other side of the closet: the device that brought her here, connected to the door frame except for the operating machinery on the right side and a light on the top, had started to blink. Slowly at first, but getting faster with each burst of light. She cursed to herself for taking too long, and began to get to work on her main ‘unessential’ experiment.

In a bit of weird positioning, she tried to shove her frozen self out of the way a little bit so that she could get to the journal unhindered, but strangely enough, her past self didn’t move at all; it was like some kind of immovable force was keeping her in that one spot. Piper shrugged it off and made the awkward reach under her own arm to reach the paper of the journal, and wrote the same note she had found in her own when she was sitting here a few minutes ago.

Time Trial 1. I, Piper Moreno, have been here (8:20 PM 10/11/24) for about ten minutes, and it’s only a little boring.

The light above the door had become a strobe light, and Piper made a mistake. What she’d found in her journal in the minutes before was just the words, but in the frozen Piper’s journal, there was also a long line of ink from a rushing pen. As she noticed this, she froze; but the light above the door was only increasing in frequency, so she had no time to try to fix it. Begrudgingly accepting her mistake, Piper hopped over the crate-desk and (after stumbling due to a botched dismount) ran over to the door, filled with the darkness of the unknown rather than the view of the old lab it would typically hold.

She took a moment to turn around and face the room—and the time—she was leaving, and stepped backwards into the void within the door. It quickly filled her view, appearing to take her farther and farther away from the rectangular opening she entered through until it was a distant pinpoint. For a moment that felt like forever, she was alone in the darkness; falling but with her feet on some sort of “ground,” surrounded by nothing. Until there was finally something: another pinpoint, far in the distance, much brighter than the other one, and approaching quickly. Piper let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding as the old lab she left so long ago appeared before her, and she stepped through as soon as she was able to.

“Ernie!” Piper yelled in the direction of the phone lying on a nearby desk, which she’d left on speaker for this exact reason.

Ernie, the voice on the other end, yelped, and replied. “Why’d you scare me like that?”

“Because it worked!” Piper said, pushing a few buttons to shut down the device on the door. When she pressed the final key, the ominous darkness within it was gone in the blink of an eye, replaced by the usual view of the storage closet, still with her makeshift desk set up inside.

A few seconds passed. “Whaddya mean it worked? You just said you were going through it. I thought it was supposed to last ten minutes?”

“It *did*,” she said, “but it must not have taken any time out here. So, to you, I just walked in and walked out?”

“Yep, scared the hell out of me is what you did,”

Piper turned the phone off speaker mode, and put it to her ear. “That’s beside the point. The point is, we did it! We made a time machine! Good for us! Now what?”

“*I* made a time machine,” Ernie replied dryly.

“I seem to remember doing half of the non-theoretical math, and most of the building and assembling—”

“Hey, hey, just joshing ya, kiddo. Good teamwork,” he said, only now sounding remotely like he was joking.

Piper swallowed her pride. “But really though, what now? I guess we could try to get a patent or get it to that program I’ve heard about that’s looking into this kind of stuff—”

“No need to worry about what to do with it next, I’ll handle all that *and* make sure we both get our due reward,” Ernie said, interrupting her again. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for this, Piper.”

She sighed. “Of course. You couldn’t have paid me to stay away from this project.”

“We’re going to change the world, y’know. You and me. In fact, we probably already did!” Ernie said.

Piper remembered the mistake she made in her past self’s journal when she went back, and pulled out her own and turned it to the page she had found the note on before the test. There it was, the long line she made on accident while rushing to get back to the now. Something in her gut told her to not mention it, and she abided by that feeling.

“Really though, I’m about to head home for the night. Anything else I need to do?” she asked.

“Nope, we’re golden,” Ernie said. “Just bring it by my house tomorrow—I think you’ve already got it, but I’m sending the address and the gate code to you riiight... now.”

Piper’s phone buzzed in her hand. “Okie doke, see you tomorrow then.”

“Thank you again, Piper,” Ernie said.

“Of course!” Piper replied, then said goodbye to her uncle before flipping the phone closed.

For what it could do, the device was shockingly portable; it folded up neatly enough that she could fit it without much hassle into her work bag. After packing it away she gathered the rest of her things, disassembled the makeshift desk set up in the storage closet, and turned out the light on the way out of the lab.

When she walked out of the door to leave, a hovering light that had been watching through the window flew up and out of sight, its silent mission complete and undiscovered by its target.

- 12 Oct. 2024 -

4:12 PM, MST

The bus stopped just at the end of the newer concrete buildings that made up most of the structures in New Springs. Outside of that, a tall brick wall blocked off the view of the horizon from the road. Piper tipped the driver as she hopped off the bus and made her way over to the gate she had made her way through only a few times, but enough to remember how to get through. A keypad poked its way out of the red brick, the only noticeable deviation from the pattern. She approached it and typed in the code Ernie gave her the night before, and after a low buzz emerged out of unseen speakers, a narrow section of the wall descended into the ground, showing the way beyond.

Piper had been to Ernie's house a few times before to pick up plans or just visit, but every time she did she was always amazed at the view of the mountains from the western side of the neighborhood. The houses were nice, yes, but being able to see those peaks touching the sky from your own window like that was the real dream. Well, that, and the house, because they were all fairly large, most with gates and fences of their own within the large brick behemoth she had passed through moments before. The grass, if you could call it that, looked wrong; too bright to be real, in addition to being the only "plant life" that wasn't obviously fake. Still, though, she enjoyed looking at it all as she made her way down the brick sidewalk.

Ernie's house stood out among the rest; a strangely narrow house made of what looked like stacked stones, and was much closer to the sidewalk than the others. But as soon as she got a bit closer, Piper could tell something was... off about it. Every time she'd visited before, there hadn't been a fence or a gate set up to divide it from the "public land" of the path, but this time, there was. Maybe he'd just gotten a stroke of design inspiration, she supposed, and pushed her way through after fiddling with the lock. She fumbled through her bag at the door, trying to get the device out without damaging it, when the door opened.

It wasn't Ernie who awaited her there, but a woman who couldn't have been more than a few years older than herself, and who also looked confused and maybe just a little nervous. Piper pushed the confusion away, dropping the device back in her bag with a barely audible thunk.

"Can I... uh... help you?" The woman asked.

"Hi! I didn't know Ernie had anyone over, is he here? I just need to drop something off," Piper said, peeking over the shoulder of the woman standing in the doorway.

"Are you sure you've got the right house? There's no one named Ernie who lives here,"

Piper could feel her face start to flush, both from the embarrassment of possibly knocking on the wrong door, and whatever the implications were if she was in the right place. “No, no, I’m pretty sure, I’ve been here before. I dropped by about a couple months ago? Just let me try to see if I can find him.”

“Look, I don’t know who you are, and so I think I’m going to have to ask you to leave. My family’s been moved in for about a couple years here, and I certainly haven’t seen you around before. Good luck finding your Bernie, or whoever it is!” The woman said chipperly before slamming the door closed in Piper’s face.

If Ernie didn’t live there, then where could he be? She was sure she’d been here before, sure as anything, but this just didn’t make sense. Piper stepped back from the door and to the sidewalk, starting her walk back to the bus stop so as to not creep out the apparent owner of the house any more than she had already, and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She flipped it open and dialed Ernie’s number; he’d called her yesterday, so he was probably fine. However, all her hopes of everything being just a misunderstanding melted away when she heard a beeping tone on the other end, followed by a robotic voice saying ‘number disconnected.’

Piper paused mid-step on the sidewalk, phone still flipped open and pressed to her ear, as thoughts raced through her mind. Her other hand absentmindedly grasped the device that was still resting at the bottom of her satchel almost protectively, and her eyes went wide as she realized what she could do. She scanned the fencelines and houses, trying to find an empty space she could use without getting in trouble with a homeowner, and her gaze eventually landed on the brick fence she had gone through about ten minutes before. Not ideal, but it would do—and it was better than trespassing, she guessed.

Getting out of the brick gateway was much easier than going in. No one was around on either side to see her set the thin metal frame up to the support of the gaping entryway, stretching the device to the limits of its extenders and resting its portable battery on the ground beside it. Piper stepped to the proper side and typed in the commands into the keypad, careful to not get far enough that the fence gate would shut all the way. She pressed the final key, and the now-familiar void within the door flickered into reality.

Here goes an impromptu test two, Piper thought, and stepped through the door into nothing. For some reason, it didn't seem to take as long to get to her destination as it did with the first test—the first time felt like at least five minutes (even though she knew it meant nothing in the scope of that strange, timeless place) but this time was just a step in, a flash of dark, and then stepping into the sunny day of two days prior.

- 10 Oct. 2024 -

4:16 PM, MST

This time things weren't frozen, she noticed, and made a mental note to look into why when she wasn't under a time constraint. Piper started the brisk walk towards Ernie's again, only realizing after walking about a block and a half that the door might close on (and probably destroy) the device she had spent a good portion of the last decade working on. With a start, she turned around and to her relief was greeted with the sight of it still in its place in the gate. Moderately frustrated with her un-subtle and unstable choice of placement, she turned back around and continued on her mission.

The fence was gone, like it used to be, so that was something. Piper nervously approached the red door with the cracking paint and gave a tentative press on the doorbell. She

heard movement from within the house, and a dog barked to alert its owner of the perceived threat that lurked outside. Tapping her fingers against her now-empty bag slung across her shoulder, she realized that she didn't even know what she would say to Ernie if he were here.

She didn't have much time to wonder. Ernie opened the door, his familiar narrow face turning up in a grin with recognition. "Hey there, Piper! Wasn't expecting you."

"Oh, hi!" Piper said, and as relief dried up, confusion rose up to take its place. "I was just wondering if you had any extra notes for the... test... on Friday? Just trying to make final preparations."

"I thought you had them all?" Ernie asked, keeping the door only open a crack to keep the nose of the blue heeler at his feet from inching out any more than it was already.

"I was thinking that having the original copies would help, if that makes sense. Nice to have it on paper. Also, good luck and stuff, y'know?" she said, which wasn't entirely a lie.

"Huh. Well, can't hurt, I guess. Not like I'm using 'em. Hold on here for a second," Ernie said, closing the door.

Piper checked her watch. About three minutes. If the first test was any kind of indication of how long it would last before she got stuck here, she probably had about seven minutes left. Trying to distract herself from the ticking clock, she started counting the bricks around the door.

She got to forty seven by the time Ernie returned, this time opening the door a bit wider than before, and allowing Ango to make his escape. The dog circled around Piper's legs and she crouched down to pet his head, which was a bit of a mistake because he landed a sloppy lick right on the left lens of her glasses. Piper yelped in surprise, and stood up again.

"Ah, yeah, he does that sometimes," Ernie said, holding the folder of papers under one arm. "Ango! Go on back in,"

Ango obliged, tail wagging as he trotted back across the threshold, plopping down against the wall opposite the door, still watching Piper.

“So, how are you feeling about the test run? Everything all ready?” Ernie asked, handing over the folder.

Piper took the file and placed it carefully in her bag, facing upwards so as not to have any of the papers fall out even though it was already secured with a rather large paperclip. “It’ll be fine,” she assured him, “I’ve got it all set.”

“Well, as long as you’re not worried about it, then I won’t be either,” Ernie said. “I’ll hear from you Friday, then.”

“Alright, see you later!” Piper said, turning away from the door before it closed all the way. That certainly wasn’t what she had hoped to do, but it seemed to have worked out. She could only hope that she hadn’t radically altered the future in some strange way, but the more pressing matter on her mind was getting back to the gate before whatever time she had left ran out.

When she got close enough to see that it was still there, she also was close enough to notice that the light at the top was blinking more quickly than it should have—and so, she started to run. She was just about to make it into the door when she noticed something flash in the weak sunlight: the lens of two security cameras at the top of the wall, one pointed roughly in her direction, and another that was probably pointed towards the portal lodged in the gate. *Shit*, she thought, the last thing to go through her mind before passing into the darkness.

- 12 Oct. 2024 -

4:24 PM, MST

The trip back to her own time was faster than the one she took before. It barely felt like a break in pace, and Piper almost found herself running right off the sidewalk and into the road on the other side of the wall. She stopped, nearly falling over, and turned off and disassembled the device as quickly as she could. Hopefully no one noticed, but the more she thought about her oh-so-clever placement of her extremely obvious time portal, the less likely that seemed.

As the mad panic subsided and she finished placing the device back into her bag, now a little less spacious because of the file folder, Piper noticed a weird hum coming from somewhere behind her, and up. She turned around and searched the cloudy sky, only taking a few seconds to see it—a drone hovering about thirty feet above her, with a camera pointed directly into her face. She froze for a moment, and the panic returned. The bus wouldn't be here for another ten minutes or so, and her house was a good half hour walk away—she wouldn't want this thing to see where she lived, anyway, even though the sinking feeling in her gut told her that it probably already knew.

Chapter Two: Hold the Line

22 Sept. 1983, 5:43 PM, EST

Ernie Faulkner

“...and that’s why I waited until now to ask you out, I guess,” Meg said with a laugh.

Ernie blinked a couple times, trying to focus on her, but it didn’t work. Must have something in his eyes, he guessed, or some sun blindness even though it was 4 PM and cloudy. On some level it registered as odd, but on every other level, he was focused on taking in the view.

Branough’s was far nicer than he thought it would be; white tablecloth-ed tables floating over the river, like they were suspended on wires. Waiters hopped from table to table like frogs on lily pads, but never fell in the river below. *This is normal*, Ernie thought. Meg sat across from him, wearing a red dress that was tighter than anything he’d ever seen her wear before.

“Well, I’m glad you finally decided to,” Ernie said, lifting up a glass of champagne that hadn’t been there a second before. “Cheers, to us.”

Meg smiled. “To you.”

He didn’t have a chance to reply before he woke up to a splash of something cold in his face, looking up at the gum-clad underside of the bar. Much less pleasant to look at than what he’d just been dreaming of, the bartender leaned over him, now-empty glass in hand.

“What! That’s so cold, what the—”

“Hey, hey, you’re fine. Well, actually, maybe not. Not sure if anyone is anymore,” the bartender said, offering him a hand up. “Just making sure you were alive. And I’m heading out, so I’d rather not have any corpses lying around.”

He got up slowly, and saw the world through the fog of whatever it was he'd drunk before he passed out as well as the lingering effects of waking up quickly. The televisions were off, that was weird. The bar was empty, too. Sadly, though, he still remembered what'd happened—but that didn't mean he had to face it yet, so he wasn't going to.

A moment of clarity struck, and Ernie knew what he had to do.

“Do you have a phone I can use? And a phonebook?” he asked.

“Yeah, back right corner of the bar. Look, kid, I'm leaving, now, so—” the barkeep, on his way out of the building, tossed Ernie a set of keys— “lock up the place for me, will you?”

They landed right in his hand. “Sure?”

“Great! Bye!” the barkeep said, and then set off in a sprint as soon as he got past the threshold.

Alone in the bar, Ernie took in the relative silence while digging through the phone book for Branaugh's—the sirens were still blaring, so it didn't take long before he got tired of it. Eventually, he found the number and dialed it, praying that the phones were still working.

To his relief, they were. After a few rings too many, someone—a waiter, he assumed—picked up.

“Hello, this is Branaugh's, we're not really taking reservations right now, so... um... how can I help you?”

“I'm looking for someone named Meg... uh...” he paused for a moment as he tried to remember her last name. “Callaghan! Meg Callaghan. Is she there? I was supposed to meet up with her a while ago.”

The guy on the other line sounded both annoyed and confused. “I can check?”

A muffled “IS THERE ANYONE NAMED MEG CALLAGHAN HERE?” echoed through the phone, and was repeated a couple more times before the waiter started talking to Ernie again.

“Okay, found her. Here she is,” he said, followed by the clicks of a phone being handed off.

“Hello?” Meg asked, sounding nervous.

“Hey, it’s Ernie. Sorry about not making it to meet you at the place, I got caught up with work,” he lied.

“Oh. Um. Well, I don’t think it would’ve been a fun hang-out if you had made it, so... yeah.” She sighed. “So did you just call to say you couldn’t make it, or what?”

“No, no. I’m planning on leaving town, do you want to meet up somewhere before I head out?”

“Sure? I guess? I should probably leave, too... wait, no, fuck. I don’t have a car.” Meg laughed, but it was more sad than anything. “I’m stuck here.”

This was his chance, Ernie realized. He hadn’t really planned on going anywhere in particular after he ‘left town,’ but now? Both he and Meg were from Texas—that was why they started talking to each other in the first place. He’d go home. As much as he hated the idea of going back to where he started, it wasn’t like where he was had anything to offer other than the ghosts of a future that wasn’t going to exist anymore.

“How about you go back to Texas with me?” Ernie asked. “You’re from Amarillo, right? I can take you.”

“You’re serious?”

“As serious as a heart attack. Go get your stuff together, I can meet you at Branaugh’s in an hour and a half.”

“Okay then,” Meg said. “If I don’t show, it’s because I realized that this is, in fact, a very bad idea.”

Then, with a crackle and a snap, the line went dead.

Chapter Three: Private Eyes

12 October 2024, 5:42 PM, MST

Piper Moreno

A dog was barking inside of Piper's apartment.

This was particularly unusual, as Piper did not have a dog.

She instinctively jumped back from the door out of shock, and with how narrow the hallway was, slammed right into the neighbor's door directly across from hers. The loud "bang" of the slightly loose door against its hinges probably echoed through the entire building, but most people were used to the noises by now. That is, unless you were the neighbor whose door almost got knocked down. Piper yelped before stepping to the side and out of the way, trying to stay silent and hoping that the person the door belonged to wasn't home.

Hurried footsteps rumbling through the thin floor rushed towards her, and she knew her hopes weren't going to cut it. The producer of the steps flung open the door, and Piper sidestepped back to face them.

"What was that?" Rosamund asked, her bright red hair at an awkward angle, like she had hastily slapped it on her head. She'd only moved in a couple weeks ago, and was one of the few neighbors Piper had any kind of relationship with after exchanging plants as a housewarming gift. "Oh, hi again."

"So sorry about that! I didn't mean to run into—"

"Wait, did you hit the door? Like, on accident? Are you okay?" Rosamund asked.

The barking continued.

"I'm fine," Piper said. "By any chance, do you know if there's a lost dog going around the building, or something?"

“What, did you lose your dog already?” Rosamund leaned against her now-open door, a hint of a smirk on her face. Well, what Piper could see of her face—her hair was a curtain over most of it, and the only defined feature besides that were her thick-rimmed glasses that caught a glimmer from the overhead lighting every now and then.

“No, I didn’t—” then, a second later, Piper processed what she’d said. “Did you say ‘my’ dog? And ‘already’?”

Rosamund nodded slowly. “Yes. What about it?”

“I don’t... uh... when did I get my dog, do you remember?” Piper asked, trying to play it cool. “It’s just been such a long time, my memory’s fuzzy.”

“Are you messing with me? You dropped by this morning to let me know you got a dog, and to let you know if he was ever too loud.” Rosamund paused, and a few barks took her place in the symphony of hallway sounds. “By the way, he’s being too loud.”

“This *morning*?” Piper asked. “And it was... me... who talked to you, right?”

“Unless you’ve got a doppelganger on the loose, it sure was you I talked to.” She opened the door and stepped backwards, leaving enough space for Piper to go through. “Do you want some tea or something? Seems like you’re having an interesting day.”

Piper sighed, following Rosamund inside. “Tea sounds fantastic.”

Rosamund’s apartment should have been just like Piper’s—being across the hall meant its layout was exactly the same, just flipped—but it felt like a completely different place. Plants and vines of all kinds lined the shelves and flowed onto the floor, so many that Piper was surprised she was able to fit any furniture in the place at all. Rosamund strided over to the kitchen, having to slightly duck to avoid hitting her head on the entryway even though the ceilings themselves weren’t incredibly low.

“I’d ask what kind you want, but I’ve only been able to find green tea in the shops for months. I’ve got honey, though, if you want some of that,” Rosamund said, taking two mugs out of a cabinet. “So, how’s your day been, then?”

“Oh! It’s been fine,” Piper replied, awkwardly leaning on the corner of her couch in a failed attempt to seem casual.

Rosamund looked up from setting up the kettle and raised an eyebrow in her direction. “Sure about that? You don’t remember your own dog.”

“Ah. That. Well. It’s a bit of a long story.”

“I don’t think we’re going to run out of time anytime soon.”

And now came the time when Piper had to decide whether to tell the truth to someone who was essentially a stranger. She took a beat to mull it over—too long and Rosamund would get suspicious, so she didn’t have more than a few seconds.

I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell her everything.

But I don’t have anyone else to turn to, now that Ernie’s gone.

Maybe she can give some better advice than my current strategy of ‘just ignore it until it stops.’

Hope I can lie, for once.

“Piper? You there?” Rosamund asked, now leaning over the bar between them. “If you don’t want to tell, it’s alright—”

“No, it’s fine! Just had to figure out where to start,” Piper said. “I’ve been working on a... project with a coworker for a few years now. We finished it just yesterday.”

“That’s great, congratulations.” Rosamund pushed a mug of tea across the counter towards her.

Piper picked up the mug and took a sip—surprisingly, not too hot. “Thanks, but... I tried to give him my final notes today, and he was just gone.”

“Sorry for your loss, then.”

“Oh! No, he’s not dead. I don’t think so, anyway. Gone, but not dead.” Her reflection in the tea didn’t help Piper out, sadly enough. “And now I think I’m being watched.”

The repetitive clinking of Rosamund stirring her own mug stopped. “Watched... by who, do you think?”

“The government, maybe? I have no idea,” Piper said, and took a big swig.

“And you’re being watched because of this project?”

“I don’t know what else it could be.”

“Hmm...” Thinking, Rosamund tapped her spoon on the counter. “You could try to go to some government office to ask? They might be able to help.”

“I can’t see any scenario where that would work out well.”

“Well, do you have any better strategy? You could keep on being watched until you also disappear, like your coworker did.”

Deep cut, Rosamund, Piper thought, trying to not let her shock show outwardly. “I could put a sign on my window saying ‘fuck off,’ but other than that, I don’t have anything.”

“As effective as that sounds, you might just make them angry.”

“You know what, fine. Not like I have anything better to try.” Piper sighed, then downed the last few gulps of tea from her mug. “I should probably head out.”

“No problem.” Rosamund followed her to the door. “Sounds like Ango’s stopped barking, too.”

Piper paused. “Wait, Ango?”

“That’s what you said his name was, right?”

“Yeah, I thought you said... mango...” she trailed off. If she had Ernie’s dog, then that meant she’d talked to him some other time—but she didn’t do that. The implications and nonsensical logic of the time shenanigans gave her a headache. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Any time. Get some sleep, you look like you need it,” Rosamund said, closing the door but opening it up again to get a few more words out. “Be safe, whatever it is you end up doing.”

Piper nodded in response at the now-shut door, then pivoted towards her own once more. In one smooth motion, she unlocked it and opened it just slowly enough to avoid the loud creak it would make if you went too fast. Sitting in the middle of the rug in the entryway was Ango, just as she’d seen him when she went back to yesterday at Ernie’s. He was quiet now, save for the soft thump of his tail on the ground behind him, looking up at Piper expectantly.

“Oooh, I bet you’ve been waiting for me to get back here, huh?” Piper asked, shutting the door behind her and plopping down on the ground in front of Ango. He replied in the form of wagging his tail more violently, the thump turning into a thwack against the rug and the wooden floor underneath.

“You don’t know anything about paradoxes, huh? Must be nice,” Piper said, not expecting an answer. Ango gave her a slobbery lick on the cheek in return. “Even if you’re only in my house right now because of some paradox stuff in the first place.”

Wonder what happened to the version of myself that brought him home this morning, that Rosamund talked to? Piper wondered quietly, then quickly realized that, perhaps, she didn’t want to know the answer to that question—if she messed something up, it could happen to her, too.

Suddenly, from further inside the apartment than the entryway, came a digitized chime that signaled the turn of the hour.

“Oh shit, I have to feed you!” Piper said in realization, jumping up from the floor and over to the kitchen. Ango followed, ears perky and tail wagging in excitement that he’d finally get some food.

- 13 Oct. 2024 -

11:32 AM, MST

She was running late. It was a deadline she’d set for herself, and she was running late. Of course she was. Piper had never been too keen on getting up early on the weekends, and today was no exception. Even though she had set an absurd amount of alarms for much earlier in the morning, here she was, half an hour before noon, trying to rush and find a government office she’d never been to before they (supposedly) got out for their (possible) lunch break. If the office even existed in the first place.

There were far too many unknowns in this situation for Piper to be comfortable with her lateness.

The government district of the city was quiet, for now. The cold, brutalist structures made of concrete like all the rest of the new part of town—if you could still call it new, it was at least twenty-five years old—shone white in the glum lighting provided through the usual overcast sky. If she listened closely enough she thought she could hear the echoes of footsteps, but it could just as easily have been her imagination.

But she knew, after living in New Springs for this long, that the silence was on purpose. In this part of town, anyway. They made it quiet so that no one suspected anything of them—or, at least, that’s what most everyone her age thought.

It was hard to pick out which one she was going to approach. *That* was why she had wanted to get out here earlier—if she could’ve seen people go into work, she could’ve figured out which buildings were actually occupied. Now, though, it was guesswork and trying to read the engraved labels faded by the years of acid rain that occasionally popped up on the sides of the buildings she passed.

They all. Looked. The same. Giant concrete boxes sticking up into the sky, some taller than others, but the same nonetheless. The main street that they all sat along didn’t help, either; it was just named “Governing Boulevard,” and each side road that it intersected was named after a number. Eventually Piper’s determined pace turned into a downtrodden trudge. She looked at her watch. It had only been fifteen minutes.

Ugh.

She kicked a piece of loose concrete ahead of her as she walked. The sky above was gray, but not the kind of gray that tended to bring rain, thankfully. A car passed every now and then, but they all seemed to just be passing through rather than having a destination nearby. A harsh gust of wind blew through Piper when she crossed a street between buildings, the wind cutting right through her dark blue coat and making her lose her concentration with the rock she was kicking.

With a bit too much force behind it, the rock left her toe and flew into a building Piper was facing, bouncing off with a metallic ‘ping’ and back down onto the sidewalk. She groaned to herself and brought her arms in tight to fend off the chill, but then noticed the plaque that the rock had hit.

‘General Administration Building: Est. 2002’ it read, in mottled greenish copper.

Not exactly what she was looking for, but it was a start.

With a revitalized sense of purpose, Piper made the short hike up the stairs of the building to the glass doors that waited at the center of the wide staircase. Her stomach was in knots—she didn't know what else she could do, but at the same time, this felt like an *exceptionally* bad idea. Piper reached the top, took a deep breath, and opened the doors to go inside.

The interior was just as quiet and gray as the outside, but shinier. Her boots clicking on the tile, Piper wondered if the outside of the place once looked as polished as the inside did, but had worn away to the dull and gray it was now. The alternative, that it was built that way, was just sad. She passed the glinting columns of concrete—or, wait, the closer she got to it, the more it seemed like granite—and approached the sole thing that wasn't made of the shiny gray stone in the entire lobby. A honey-colored, large wooden desk sat exactly opposite the door, and was as far away as it could be from it without being outside.

Behind the desk sat an older woman, who looked extremely bored before Piper walked in. In time with the swinging of the door, she looked up from whatever she was reading and pushed her glasses up on her nose, dark gray hair in ringlets behind her almost helping her blend into the equally gray background. During Piper's purposeful walk across, she stared at her with a stern look on her face, probably trying to figure out why she was here. According to her nametag, almost too small and worn to read, her name was May.

Piper clicked her way across the too-wide and too-empty room, and eventually reached the desk. May looked impatient.

“Reason for your visit today?” she asked, and leaned over to her side to go through a drawer closer to the floor.

Piper shifted her weight around. She hadn't thought about what she would do when she got here—no, no, she did, but she hadn't considered what it would be like to actually do this stupid thing. She cleared her throat, and was surprised at the echo it produced in the silent hall.

“I, uh... I have a few questions. Is there a department that has been handling temporal technology?”

“Uh... huh.” May let out a barely stifled laugh, and popped back up to her previous posture, clicking a pen in front of her. “And what kind of questions, Ms. Moreno?”

“I think that they have been keeping track of me and my research pursuits?” Piper said, trying her hardest to sound more confident than she was.

“Oh?” May said, now writing on the form. Her tone dripped with sarcasm. “How do you suppose, exactly?”

“Look, if you're not going to take me seriously, I can just leave. That's all you had to say.”

“I don't know what your plan was coming in here today, but I'm afraid I can't help you.” She looked up from the form, and smiled a cold smile. The snark was gone, now. “There's no 'department' of the sort that you're referring to.”

“Do you think you could help me fi—”

“If this is a prank, and I'm fairly certain that it is, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave or else I will contact security.”

Piper was mortified. This went just about as badly as she had feared it could have. *That's the last time I listen to one of Rosamund's ideas*, she thought.

Nervous tears tried to break through, but she fought them back enough to smile, nod curtly, and turn around to leave. She blinked them away before they had the chance to make their

way down her face, but her watery eyes were particularly uncomfortable in the brisk cold that greeted her outside.

Almost all the way back down the steps back to the sidewalk, Piper's stomach sank. The lady at the desk had called her by name. Neither of them introduced themselves when she came up to it.

Someone knew who she was.

She overstepped a stair with that realization, and felt that terror that only comes when the ground you expect to be underneath your feet is suddenly not there at all. Her foot landed and rolled a little bit; thankfully not enough to have sprained it—she'd been through that before, it wasn't something she'd like to repeat—but more than enough to send her tumbling down the last couple steps to the sidewalk below. Bracing herself with her hands, Piper just barely avoided smashing face-first into the concrete.

For the first time this morning, she was glad that no one was around on this stupid, barren street. Someone may have been watching her, sure, but if they were, she couldn't see them. She wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

Somehow having survived the tumble without much other than a couple of forming bruises on her shins and her knees, as well as a bunch of angry red scrapes on her palms, Piper dusted herself off and started to walk away, doing her best to pretend that nothing had happened.

The further away she got from the apparently-deserted government district, the more lively the city got again. It wasn't the nicest looking city—certainly didn't compare to any of the ones she saw in history books that used to be around, it was all made up of mostly-even blocks of

concrete—but, the people living there didn't seem to notice, and were the key ingredient to making it somewhere someone would actually want to be.

Piper picked up a bag of chips from a vendor on the sidewalk. They were running low on her favorite kind, which wasn't unusual, but she wasn't picky when it came to chips so she was happy with anything. She tipped the vendor the coins, and he flashed a gap-toothed grin her way as she continued on. However, when she popped the first chip into her mouth a few paces down the sidewalk, she was met not with the crisp crunch of a fresh chip, but the wimpy wilt of a stale one. Hoping that the distaste wouldn't show too much on her face, she stowed the bag away until she was out of sight of the vendor; and, as soon as she turned a corner, she tossed the still-full-minus-one-chip bag in the nearest trash can.

This was happening more and more often, now. Piper didn't check the expiration date before she threw the bag away, but she was pretty sure that it was way out of date. Almost all of the stores were running out of things that were fresh. Of course she was worried about the trend, but it was one of those worries that lodged their way in to the back of her mind, instead of the ones that were front and center. She continued down the street, each step getting her closer to the noisier town center up ahead.

Usually, the square in the middle of the central marketplace was busy, but in a quiet kind of way; people shopping around and wandering from store to store, parents running daily errands, and the occasional merchant yelling to advertise their wares.

Today, though, it was crowded. Packed with people, standing shoulder to shoulder in one corner, but still close together to the opposite edge. They weren't overly loud or anything, not yet, but the crowd seemed like they were running on a short fuse. Piper pushed her way through, uttering a muffled apology here and there to the odd shoved elbow or slightly stomped foot.

About halfway through to the other side, she found an odd pocket of sparseness and saw an opportunity to see what all the buzz was about. Standing on her toes she was just barely tall enough to see it above the multicolored heads and hats, but she caught a glimpse just before the bubble she was in closed back up.

OUT OF EVERYTHING.

Oh no.

The sign was being tacked up just at that moment. Piper fell back on her heels, and suddenly realized that she needed to get out of the square, and fast. The murmurs in the crowd grew louder, the words from the sign slowly rippling their way across the sea of people.

Yelling began towards the front, and echoed along into the back of the crowd. People started pushing, hard, to try and get forward to try and get something, anything else for themselves. Piper started to try to run to the way she needed to go, to cross the square—that's all she needed to do, cross the square. But the bodies around her were pushing forward and any sideways movement she tried to make was lost in the current.

Suddenly, she was pushed into another pocket where no one was standing for a brief moment. Piper started to fall face first, and just barely caught herself with her hands. Focused on trying to pop back up to her feet, she almost didn't see the person standing against the tide of the crowd and staring down right at her.

But she did.

As soon as they locked eyes, the person dipped backwards into the rest of the crowd. She wasn't able to get much of a look at their face, but they were going towards the way Piper needed to go, so, she thought, why not follow? They might have better luck finding a way out than she did.

She moved through the crowd, pushing and shoving equally as much as she was getting shoved herself, muttering a quiet apology under her breath after each movement. They were still ahead of her, looking far too casual walking through the crowd. Piper tried to take note of what they looked like from behind—fairly tall, black leather jacket, and short, brown, wavy hair that was buzzed at the sides. Losing them in the chaos that surrounded her was easy, but somehow they found their way back to the center of her vision, stuck in an inexplicable pocket of people at just the right time.

It was getting just a little bit more sparse but not any less loud, and judging by the buildings that were getting closer, Piper had chosen correctly in following them out of the mess. She kept losing them for longer periods of time, now, which was odd, but they kept reappearing, looking just as calm as they did the first time they stared her down. Also, the usual exit she would take seemed to be blocked up by a growing crowd of people trying to flee the chaos themselves, so she decided it was better to follow someone who seemed like they knew what they were doing.

So focused on trying to avoid the odd person who ran by every now and then, Piper almost ran face-first into one of the stores that marked the edge of the square. She looked left and right to try and continue to follow this person who had led her out of there, but they were gone. Had she just imagined them?

Then she caught the shine of a glass door opening, and then closing, on one of her glances to her right. Piper looked back towards the still-crowded street she had planned on leaving out of, shrugged, and briskly walked over to the door that had opened just a few stores over. The doors were pretty much the only thing that differentiated the businesses from one another—other than that, they were just big concrete blocks like everything else. People seemed

to be staying away from the edges, for some reason, and gravitated towards either the exits of the square or the main grocery store in the middle.

Then a shot rang out, and Piper started to run.

Whatever hesitation she had harbored before was gone now. She reached the door, slammed it open and shut it just as quickly behind her, only to meet—

Nothing.

The store was empty. The shelves were full, still—mostly hair care products instead of food, which is why it must have been as quiet as it was—but that didn't explain why there was no one here. It was noon at this point, on a Saturday, prime shopping hour. Where was everyone?

Taking advantage of the relative safety of the store, Piper took a deep breath and stretched a bit, suddenly very alone instead of surrounded by people just a few seconds earlier. Judging by the amount of noise still coming from outside, it didn't seem like she'd be getting out of here any time soon. She wandered over to one of the shelves near the back, a big sign over the top of it declaring it to be shampoo.

Huh. Weird. None of these looked like brands she'd ever seen before. Piper tried to pick one up, and was surprised when it didn't come up off of the shelf with the amount of force one would usually use to pick up a small object. She chose one on a lower shelf and pulled up on the bottle as hard as she could, but it still refused to be lifted. They were all attached to the shelves, glued down for... some reason.

She gave up on trying to lift the shampoo from the shelf like in some kind of terrible rip-off of "The Sword in the Stone," electing to try her luck around the counter. Now expecting someone to be hiding behind there, she approached carefully and leaned over to get a better look, only to find empty floor space. Going around to the other side of the counter proved the same

thing—no one was there. She crouched down to the ground, searching under the counter and shelves in the back to see if someone, anyone, was back there, only to find nothing.

“I am really, *really* sorry about this,” a hushed, familiar voice said from behind her.

A sudden pressure was placed on her face, and then everything went dark—the store disappearing from her vision before she could even say a word, and Piper fell into a different kind of void than the one she was used to.

Chapter Four: Tuesday's Gone

22 Sept. 1983, 6:02 PM, EST

Cambridge, MA

The town was completely different than it was just an hour before. The streets were barren, somehow; Ernie guessed that most everyone had been running somewhere to hide, or to a car, and the non-residential part of town didn't seem to be the location of choice to run towards. He was rushing, too—his quick footsteps crunched on the orange, brown, and red leaves that littered the cobblestone sidewalk, trying to get back to the hotel he was staying at to recover his things (and his car).

But for now, he was alone. And things seemed almost normal. It was quiet around here, the sirens having stopped a few minutes before, even though the drone of motors and angry car horns blared from a busier part of the city. Even if just for a moment, he could forget the world he now lived in and could pretend that the old one was still around. If the quiet moments had lasted much longer than they did, he probably would have convinced himself of it, too.

However, every few minutes or so, someone would run past or drive past with such panic in their way of movement that it thrust him out of his sweet daydream back into the horrors of the new world. He wasn't ready to face them, nor was anyone, he supposed, but they all had to anyway.

Still, though. In the quiet moments, the kind delusion returned.

Despite all the conflict happening in his head, his feet had kept going on to their destination and he had arrived at the hotel.

The lobby was empty, save for the Hall and Oates echoing through hidden speakers. A handwritten note reading '*sorry, I had to go*' was left at the concierge's desk, the only remnant

of whoever had been working there. Ernie walked to the elevator, the tap of his shoes on the pink marble floor matching the beat of the song. He pressed the button and immediately a friendly chime greeted him and the door opened—to his surprise, someone was inside.

The woman in the elevator looked like she had been crying, and was carrying a few bags. When she realized she was no longer alone, she quickly rubbed her eyes and walked out as soon as she could fit through the doors. Ernie tried to say ‘hello’ as she nudged past him, but decided that maybe it wasn’t the best choice. No one seemed to be in the mood for talking anymore, from what he could tell.

No one, that is, except for Meg.

Now empty, the elevator awaited his command. Ernie double checked the number on the key tag he was given, and pressed the button that would take him to the fifth floor. The ascension took much longer than he expected it would; much longer than it seemed to the first time. He was fine with it. Why did he feel okay, now? Nothing would ever be the same again. Was he just clinging to these last remnants of the world that was in the hopes that might bring it back? He didn’t know, and didn’t have enough time to think through it before the elevator chimed again, and the doors opened.

The long hallway that led to his room was even more quiet than the lobby. Usually in a hotel, you’d hear people rustling about—some talking, a television or shower running—but now, it was silent enough that the only noise of note was the high pitched ringing in his ears that was always there, but typically covered up by the sounds of the world. Somehow, even the silence didn’t strike open the wall of realization he had unintentionally formed in the back of his mind. When that barrier broke, he didn’t know what he would be like.

His hotel room was just as he left it: messy. Everything was in its place; his suitcase and its innards strewn across the bed near the window, sneakers that he traveled in acting like a makeshift doorstep, the half-open closet door displaying his almost-neatly hung up shirt that he had planned on wearing to work the next day. It was normal. As long as he didn't think too much.

So, in an attempt to keep his streak of delusion going, he sat down on his bed and did what he would normally do after getting back from a long day of work: kick his shoes off, and take a nice, long nap.

The second his head hit the pillow, though, the knowledge that something was Extremely Wrong rose to the surface. No sleep came, but despite that, he lay there a while and just thought. Thought to himself about the things he had lost forever, and what would have happened if he hadn't. It was a daydream and he knew it, but it was comforting, at least. He imagined the next place he would go—somewhere new that he'd never been before, somewhere far away from everything he'd ever known, somewhere across the world. Things that on normal days he knew would never happen so he didn't allow himself to dream them, so as to not get his hopes up.

But, as he knew in his bones, there was no longer a 'normal.'

Daydreams only kept Ernie occupied for so long. After about twenty minutes spent motionless with his eyes closed, lying on the crispy flower-print comforter covered in laundry, he let out a deep sigh. And then, he let himself think about what he needed to do.

He knew he needed to start slow. Step by step. Don't consider the big things, not just yet. He wasn't ready for that, and he knew it.

So. Starting small.

Meg.

Yep, that was it. The girl he was meeting up with in—he checked the clock on the bedside table—about an hour. He needed to pack up all of his belongings and prepare to leave everything he'd ever known in an hour.

No, no, he told himself, *you just need to pack up to go meet with Meg in half an hour. There ya go. Much better.*

He popped up from the bed, and after a big stretch, started to gather his things in his suitcase. It didn't take long, really, because he didn't bring all that much with him. This was just supposed to be a three day trip, after all. The rest of his things were at home.

Home was gone.

Oh no.

Ernie hiked in a breath and rubbed his eyes, trying to push those thoughts away again. For now. He changed out of his stuffy work clothes and into what he traveled in—jeans and sneakers, made the journeys much more comfortable than in a suit and tie. And he needed all the comfort he could get at the moment. He threw the rest of his things into his suitcase without much care, and just before he zipped it up, the reality of the situation peeked through the wall he had built up, just a little bit. For some supplies, he stole all the still-sealed toiletries in the bathroom, and raided the snacks in the mini-bar. If the concierge wasn't in the building when he walked through before, he was sure they wouldn't care now. After that, he was satisfied with his makeshift getaway bag. It would have to do.

Later, though, sometime when he could think about the reality of his situation, he knew he would need more.

Ernie wheeled his bag behind him to the door, keys in hand, when he had one last moment of foresight and grabbed a couple pairs of sheets, two blankets, and all the towels he could carry from the closet in the hallway.

I'm just borrowing them, he lied to himself. He knew it wasn't true, but couldn't admit it.

I'll bring them back, he thought, stuffing the stolen linens into his already full suitcase.

The door was still closed.

Maybe he could keep it closed? If he turned around now and just went to sleep, when he woke up would the world be normal again?

Ernie shook his head. He at least had enough sense to know that denial now would only make things worse in the future. If he stayed holed up in here and something *else* happened, he'd be totally fucked. For now, though, he could pretend to make himself feel better, while still doing things that didn't put him in danger. Cognitive dissonance, or something like that. He was pretty sure he'd read it in a book once.

He opened the door and stepped through.

The hallway looked the same, but felt different. Now that its final tenant was leaving, it was like the hotel had taken its final breath and died. Peaceful, yes, and quiet, but unnaturally still. It must've been the knowing that there was nothing else for him here that made it change.

By the time he got to the lobby, the music had stopped. In the back of his mind, he knew it would probably never start again. But, the front of his mind still reassured him that the music would play again in a few months or so when everything was magically figured out.

To his relief, his car was still in the parking lot waiting for him. Ernie patted the shiny red Bronco on the hood, which was weird—he usually wasn't a Car Guy, but nostalgia will do all sorts of things—and loaded his suitcase into the back. He dug out the food to lighten the load on the bag's zippers, and closed it up. It sat shotgun next to him, bags of chips and other assorted junk foods as a friendly face until he got to Meg.

Now to figure out where Branaugh's was. The only smart thing he'd done all day was bring the yellow pages from the sports bar along with him—flipping through, it only took him a few seconds to find the listing again: 772 Memorial Drive. Yep, that's an address. He sure didn't have a map. It was on the river, though, he knew that for sure, so he pulled out of the parking lot and drove southwest until he found the street in question. Counting down the numbers on the sparse waterfront buildings, he finally found it.

He didn't really need to see the address to know he'd arrived, though; with a suitcase and a backpack at her side Meg was sitting on the curb, head in her hands, seeming like the only person left anywhere around the place. Pulling up closer, Ernie rolled down his window.

“Need a ride?” he asked.

Meg popped her head up, quickly rubbing her slightly smudged makeup away from her eyes. “Took you long enough.”

After putting the car in park in the middle of the street, Ernie hopped out to meet her. “What a reunion.”

“What a reunion,” Meg repeated, heaving her backpack on her shoulder. “I was a bit worried you'd decided to not show.”

“You really think I'd do that?” he asked, picking up her suitcase and bringing it around to the back of the Bronco.

Meg didn't answer. Ernie figured she just didn't hear him, for some reason. Now fully loaded up, he shut the back hatch of the car and returned to the driver's seat—he'd forgotten to move the snack bag, he just realized.

Staring blankly through the windshield into the night sky beyond, Meg was silent. Electing not to bother her, Ernie shifted the car into drive and set off towards the highway.

About half a mile from the river, she finally broke from her trance with a sigh. "Thank you for doing this, honestly."

"No problem at all," Ernie said. "Any last stops before we leave town for good?"

"I would say yes, but I'm not sure I'd be able to leave after," she replied.

He nodded. "I feel that, too."

And so Ernie, Meg, and the Bronco drove off and away into the unusually dark night.

Chapter Five: Take a Chance

13 October 2024, 1:35 PM, MST

Piper Moreno

When Piper opened her eyes, it was hard to tell if she actually had done so at all. It was pitch black, wherever she was, and in the haziness of half-sleep right when she woke up, she wondered if she was dead. She was lying down on top of something softer than the floor, and underneath something warm. If she was actually dead, then she could probably get used to this. An attempt to sit up proved successful, and looking around the space she found herself, she could just barely see an outline of light surrounding what she assumed to be the door out of here. For some reason she didn't feel scared, more confused than anything, but without even thinking about it she tugged the blanket up around herself to act as a shield from whatever waited outside. Also, it was cold in here.

A buzz came from above the outline of the door, providing a welcome sound other than the ringing in her ears, and the second that happened, a dim light shone out and slowly got brighter from a few bulbs on the ceiling. Piper was surprised to see a mustard yellow carpet standing out against the gray concrete of the walls of the room, partially covered on one side by a desk and a chair made from dark painted wood. The blanket she was clutching seemed old based on the amount of decorations on it, but it still looked new, which was odd.

Through a square speaker on the wall near the bed, a tinny voice blared out.

“Are you awake?” it asked, a male voice obviously waiting for an answer.

“Nope, not at all,” Piper replied with a yawn. She was still too tired to ask any other questions, and the strangeness of the situation hadn't totally sunk in yet.

“Okay, good. You’re going to talk to…” paper rustled on the other side of the line, “Roswell. They’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Alright,” she said, then suddenly snapped to awareness. A feeling like an electric shock went through her, and she shot straight up in the bed. “Wait a minute, where am I?”

But the crackling from the line had already stopped, and the room was silent again. From outside the door, footsteps clacked from one end of her perception to the other and out of earshot once more. She knew she wasn’t completely alone here, which in a way was comforting, but it also meant that she *was being kept here by people*, which was much less than comforting. A few more steps came and went, and Piper tried to check her watch to see what time it was—only to realize that all of her things were gone.

“Shit,” she muttered, patting her pockets to confirm what she already knew—yep, nothing was there. At least she’d left the device in her bag at home, though the small relief that brought wasn’t much to help the thought that she’d been searched while she was out, and was apparently enough of a threat to have even her watch taken away.

After what could have been an hour or a few minutes, footsteps approached once again. However, this time they didn’t continue past; they continued to get louder and louder, until finally they stopped, accompanied by a shadow overcoming the light that had been seeping underneath the door. Two quick knocks echoed through the small space, and to Piper’s surprise, no one burst through the door. They were waiting for an answer—a nice gesture, she supposed, but not nice enough to override the fact that she was being held captive.

“Come in? I guess?” she said—not shouting, but hopefully loud to be heard on the other side.

The door slid open, sending a widening sliver of bright white light shooting across the still-dim room. A familiar face peeked around it—though this time, not wearing what must have been a wig and fake glasses—putting on a meek smile as they stepped through.

“Hiya,” the person she had previously thought to be her neighbor said. “So I bet you have some questions.”

“Rosamund?!”

“It’s Roswell, actually,” they said calmly, closing the door behind them with a click.

“Apologies for going undercover, just needed a way to keep an eye on you.”

“And that was you in the crowd, then, too? You’re the one who knocked me out in the store! What the hell was that about?” Piper asked angrily, swinging her feet off the bed and onto the floor.

“Hey, hey, okay, I get that you’re a bit freaked out right now, I get it.” They raised their hands up in the air defensively. “That was the only way to get you here.”

“Oh, really? The *only* way? Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. Again, I’m sorry.”

Piper, at a loss as far as what to say, continued to sit off the side of the bed and stew. At the door, Roswell looked like they had a moment of realization, and for the first time, stepped closer.

“I… feel like I should make a formal introduction,” they said, and extended their hand down to Piper. “I’m Roswell, you can call me Ros if you want. And you’re currently deep in the bowels of a place I cannot tell you the name of. You… know why you’re here, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” Piper finally stood up, no longer the tallest person in the room, and shook their hand. “And you—and whoever you work for, I guess—are what’s been following me for the last few days?”

“That’s not entirely correct, but yes.”

“What do you mean, ‘not entirely correct?’ Who else could’ve been following me around?”

“Wrong part,” Roswell said. “We’ve been following you for much longer than the past few days.”

The shock went through Piper again, but this time it was colder. “You *what?*”

“That’s beside the point. I need you to answer some questions for me.” The room’s light flickered a bit, then continued to brighten as some unseen force continued to turn up the dimmer switch. “If you want answers, and I know you do, just help me out here, alright?”

Piper cocked an eyebrow. “Help *you* out? I’m surprised you don’t know more about me than I know about myself, if you’ve really been watching me for so long.”

“It’s not all about you, so... let’s get started,” they said. “Where’s your uncle?”

“If I knew, that’d make my life much easier. He was gone when I went by yesterday,” Piper said, not mentioning her brief stint through time, even though she was fairly certain they were already aware of that. “Gave me his dog, too, so it doesn’t seem like he’s coming back anytime soon.”

“Are you sure?” Roswell asked sternly. It was clear they were trying to be intimidating.

“Very sure.” Piper stood up and got a couple paces closer to the door, preparing herself to try something out. “Also, because of you, I no longer have a neighbor I can call to check on him, so I really should be getting back.”

“We can’t let you go just yet.” Walking a couple steps over, Roswell effectively blocked her way to the door with their lanky frame.

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, Piper plopped back down on the bed. “Fine. Hit me with your questions.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s only about—” they checked their watch— “one-fifty right now.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course.” Roswell pulled a wooden chair out from the desk on the opposite side of the room and dragged it closer over before sitting in it sideways.

Piper guessed that they—both Roswell and whatever they worked for—were trying to make a good impression. For some reason. That, or they were scared of her. If they’d wanted to intimidate her more than this or get rid of her in another way, they had ample time to do that earlier when she was out. Instead, they tucked her into a bed that was nicer than the one she had at home. Even though her gut was yelling at her to stay on high alert, she let her guard down a little bit.

“Just to make sure we’re on the same page.” Roswell cleared their throat. “What did your uncle say to you yesterday, when he gave you the dog?”

Ah. Shit, Piper thought. Of all the things they could’ve asked, they picked the one she knew nothing about. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember? It was yesterday. You visited me in the morning to tell me about it.”

“Oh, that. Yes. Um,” Piper mumbled, trying to stall until she either came up with a fake answer that was good enough, or the knowledge from that now-nonexistent version of herself appeared from the void. Neither happened. “I think he said he was leaving.”

“Anything else? We talked for a while. Do you remember anything about that?” Roswell asked, fishing for an answer that Piper could not give.

“You made some good tea?” *Uh-oh, no, that was last night.* She absentmindedly patted her jacket pocket where her notebook usually resided, only to remember that it wasn’t there. “Where’s my stuff at?”

“Do you... need it?”

“Um, yes? I might have written something down in my notebook. Can I get it back?”

“We don’t want you to be taking notes in here,” Roswell said. “You’ll get your things back when we know for sure that you’re not going to pose a threat, or spill our deepest secrets to the world.”

“Secrets? You haven’t told me anything,” Piper said, now fully frustrated. “Do you want to exchange secrets? Because this has just been an interrogation on my side of things, and I have no idea who the *fuck* you are or what’s going on or why you’re keeping me here.”

“Hey, hey, I’ll tell you everything you need to know—just please, be patient.” Standing up and taking a step back, Roswell raised their hands up in an attempt to seem less imposing. Which was difficult for them to be in the first place, beanpole that they were. “Okay. You can ask a couple questions, I will answer what I can.”

“Fine.” For some reason, Piper was still sitting on the bed. Nowhere else to go, she supposed.

Roswell sat back down in the chair with a quiet ‘hmp.’

“What do you want from me?” Piper asked.

Their face fell. “That’s... an answer I can’t give you just yet.”

She groaned. “Fine. How long have you been watching me?”

“That I can answer. We’ve been following you guys for quite a while. Your uncle’s been on our radar since before I was even born, I bet.” Roswell tapped their hand on the side of the chair. “Honestly, I’m surprised it took either of you this long to notice, I mean, we’ve majorly slipped more than a few times.”

Her heart sank. Ernie had been watched for *decades*. How much had he not told her? All she was able to muster in response was a small “oh.”

“Since it seems like you don’t want to answer my first question, I’ll try a different one,” they said. “What led to you getting involved in Ernest Faulkner’s... temporal... experimentations?”

“You can say ‘time travel,’ it’s fine,” Piper replied. “And how do you think? He’s my uncle. I grew up knowing he was this ‘genius,’ always working on different projects. When I got into tech in school and ended up being pretty good at it, he got me to help him out.”

Roswell nodded. They weren’t taking notes or doing anything like that, which made Piper suddenly become certain that the two of them were being watched, or at the very least listened to.

“Did he ever say why he was so invested in the field of temporal mechanics?” they asked.

After wracking her brain for a minute, Piper realized that in the half dozen or so years that she’d been working with her uncle he’d never mentioned his reasonings at all. She shook her head. “No, I don’t think he did.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Roswell’s tone changed again to be more serious. “Have either of you changed anything? Or is that even possible at all?”

“The answer to that is... complicated. I think it’s possible. I can only speak for myself, but the only thing I’ve knowingly changed is that I wrote something in a notebook during the first test,” she lied.

Roswell shot her a suspicious look. “Then what was your visit with Ernie?”

They know, she realized. “I don’t know exactly what that changed. All I know is that he for sure lived at the house he lived at, and I have his dog now.”

“Alright, I can recognize a brick wall when I run into it,” they said. “Why did you build it?”

“I already said, he’s my uncle, I was just helping him out—”

“No, no, that’s not the question.” They leaned over, perching their head on top of a fist, staring Piper down. “Why did *you* build it?”

She hadn’t ever really thought about it, weirdly enough. The reasons were there; everyone has reasons for doing anything, even if they don’t realize it. Of course she knew why she was doing what she did—she wanted to be remembered, be the source of a scientific breakthrough, and have all sorts of things named after her for all time. But it was more than that, too: what they were working on had the potential to help people, to fix things, to stop what had happened forty years ago from having happened in the first place. The reasons kept coming, familiar as they were.

This train of thought was broken by a polite interruption from Roswell. Piper came back to reality with a jump a split second after the chair scraped loudly against the concrete floor.

“Oh shoot, sorry to spook you. I think I might have to leave soon.” They were standing up now, pushing the chair back over to its rightful place at the desk. “You were saying?”

“I did it because I think it can help something. Or someone. Or a lot of someones. Hopefully.” Piper stood up too, and started to approach the door like she had done before. “If that’s it, can I go? I don’t really know what else you want me to say.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re in it for the right reasons,” they said, meeting up with her and getting closer to the door. “And no, you can’t go just yet—just one more question from me, okay?”

“No.” Piper sidestepped quickly to get between Roswell and the door, and to her surprise, succeeded. “One last question from me, then you can ask yours.”

“I think we’ll only have time left for one more, and it’s going to have to be mine, I’m sorry.” They looked nervous. “Have you or your uncle changed anything in the timeline, and were you working with him on anything other than building it?”

“You already asked that, and the answer is no. To both.” Piper maintained her place barring the door and leaned back against it, a cold metal that she could feel through her jacket. “Hey look! Seems like you’ve got time for one more question.”

“I don’t really know what you want to ask that I haven’t answered already,” Roswell said, looking every second like they were going to burst out of their skin from some strange source of unease. “If you want to talk to someone else I can arrange that—”

“I’m fine talking to you, thank you very much.” Piper looked them up and down, and smirked. “And my question is this: why are you scared of me?”

A couple feet away, Roswell clasped their hands together and let out an unintentional, nervous laugh. “I—what? No! We’re not scared of you, don’t worry.”

“Why are you acting like it, then?”

“There’s... a lot of things that could happen—and have happened—that don’t seem to be your fault, but we don’t know for sure.” Roswell stopped pacing. “We could handle you if we needed to.”

“What the *hell* are you talking about?” Piper asked.

“All I’m saying is, there are things that you’re connected to, not saying that you are involved or not, but connected. And those things are dangerous,” they said. “So, by association, you are, too.”

“Haven’t you been watching me all this time? You know everything about me, right?” she asked, a bit of sarcasm creeping in. Piper stared at them blankly. “At the very least, you could tell me what’s actually going on here.”

“What part of ‘you are connected to dangerous things’ don’t you understand?” Roswell stepped up to her at the door and looked down at her once they got close enough. “Now, for the last time: I need to go. Please move.”

Possessed by some strange, combative force, Piper stood her ground and said: “You’re going to have to make me.”

Though she couldn’t hear it, a rush of air hitting her back indicated to Piper that the door she was standing in front of had slid open. Fully intending to make a run for it, she did a heel turn—only to find that her way was blocked by an older woman wearing both a sharp pantsuit and an expression of absolute annoyance.

“I’m Director Hughes,” she said, and extended her hand, seeming to warm up slightly. “For someone who’s broken all the known laws of time and space, you’d think you would recognize that you’re a threat.”