

He always dreamed of going to the future.
Then one day the future came to him.

'It was the twenty-first century. It sounds strange to call it that now, because I'm so used to the lingo of the fourth millennium. They call it 2.1.C; less syllables or something. You wouldn't believe how lazy people from the future are.

Anyway. My name is Aaron Sellafield. I was sixteen at the time everything started. I'd fallen into that whole 'high school social outcast' role I suppose. I had friends; at least one, I mean, whatever. That's not really important. Point is, I wasn't special, not like those super intelligent kids that go on quiz TV shows or complete a PhD before they hit puberty. I just had a pretty simple idea about time travel one day; this theory I decided to investigate.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My story begins, as stories often do, at the start. I'm just a typical high school student in my hometown of Stradleigh, north England. To clarify the kind of person I'm not: I have no random friends in the higher echelons of freelance science; I wasn't a son of one of the X-Men; and (as far as I'm aware) I was never short-listed by benevolent aliens to guide humanity through its darkest hour. If they're recruiting, though, I'm totally up for that.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm normal. But not quite, clearly, or I would be like everyone else. You get me?'

ALEXANDER WEBB

Chronozone Zero

THE CONTINUUM SAGA

-1-

One for all the daydreamers

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1.

The Chrononaut's name was Tethis Lithi Arkwright and she wasn't to be born for another one thousand years.

She stood on the neat grass of Kelvingrove Park. Two white boots with an artificial quality, like the fabric of a race driver's overalls. White leggings, tucked into the boots, also had the same puffy, matted look. A black and a yellow stripe ran up the outer sides of the leggings, flowing seamlessly into a full jumpsuit wrapped around a flawless female torso. Slightly padded shoulders pronounced the shape and slender covered arms ended with slim white gloves. The figure's face was that of a beautiful woman somewhere in her early twenties, with flowing blonde hair and a pearl-plastic mechanical graft on her right temple.

She lifted her hand and deliberately tapped the graft above her eye. Her dark blue eyes flickered, the pupils darting to and fro to read holographic shapes focused millimetres in front of them. Her eyebrows turned to a frown; an expression that grew across her face like a stain spreading on a white tablecloth.

'He's not here.' She said finally.

The voice that answered resonated inside her head.

- 'But we've successfully translocated several hundred miles from...'

'Yes, I know that. What I mean is I can't pick up any likely traces in the vicinity.' Tethis replied. There was a blip and a short crackle then the reply came again, vibrating inside her ear-drum implant.

- 'Confirmed. Well, I mean it's no wonder really. I told you that starting our search a hundred and fifty miles from the CZ was overkill.'

Tethis sighed with some resignation, still looking around in a mechanical fashion. 'You always have to be right, don't you?'

- 'People don't move that kind of distance so casually in this era, do they?'

She tapped her chin. 'I know. But I'm positive this is where the readings pointed to. And now they show up blank?'

- 'Yes.'

'It doesn't add up.' Tethis looked around suspiciously. 'I want to search the zone on an inward spiral. That would be the logical thing to do.'

- 'Mother, please come back to the ship. The nice primitivos are staring again.'

Tethis glanced at the old man sitting on the bench nearby. He was indeed staring at her. Although Tethis wasn't quite the strangest thing to have set foot in Kelvingrove Park, she was giving him the willies.

She mentally sifted through her chronological knowledge and smiled back as warmly as she could. 'It's a Hands-Free!' She called out, tapping the side of her head in an explanatory way.

-*'That's not all that's absent.'*

'Shut up, you.' She muttered, walking back through the trees toward the ship.

The bemused pensioner continued eating his packed lunch.

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'Now just... what on earth is this?' Ms Ulster held the paper in front of Aaron's face. She was clearly frustrated beyond the point of restraint. It seemed she might even swear if pushed.

'Um. A science report.' He replied blankly. There were some giggles. The others seemed to think he was trying to be funny, but he wasn't. It was a science report.

'This...' she clenched the paper with frustration. '*This* is not science, Aaron. This is what we call *'fantasy'*. Fanciful conjecture. Nothing but whimsical nonsense.'

Ah, thought Aaron. Because investigations are about stuff we already know. He didn't voice his opinion; he'd learned the hard way about the pitfalls of speaking his mind.

The gaunt old science teacher glared at him for a moment. 'We are not living in the times of Thales. In our day, a mere theory means nothing. You have to have evidence. You can't just say the centre of the Earth is a compressed ball of fairy dust and expect to win a Nobel Prize.' She frowned suddenly, interrupting her own rant. 'Did you read the homework sheet properly?'

'Yes.' Aaron replied. 'To write an essay that aims to find something out about the laws of physics.' He recited.

'Right.' She said. 'So you knew what you had to do. Now, why did you hand in this half-baked *joke*? You think you can get marks for taking the mickey?'

How dare she! Aaron flinched. He'd put a **lot** more thought into his report than she assumed, and probably more than half the other students ever did. Typically a quick glance away from the PlayMaster 5 and a moments' pause from texting their mates, churning out a cloned essay on a Newtonian Law.

His work had been unusual, but it wasn't off-topic. 'Universal Sticktion Effect Theory' he had called it. A thesis on the way an object that is stationary conforms and is harder to move the longer it remains such. Scientifically, the theory ends pretty much with the tread of a boot on a wet surface, but he'd sort of gone on further from there.

'I'll grant you, it has a nice beginning, but the rest is utter garbage.' She continued. After introducing the concept, he had admittedly gone into speculating that all objects resist change, if they have remained unchanged for a time, as part of the universe's natural structure, a kind of oppositional force to entropy. He may even have gone as far to say that history itself has an optimal path, that events don't so much fork out but in fact meander like a river taking the easiest route. It might have digressed somewhat, but it was still in an enquiring nature and he'd researched his speculations. After all, she did specify it was to be on 'anything you find interesting'.

'Suffice to say... I could give no more than a low 'D' for that.' She said; her manner more collected again. 'Which is disappointing, because you're a bright student Aaron. You just... well, you need to come down to planet Earth. Understand?'

Aaron made a faint nodding gesture of simultaneous gratitude and loathing, taking the paper back from her outstretched hand. He felt stupid. Ms Ulster never entertained anything that was even slightly controversial, and he knew that. Yet he'd still gone ahead with his idea and the result, he had to admit, didn't surprise him at all.

The teacher turned and held the next paper to her eye, her icy face melting back into a smile. She strode over to an expectant-looking girl on the other side of the room. 'Ah, Helen Reynolds... yes, a wonderful 'Second Newtonian Law' investigation here. I especially like your use of the pink gel pens, it looks very neat...'

As her voice trailed to the other side of the room, Aaron's friend leaned over. 'Dude, what the hell did you write? You didn't go into Nazi Precognitive Research again?'

'No.' Aaron hissed. 'I've never *written* about that.'

'Whatever it was,' he added vaguely.

'It was just stuff that came to me.' Aaron said with a shrug, watching the smiles and grins between the teacher and the far table.

'Why don't you just do what you're supposed to for a change, make life a little easier on yourself?'

Aaron looked up at the ceiling. 'I wish I knew, Moley.'

David Burrows didn't mind being called Moley anymore; he'd grown to like it and almost no-one called him by his real name now. It was originally a pun on his surname, but the fact that there were three Davids in their class alone meant that a nickname was a handy thing to have. Besides, Moley's social understanding was sharper than a military pencil; he knew the best way to combat an insulting nickname was to steal it for himself.

'I reckon you like the challenge or summat. That's what it is.' Moley threw a sideways glance.

'I don't think so-' Aaron fell short of finishing his sentence as the teacher turned and moved to the next table. The general murmur in the classroom was acceptable, but he had a bad habit of being the last one to stop talking when the teacher wanted to carry on the lesson; which was always received with an irritated 'Aaron, please be quiet!' remark. He continued to keep an eye on her.

'Anyway.' Moley continued, 'You done your History for next lesson?'

Aaron frowned. 'We had homework?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh.'

Moley leant back a little on his chair. 'Hey, no problem, mate. I'll help you with it over lunch.'

'Thanks man. I really didn't realise there was any.'

'Sure.' His friend replied in a subtle tone somewhere between sincerity and sarcasm.

'What was it anyway?'

'We're supposed to write about how America got dragged into the First World War. Or how the war got started. Something like that. Dunno, can't say I'm that interested in history.' Moley said, objectively watching Jason Steeple carve a crude phallus into the table with the end of a mathematical compass.

'You're predicted an 'A' for history. How the hell can you do so well when you don't even care?' Aaron sounded exasperated.

'I dunno. It's just school, in't it?' Moley replied. He had an almost clinical way of just getting on with things, no matter how dull or difficult, so long as he could see something good coming out of it. It annoyed the hell out of Aaron; who had repeatedly cited this fact as evidence that Moley was not human, but a hybrid alien from Sirius.

'Well I kinda like history.' Aaron admitted. 'And I still forgot about it.'

'You forget everything.' Moley grinned.

'No I- well, yeah but... okay, so sometimes.'

'You refuse to write anything down, so it's not surprising.'

Aaron looked about distractedly. 'I don't like rigid stuff. Schedules... timetables... reminder notes. Makes me feel, uh oppressed I suppose.'

'Christ, you're a regular George Orwell, aren't you?'

'Well I don't mean to be. It just doesn't feel right doing things purely 'cause that's the way they're done-' Aaron stopped talking as he realised the teacher and most of the class were waiting for him to finish.

'Thankyou for that comment, Mr. Sellafield.'

Aaron glared at the desk. *Damn, always when I'm not looking.*

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A short ring of the bell resounded through the corridors of the school, signifying lunchtime.

Aaron didn't like lunchtime; it was a boring gap in the day. Much like break time was, only longer. There was nothing at all to do except eat. Somehow, that often ended up taking the whole hour anyway. But besides food, it was a time when he was unsure what to do with himself.

Usually he went off on his own for a while to think and daydream hopefully without bothering anyone. Unfortunately, there wasn't anywhere you could really go without somehow arousing suspicion in somebody.

You could sit indoors, in the Technology and Humanities block. They had comfy seats, computers that were almost good enough to be in a cheap internet café, and because the sixth-formers used it so much, it even had a vending machine. Of course, only sixth-formers were actually allowed to stay inside during breaks. If a teacher found him, it'd be the 'Go outside and get some sunshine, lad' remark and off he went.

You could, providing you didn't mind standing up the whole time, hang around outside the back of the bike sheds. But you'd almost certainly catch the evil gaze of Headmaster Knightsbridge; well, not evil as such; he was just overly suspicious of children, an unfortunate but seemingly necessary outlook for a headmaster. Knightsbridge had his office placed in clear view of the rear of the bike sheds, to openly counter common high school lore that the most outrageous events will occur there. For some reason he

never suspected the students would figure this out and treat the secluded Gym Block as the new back-of-the-bike-sheds from then onwards.

If it came down to it, you could sit on the benches outside where you're meant to sit at break. But then nosy girls would come up and ask you why you're sitting by yourself.

'I'm waiting for Moley.' Aaron replied, feeling less intruded on than usual as he sort of had a reason for doing nothing. Most people seemed to need a reason to do nothing.

The tall girl shrugged. 'Can we sit here then?'

'Uh- I suppose so.' He glanced about. The tall, Hispanic girl talking to him was Bonita Menendez. She wasn't dazzling, particularly, but her foreign tint enhanced her simple good looks in a sea of mostly Caucasian faces. It left her with a bit of a reputation as a looker and she always had a boy after her.

To her side stood the headstrong Helen Reynolds, clutching her mobile and wearing an expression of utter indifference. Of course, the trio were never complete without the slightly scatty and shy Candice 'Deesy' Doncaster, playing with her long plaited hair absently.

Aaron tried to deny the nervous sensation in his gut, as the three girls sat down to the table a sensible distance from him. He wanted to make himself look busy by delving into his backpack, but there was still the same stuff in there, nothing he could really distract himself with. Just his Science report, his pencils from Art earlier that morning and his exercise book for History. None of which were at all interesting.

'Hey Aaron, what did you do in science that pissed off Ms Ulster so bad?' Helen asked him.

'Uh, just y'know... wrote about Sticktion.' He replied.

'What?' She asked, in a way that was really more of a 'so what?'

'Um. Tiny forces that try to keep things as they are. In a sense.'

'Oh right.' She nodded.

That's lost her, Aaron thought to himself with a sense of resignation.

Candice murmured something.

'He's just fucking about Deesy.' Bonita laughed. 'You don't need to take it seriously or anything.'

The conversation quickly excluded him, so he simply sat awkwardly avoiding eye contact and waiting for Moley to turn up. When he finally did, Aaron felt as though he'd been sat for hours.

‘Hey guys.’

‘Hey Moley.’ Aaron replied, looking up.

The three girls exchanged glances and somehow stood in unison. Aaron made a mental note of it as possible evidence that girls are secretly telepathic with each other.

‘Lunchtimes’ almost ended.’ Helen said, tapping away on her mobile.

‘Later.’ Bonita nodded. Candice gave a vague nodding goodbye before following them.

Moley watched them going. ‘What, do I smell or something?’ He grinned.

‘Where have you been all lunch? You said you’d help me out with this homework.’ Aaron tried not to sound annoyed, but it didn’t work. ‘If I had’ve known, I would at least have tried to do it myself in the library.’

‘Sorry, man. Been busy. You remember Stacey, right-’

‘Moley, I’m trying to pass something here. You know, History, the only thing I have a chance of doing well at. I screwed up and I need your help.’

‘Alright, alright. So, what’s the homework?’

‘You tell me. It’s for History in about twelve minutes.’

Moley reeled. ‘We don’t have any homework for History. Who told you that?’

‘You did.’ Aaron sighed. Moley was also a pain in the ass for forgetting when he’d said something.

‘Nah, see, I was probably talking about Geography. We’ve got Geography for tomorrow.’ He asserted.

‘Yes, I know that. The thing about the Shinkansen.’

‘The what?’

‘The Japanese Bullet Train.’

‘Yeah, that.’ Moley looked around. The field around the outdoor tables was fast clearing. ‘Common’, we’ll be late for afternoon registration.’

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David Burrows was born in early October, so was older than many people in their school year. He also had a surname right near the beginning of the alphabet, so was one of the first people on the register. Aaron Sellafeld, by contrast, was a young mid-July birth and pretty far down on the surname list. Groups were most often split by surname along either side of ‘K’ and ‘L’, so he and Moley frequently ended up in different groups. For the same

reason he was also one of the last few people to be called up in the class for a presentation, and during exams he was allocated the 'extra space' part of the hall with the wobbly temporary desks for children with alphabetically retarded surnames.

Aaron sat curiously considering the various effects on his life exacted merely by his surname while his Form tutor, Miss Lane, plodded on through the register with her usual impeccable politeness. As she did so, he noted there were plenty more unfortunate than he; with surnames like Crass, Bong and Giblett passing by. Perhaps sharing a name with a nuclear power station wasn't so bad after all.

Thoughts about the embarrassment in science kept poking at him. Stradleigh High School was quite an old-fashioned academic institution; they would rarely consider any more radical a change than a new colour for wall paint. Even if it hadn't been Ms Ulster marking his science report, he was pretty sure it would have gone down like a concrete cloud.

People seemed to consider thinking outside of the box the reserve of corporate cokeheads and military lunatics. Trying something new was weirdness, and weirdness is just uncomfortable for most; even the ones that see the benefits usually feel unnerved by odd thinking. True enough, science is typically based on the simplest solution. But it's also fuelled by imagination and free thinking.

He'd once read that Albert Einstein's greatest asset, that put him ahead of his contemporaries, was the fact he had a vivid imagination to go with his superb logical mind. It still fascinated Aaron that nearly all modern vehicles are propelled by a very quick succession of small explosions of flammable gas. He doubted anyone a few hundred years ago would've believed such, nor thought it a good idea.

The school bell demanded an end to registration. As the Form made their way out to their classes, Moley pulled him out of his thoughts.

'So hey, Aaron, you wanna come round later? Me an' me dad built some jumps for the bikes on Saturday, you could have a go if you like.'

Aaron nodded. Moley's house was pretty big, but it was the sort of messy kind of rich house with tyres and junk all over an ill-kept garden and random pets sleeping wherever they felt like. He couldn't figure out where their money came from, although the wealth might've just been the impression he got from Moley's carefree attitude with money.

The two of them walked down the L-shaped corridor to History, went into the classroom and sat down. Most of the rest of the class were still elsewhere, as Aaron and Moley's own Form was closest to the History department.

As they continued talking, their teacher walked by and sat on the side of Aaron's desk.

'Hey lads.'

Aaron nodded back. 'Hi sir.'

'Hey Matt.' Moley responded casually. They all knew that calling him by his first name was school taboo, but they still did it as a kind of banter because Mr. Kaufman let it slide most of the time. He was the kind of teacher that spent the majority of his free time either helping his students or preparing their lessons. When they did a case-study on the Coventry Blitz in WWII, he had personally organised a trip to go to Coventry and see the ruins of St. Michael's Cathedral; primarily to get a close-up look, but also because he didn't think they were getting enough school trips this year. Matthew Kaufman didn't work as a teacher; he lived as a teacher.

'There wasn't any homework for today was there, sir?' Aaron asked tepidly.

'No. Although there will be for next lesson. All about the Russian Revolution and how it affected the Great War; fascinating stuff I'm sure you'll agree.' He chuckled, knowing his students would need considerably more convincing.

'Russians eh? I've got a book on those.' Moley said. Moley claimed he had a book on just about everything.

'How did your experiment go, then?' Mr. Kaufman enquired interestedly.

Aaron bit his lower lip. 'Ahh... that.'

It had been a few weeks ago. Aaron had been participating in a debate during one of their history classes and it had gone a little off topic. Somehow or other, Aaron could not recall, the class discussion encroached the subject of time-travel.

'It's obviously impossible.' Said a snooty voice to Aaron's left. Greg Rutherings glanced at Aaron when he looked over. Just about everyone considered Greg to be a stuck-up, arrogant nerd, although Aaron didn't like to be so judgemental. Yet he did find the short curly-haired boy's nature got on his nerves.

'No way man,' came Jay-Zee's relaxed retort. Class attention on the whole followed the speaker focus as it turned to him, all except the minority that weren't paying any attention in the first

place. 'It's gotta be real, cause time is totally like Einstein's' bitch, man-'

'What proof is there?' Greg interrupted rhetorically. Greg had been using rhetoric longer than he'd been using deodorant.

'Huh? How could there be proof?' Katie Pilkings wrinkled her stubby nose. 'It hasn't been invented.'

Greg sighed. It was a heavy, impatient, 'why is everyone other than me so stupid?' kind of sigh.

'Well the reasoning is,' Mr. Kaufman injected patiently, 'that if anyone has invented time travel at some point in the future, why haven't they come to visit?'

'It's like aliens!' Shouted Mick Huang; a somewhat anarchic Korean kid that had been done three times for graffiti on school property. He spent most of his classes doodling incredible robots on his workbook. This class was no exception, although he'd gradually been suckered in by the interest of the subject matter, causing the mechanoid on his textbook to have various time-travelling appendages.

'Sort of like Aliens.' Moley said in an unusually thoughtful moment. 'But it's no more solid than saying evolution is all toss because we can't find all the links.'

Aaron suddenly had a thought. He wasn't sure how to put it. He wasn't even sure if he should voice it at all.

'Interesting.' Mr. Kaufman nodded. 'It does seem to beg the question, though. Why *don't* we see any people from the future? Perhaps they can just disguise themselves very well?'

'Hardly.' Greg snorted. 'Sooner or later they'd get caught out, some evidence would turn up. Like ghosts; same thing. That's why aliens aren't real too-'

'They are too!' Mick shot a stern look at Greg, who glared back.

'Okay lads, we're not getting into that discussion again.' Mr. Kaufman said sternly.

Aaron inhaled. 'It could...'. He began, noticing that people had turned to look at him. The boy that rarely talked. He realised he wasn't quite sure how he was going to finish that sentence. 'I mean, they might not be able to come back because... because they don't have the information.'

'How do you mean, Aaron?' Mr. Kaufman enquired.

'Well I mean... you'd need some pretty accurate data to travel to a different time. It's not just time that changes; space does too. The Earth moves, land shifts, things are built and knocked down, stuff comes and goes so what's to stop you appearing in the

past half-stuck inside a mountain? Or a person? What if you need to use the matter at your destination in some way? Where do you find records of the exact positions of people in a given time and place, down to where people stood?’

Mr. Kaufman nodded.

Aaron was gathering momentum, forgetting that everyone was looking at him. ‘You’d need to know the exact details of your target zone, when it is, where it is, what’s in there – cause at the very least it’ll contain air – and you need the people in the past to have made that information accurately. But the people in the past don’t know to write that stuff down so they won’t start doing it until time travel is invented, which is why we don’t see anyone from the future, because they can’t travel to a time before the records began.’ He took a breath after he’d finished, suddenly self-conscious of how ridiculous the idea sounded.

‘What’s he talking about?’ He heard Greg mumble.

‘That is an interesting, hypothesis Aaron.’ Mr. Kaufman nodded slowly. ‘A little fantastic, but it does adhere to logic.’

‘But wait- that sucks, it means we’ll never get to see the dinosaurs and stuff...’ grunted Liam Prester, friend of Mick and unspoken leader of the group he sat with. ‘Unless I s’pose *they* made them info things...’

‘But dinosaurs don’t have opposable thumbs!’ Greg bemoaned.

‘They could always resurrect them;’ Gilly Wallace, an outspoken dark-haired girl, said; ‘like in this old film I saw once where they used dinosaur’s DNA to bring them back to life...’

‘Rubbish!’

‘It’s not, it worked on the *telly!*’

‘Okay class, I think we’re digressing a little here.’ Mr. Kaufman said. He didn’t like to interrupt a class discussion, but there was a point where work had to be done and he resumed his lecture.

At the end of the class, Aaron and Moley began talking to him as the rest of the kids left.

‘So, how would you test your theory?’ Mr. Kaufman asked Aaron.

‘If the future needed the past to record certain information, how could we know what that info is? And how can we get it to them?’ Aaron frowned.

‘Getting it to them should be simple. All things can only travel through time in one direction, naturally speaking.’ His teacher said.

‘To reach them it only has to be preserved. But finding out what they want... that’s a little tougher.’

‘Trial and Error.’ Moley said, almost to himself.

‘Would be the only way.’ Mr. Kaufman confirmed.

Aaron nodded, slowly. He had the funny feeling both his friend and his teacher knew what came next, but were waiting for him to say it so to be sure he was keeping up. ‘And we know when we get the info right, because something turns up, yeah?’

‘Uh yes, that’s the idea.’ Mr. Kaufman chuckled slightly. He had a weathered but friendly face, trim black hair and Aaron could see a glint of intrigue in his eye. He seemed genuinely taken by the idea, if only for the fun of it.

‘It wouldn’t *really* though, would it?’ Moley said. ‘I’ll bet someone’s tried this before somewhere? And what are the chances?’

‘Hard to say.’ Mr. Kaufman replied non-chalant. ‘But it isn’t the most difficult thing to do; record some details of a time and space then keep them. Easy enough, wouldn’t you say? And they’d probably be useful at some point one way or another.’

‘But doesn’t that sort of information exist elsewhere?’ Moley asked.

Mr. Kaufman shrugged. ‘Not that I know of, not the comprehensive level of detail we’re talking. As Aaron said, where people are is important. You wouldn’t want to inadvertently land on your grandmother’s grandmother.’

‘Besides,’ Aaron hypothesized, ‘I imagine they’d have to include a lot of random detail you won’t find recorded normally.’

‘That would mean they wouldn’t use any records from anything generic.’ Moley nodded. ‘But then they might not use ours either, seeing as we have no real idea of the criteria.’

‘Well there’s only one way to find out. You could always give it a go.’ Mr. Kaufman suggested, stroking his stubbled chin.

Aaron’s mind was already off the starting line. ‘Yeah. Why not? I got a few ideas of what they might need to know.’

‘That’s the spirit.’ With a deep breath, the history teacher leant back against his desk thoughtfully. ‘I’ll have a word with a friend of mine, a historian who works for the National Archives. He might be able to get your data somewhere that’ll stick around for a while.’

‘Really sir?’ Aaron exclaimed.

‘I’m sure he’ll be up for entertaining the notion.’

‘What about the internet?’ Moley said. ‘Wouldn’t that be easier? That isn’t going anywhere soon.’

‘As an entity it may stand for a long time, but individual pages come and go like the kebab shops on Wigan Road.’ Mr. Kaufman replied, smiling.

Moley nodded. ‘True, fair point.’

‘Thanks Mr. Kaufman.’ Aaron slung his bag over one shoulder. ‘We’d better be off home now.’

‘Okay. Take care now, lads.’ Mr. Kaufman turned away to start putting his things back into his open suitcase on the desk. Aaron and Moley left the empty classroom and headed outside to the bike sheds. The buzz of the normal quarter-to-four rush out of school grounds had mostly died down. Instead they found themselves amidst a businesslike shuffle of diligent young adults, like some youthful parody of an evening commute. Aaron and Moley unlocked their bikes and rode off to Aaron’s.

Almost as soon as they walked in, Aaron’s mum had offered them both a drink of cola and a biscuit.

‘Cheers mum.’ Aaron said, taking them gratefully.

‘Thankyou very much, Mrs. Sellafield.’ Moley took the refreshments like an ambassador accepting a royal gift. His manners around anyone’s parents were always flawless, even though he swore loudly throughout much of the school day. The duality was the same in almost everyone, including Aaron, but with Moley it just seemed to be exaggerated further.

‘How was your day honey?’ Aaron’s mum asked him.

‘Ok.’

‘Did you get your maths homework in alright?’

‘Yes mum.’ A tedious tone began to seep into Aaron’s voice, which made him feel bad because she was his mother and she’d want to know these things.

‘So are you boys busy this afternoon?’ Mrs. Sellafield asked them.

‘Uh, yep.’ Aaron said cautiously. ‘We’re going to do a science experiment.’

‘An experiment?’ She exclaimed. ‘That sounds lovely, dear. Hope it isn’t anything too messy.’

‘No, mum.’

‘Okay, well if you have a minute I need someone to move the new telly upstairs to my room.’ She indicated the packed box on the floor by the couch. ‘And you’re both strong lads, eh?’

‘You can count on us, Mrs. S.’ Moley said dutifully.

Aaron nodded absently. ‘Sure, mum.’

‘Thanks honey.’ And with that, she left.

After moving the boxed television upstairs, Aaron and Moley set about creating a plan for their experiment. The first problem was where to isolate. A garage seemed perfect, but Aaron's was full of junk because they had no loft space left. Moley suggested a half-empty storage warehouse-garage his dad used for dumping spare cars until he could sell them. They agreed that would be best. It seemed as though it would come together smoothly.

They booted up the family computer and began to browse web sites. A quick search found co-ordinates in longitude and latitude for the warehouse's location. They also managed, after a considerably longer search, to get the closest scientific estimate of the Earth's position relative to the Sun. Aaron also printed out three copies of a sign for the area. As it slid out of the printer, he held it up to the light. It read:

!! TEMPORAL EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS !!

Below it was a small discoloured and pixelated picture of Christopher Lloyd, as Doc Brown in the movie Back to the Future, that Moley had put on it to try and 'make things a little more fun'.

They then rode to Moley's to get the keys for the warehouse from his dad. Moley's parents were out when they arrived, so he went to his dad's office and took the keys from a hook by the door.

'Dude, what would happen if your dad caught you doing that?' Aaron asked.

'He'd tell me I'm grounded for a week.' Moley said. 'But if he didn't, he'd be cool with it.'

Aaron shook his head. Moley's family was weird.

They rode their bikes down Woodgrove Lane, out of the estate and in the direction of Riverside Industrial Park. Originally hyped to be the shopping hub of tomorrow, it was hardly destined for big things in a place like Stradleigh. And besides, with an acronym like RIP, it didn't surprise Aaron that the Park ended up being an empty assortment of car dumps and storage warehouses, with the occasional DIY or gardening centre thrown in to drag out its demise.

They skidded their bikes to a halt and Moley tapped a six-digit number into the pad that locked the warehouse. It wasn't exactly an enormous building; no more than a tall double garage really. But for a family-owned commodity, it was impressive enough to Aaron.

With the number entered, Moley slotted the key into the lock and turned it, resulting in a satisfying buzz followed by the shutters

rising slowly upward. The view of the interior was gradually revealed; a single battered-looking old Fiat sat in the corner looking very sorry for itself, and the rest of the spartan workshop was so bare it had the appearance of being burgled.

‘This is good.’ Aaron said. ‘It’s almost empty.’

‘Almost isn’t good enough, though, is it?’ Moley said. ‘We need it to be completely void.’

‘Would be best.’ Aaron nodded.

‘So lets get shifting.’

‘But where is this stuff gonna go? And how are we gonna move the car?’

Moley held up his mobile. ‘I sent a text to my Dad, asked him to drop by later so he can take this stuff back to ours for a bit.’

‘He’d do that?’

‘Well, yeah. Why not?’

Aaron shrugged. He wasn’t going even deeper into the paradox that was the Burrows family. ‘And what about the car?’

‘Dunno. S’a piece o’ shit, doubt he really wants it. Might just leave it out here.’

‘Ohhh-kay then.’

They set to work. It didn’t take long at all before all the bits and pieces sat on the ground in front of the warehouse. The car was a little more tricky; Moley had to put one of the wheels back on so they could roll it outside.

Finally the interior of their target space was clear. Aaron was already having doubts. He felt childish; this whole idea made him feel crazy. But somehow it was worth the effort, just on the slim hope that something interesting might happen to spice up the humdrum of reality. And it was oddly fun.

They looked proudly at the empty space before them.

‘Now what?’ Moley said.

Aaron sighed. ‘Why is it you are so smart one minute, then the next minute you’ve lost the plot?’

‘Just tell me dickface.’

‘We seal it up and record the exact time, date and position of the space.’ Aaron said levelly. ‘Ballsucker.’

‘Right, then we go home?’

‘No.’ Aaron said. ‘We have to stay here to make sure it stays isolated. And also in case something turns up!’

‘Damn, I wish I’d known, I’d have bought my Ninetron Portable...’ Moley trailed off. ‘Say, you really think something will come through a wormhole or whatever?’

Aaron didn't, in all honesty. He wasn't really sure why he was doing it in the first place; it was almost purely because he'd convinced himself that he was toying with great scientific powers at the mere action of taking measurements, that this was just kinda cool to attempt. On the face of it he wondered if he was just getting carried away.

'Hope so.' He said eventually.

'It'll be kinda dull just waiting here, don't you reckon?' Moley asked.

'You can borrow my 'player if you want.' Aaron pulled the device out of a coat pocket by the headphones.

'Sure.'

'Besides,' Aaron put his hands back in his coat, looking up at the darkening sky, 'we don't have to be here long. I mean, if they're time travellers they shouldn't need that much spare time, should they? One half-hour slot should do.'

'It better.' Moley plugged an earphone in his left ear and took a tape measure from a toolbox that had been inside. They began measuring all the dimensions of the interior space, pinning the tape along the walls and the floor, as accurate as they could.

Moley jotted down the info on a notepad while Aaron shut the doors. They locked the keypad and sellotaped the notices they'd printed off along the corugated metal door.

Moley barely even listened to the music player. Aaron had begun to suspect that his friend was just hanging around to be out of the house; but then he saw a flash of a grin that told him there was still some inner child in David Burrows.

Besides, both of them shared the collective delusion that it was more than just an exercise in futility. It was like the Lottery; the chances of success were miniscule, but the sheer worth of the outcome made it worth a go, exciting even. Because you can spend days just discussing what *could* happen.

At half past five, Moley's dad pulled up in his grey Bentley. With a gentle whir the window came down.

'What's all this about, lad?' He enquired in his thick Sheffield accent, as they walked up to the car. Moley's family had only moved to Stradleigh a half dozen years back, so they still had the yorkshire twang.

'School project.' Moley replied.

'Right y'are then.' His dad sounded satisfied. 'I'll bung the rest of that stuff in the boot.'

'Cheers dad.' Moley replied. 'What about the car?' He indicated the worn Fiat.

‘Ah, leave it, son. Driveway’s officially part o’the lease, so int like it’s on public road.’

Moley nodded. ‘You not worried someone’s gonna nick it?’

‘Wish they bloody would.’ He snorted. ‘Saves me figuring out what t’do with the bugger.’

‘Cool. Ta, dad.’

He parked up the car and the two boys helped him load the back.

Moley’s dad was a tall and well-built man, with a receding hairline and angular face. He stood with his arms folded, powerful but not threatening. ‘So you two finished? If you chuck yer bikes in the back I’ll give you a lift.’ The sky was dimming, a pale early-autumn hue ready to unleash a legion of raindrops.

‘Well, dunno. We done here Aaron?’ Moley asked.

They’d recorded a three-quarter hour interval. Aaron figured that would probably be enough, scribbled down the end time at the end of Moley’s notes and put the paper safely back in his bag. They walked over to the warehouse. It hadn’t made a single sound.

They removed the notices, then Moley tapped the combination into the keypad and carefully turned the key. The door raised slowly, as they looked on with baited breath.

There was nothing there. They stood for a moment in silence. Then the disappointment was there, as though it had slipped in behind them when they weren’t looking. Well, what had he expected? Buck Rogers? It was over, in any case.

Moley then said quietly: ‘Better luck next time.’

‘Yeah.’ Aaron agreed.

He hadn’t expected to try again, but Moley’s comment had won him over. With just a few words the unthinkable became the unshakable. It’d take more than one failure to give in. They were the Time Crew! Okay, perhaps they’d work on the name, but they were a team nonetheless.

Moley’s dad drove them back, dropping off Aaron at his house. He spent the rest of the evening sitting at his mum’s desk in the spare room where the computer was, thinking up new things they could add to the data. Air composition? Not sure how to test it. Light levels? None, surely. And thinking about it, could they not work out where the Earth was in the future anyway, making that bit pointless? It seemed there was so much to trial and error their way through.

He looked outside across the rooftops that painted the view from the study window. Red brick rows with slate roofs and

countless aerals punctuated the cluttered 'two-up-two-down' terrace, each house an identical block with a small extension for the kitchen. The skies had poured on the way home and the roof tiles reflected the vanishing orange light of the sun. The rattling of rain on the roof and the window, with him cosily behind it, made him feel warm and relaxed. It instilled a strange sense of anticipation within him.

He began to browse online again, determined to figure out what information might be needed and how to measure it. He delved into scientific journals, flicked through all manner of pages on setting up simple experiments and even glanced at some general time-travel theories. Many he found outright confusing, but some had him reading for hours in facination.

Over the next week they tried everything they could dream of. They took the air pressure with a barometer, gas composition, humidity; they even tried to make a device that detected magnetic fields. It didn't work, but they continued all the same. Recording different lengths and varying the time of day, they meticulously exhausted any and all types of data and format they could come up with. After a while the waiting got annoying, so they just left the warehouse with notices and warnings urging not to interfere. And each time they had a history lesson, Aaron handed Mr. Kaufman a disc of typed-up data for the National Archives, so they didn't even have to get anyone else to do it.

Yet still, no success. Every occasion was the same: the door went up, and inside was exactly the same as when the experiment began. They started to feel slightly idiotic. Finally, on the Monday, the pair decided they'd had enough.

Aaron shook his head. 'We gotta give this a rest.'

'It was worth a go, eh?' Moley said.

'I suppose.' Aaron admitted glumly. He seemed wistful and melancholy, like he'd lost something grand but he wasn't really all that mad about it. They rolled the old Fiat back inside, then stepped back outside. Moley gave a short sigh, and closed the warehouse door one last time.

'Ah well.' Aaron tried to sound non-chalant.

'Woulda been cool.' He said, lifting his bike from the floor and straddling it.

'...Yeah.' Aaron did the same, but more slowly and a little uncertain.

They rode home in silence, then parted at Aaron's with a murmur of goodbye. Aaron went inside then sat in his room, which was downstairs and looked out onto the small garden. He sat at

the window, thinking hard about the experiments. There was a distant sound of a car, with a motor-boat's exhaust, thundering down the adjacent street and setting off the annoyingly sensitive car alarms as it did.

He decided that in his next history lesson on the following Thursday, he would give in the last of his readings.

Aaron looked up at Mr. Kaufman. He wasn't sure how to tell him. It was as though they were letting him down; Mr. Kaufman had shown such support into his theory and now they were just giving up on him, proving how childish and fickle they were. But they really felt like they'd tried everything.

Fortunately, as is often the case, Moley took up the sword on the matter. He was particularly good at sensitive discussion or explanation. Aaron often said that if it were possible to get a job as the guy who has to tell people their dog died, their spouse has left them or they've been fired; Moley would be industry standard.

'We've got a final set of results with us.' Moley told him. 'And as we're short on ideas, we won't have any new data to offer I'm afraid. At least not for the time being. That isn't to say we're giving up, only that we've... exhausted avenues of research.'

Aaron smiled inwardly. How did he make wimping-out sound so damn professional?

'That's a shame.' Mr. Kaufman replied, but Aaron could see that he didn't look the least bit surprised. His eyes suggested he'd been waiting for it to happen. 'It was good work, though.'

Then Aaron saw it. Of course he had been waiting for it to happen! How stupid; he's a teacher for heaven's sake. He didn't really think they were going to get anything. He probably didn't even have a friend at the National Archives; he just wanted them to have a fun project and to practice being scientific and inquisitive. Aaron was almost annoyed at the prospect. It basically amounted to the fact Mr. Kaufman had been wasting their time. No point in even bringing that to light either, he'd just deny it completely.

'We'll let you know if we think of anything.' Moley told him, then with a nod the teacher got up and returned to the front of the class. The rabble of the other arriving students were already filling up the room with a tide of chatter.

'He knew we'd fail.' Aaron said quietly.

'Totally.' Moley stared ahead.

'Maybe you're right, Moley.' Aaron said openly. 'Maybe I should stop trying so hard. Stop resisting and poking and messing

with things and just spectate; entertain myself, let life happen. Do what I'm meant to do, and consume the junk food of existence.'

Moley pulled his bag up onto his desk, taking his books and stationary out for the lesson. 'Christ, I doubt anyone could make living normally sound as depressing as you just did.'

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That evening, after getting back from Moley's, Aaron rode up into the small front garden of his house and dismounted his bike. His neighbour, a pensioner named Mrs. Pittock, was tending to the small potted plants in her garden and looked over the wall at him oddly.

'Hello there, Aaron.' She said.

'Hi Mrs. Pittock.' There was a moment's pause. Aaron didn't talk to her that often, nice as she was. He usually ran out of things to say, and the usual English reflex of talking about the weather generally got on his nerves.

'Dearie... you don't happen to know any... older girls, do you?' She suddenly looked apologetic. 'If you pardon my question.'

Aaron tried not to look stunned. What the hell was she talking about? 'I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Pittock.' He said, in an attempt to be diplomatic.

'Oh my... I don't mean to pry.' The old woman looked embarrassed. 'S'just that, there was a lady here looking for you. Earlier today.'

For him? Now that was weird. 'A lady?' Aaron repeated.

'Yes...' Mrs. Pittock paused, her memory moving slower than it perhaps once had. 'She was a pretty little thing, not much older than twenty five I'd say. Your mother was out, of course.' Mrs. Pittock put her watering-can down and began to pat the soil of her plants. 'I was out here tendin' to the garden so I told the lady your mother was at work. But she said that actually, she was looking for you.'

Aaron bit his lip. It was all a little strange and quite unexpected. He tried to think who she might be talking about, but nobody fitted the bill. Anyone who knew him would also know he was in school, surely. Even then they were all boys. And who else could want to see him outside of school?

'What did she look like?'

Mrs. Pittock squinted. 'Ooh, I'd say about-a six foot or so, skinny thing she was. Long blonde hair, y'know the kind. Wearing those motorcycle leathers that you kids wear.'

Motorcycle leathers? Aaron felt like the more he asked, the more confused he became. Enough was enough for one day.

'Thanks, Mrs. Pittock.' He said deeply, then with an air of disorientation went into the house.

After getting a cup of tea with some biscuits he sat down at his desk to do his Geography homework. But the prevailing image of the tall blonde motorbike lady kept distracting him. Maybe Mrs. Pittock was mad. Or maybe the woman had gotten the wrong house.

But then he'd been asked for by name, hadn't he? Although Mrs. Pittock had not said it in those exact words. He didn't know for certain if this woman knew his name or not. He decided that he'd be better off putting the whole thing out of his mind.

At twenty-to-six his mother came home, with his younger sister and brother in her car. She normally picked them up on the way home from the Primary school, because it was several miles away. After Aaron's experiences at the awful Stradleigh Primary, his mum had decided that his younger siblings wouldn't suffer the same.

'Bloody nightmare!' Were his mother's first words stumbling through the door. She had three shopping bags in each hand and two whining children in tow. Michael, the older of the two, was fuming about having run out of battery power on his Ninetron Portable. The younger, Haley, was crying because her feet hurt and she was tired and she really wanted the pink wellies they'd seen.

'Need a hand with the shopping, mum?' Aaron said as his mother staggered down the hall.

'Yes please, love.' She said, and then turned back to the other two to try and quieten them down.

Aaron went to the car outside and retrieved the last three shopping bags, closing the boot awkwardly with his elbow afterward. As he straightened up, he caught sound of a deep resonating hum; artificial like a sine wave or 'pure tone'. The moment he noticed it, he realised he could no longer hear it. He paused, standing beside the car looking blankly along the road to the artificial horizon, where the incline of the road disappeared over the crest of a railway bridge.

'Aaron?' His mother called from the door.

'Sorry, mum.' He apologised, walking back inside. 'Having a bit of a strange day.'

2.

Tethis sat glumly, slumped in her seat. In front of her, the glowing holographic panel displayed the location readout data from the sensors. Her craft, the *Novodantis*, had been scanning around the vicinity to find the person she was looking for. But for some reason, despite the fact it was all within the capabilities of the ship, it returned nothing.

She had managed to find similar genetic makeup in very small quantities near a dwelling she'd found, but it had been unoccupied and locked. Her attempt at investigation had gotten nosy neighbours interested, so she made her excuses and left. And if she went back again, she might start arousing even more suspicion. This was supposed to be seamless. No mark left. Unseen, unheard. And most importantly, unremembered.

Tethis Lithi Arkwright, Chrononaut of the Third Age Unation, was possibly the best there was. She felt a certain pride in her task. Even if it wasn't going quite to plan, she felt confident it would work out in the end. Time was like that.

Her daughter was sleeping in the adjacent living compartment. It was not a big ship with just the two compartments in all. They ate and slept in the living section, to the rear, while the science compartment at the front contained the ship controls, the repair access and other sophisticated equipment.

And should they get bored, the living area had a Recreator; a device that allowed its user to custom design dreams, then put them to sleep whilst keeping their memory fully active. The result was an endless virtual world of possibility to escape the cramped confines of the ship. Food was created, stored and prepared by a machine in the corner of the living area. The ship's self-repair nano droids in the science section gave them maintenance access to the entire ship from the comfort of a chair.

Tethis compared her cramped and supposedly tough ship lifestyle to that of 2.1.C, the century she was now in. Unlike her, they had to exercise to stay healthy; they had to drive their vehicles themselves; they had to wash and eat and work and even shit like animals. By contrast, even on the tiny *Novodantis*, her lifestyle was luxurious. It seemed like an unimaginable slog living in 2.1.C.

She returned her attention to her work. Something about the problem bothered her deeply, on some instinctive level that she tended to forget she had. Although she was pretty sure that the

dwelling she visited was the boy's home, he wasn't on the scope of her devices. And that meant he couldn't be any nearer than the minimal range of 200 miles. It was highly unlikely, in fact, that he was any closer than one thousand without being picked up.

Now, in her own era, it might be plausible that he was attending school elsewhere on the planet. But in 2.1.C people don't travel a thousand miles away for an afternoon. Many never leave their counties or even towns, let alone their continent. It was still a possibility; she'd been reading all about it on the projection in front of her eye, while simultaneously trying to thrash all she could out of the Novodantis' sensors and swooping across Stradleigh in a vain hope to identify him by visual.

According to her records, people of this time had the ability to move such distances, but the majority of them never had the opportunity. And if they did it was typically a rare occasion. Tethis cross-referenced the holiday and business statistics of early 2.1.C long distance travel (patchy records at best, admittedly) with the average wealth of the area she had surveyed. She then requested the computer to calculate, by meta-probability laws, how likely the boy had flown out of range. By the time she'd completed her sentence and drawn breath, the computer responded.

'Probability calculated: one to fifty by point zero four.' The computer replied coolly.

Tethis sighed. She was never able to really grasp meta-probability. Her mathematics tuition had claimed this was because the human brain isn't actually capable of understanding meta-probability in the form of its developed 3.2.C theory. But computers could grasp it to the degree where they were able to create enormous formula that could calculate it.

'What does that mean again, Novodantis?'

'The first number signifies the-'

'No, what I mean is, is he on holiday or not?' Tethis interrupted impatiently.

'One very much doubts it.' The computer returned blandly. 'But hard to tell. That's what it means.'

Tethis buried her face in her palm. That wasn't as useful as she'd hoped. Technology did have its limits.

'Tethis, have you checked the sensor integrity?' The machine asked.

'Yes.' She replied, somewhat dejectedly. 'Already had the nanos over them twice.'

The computer allowed a pause. 'Suggest that you await his appearance in the following planetary cycle.'

‘That’s a lame plan.’

‘No further course of action can be suggested.’

‘Fair enough then. You win today.’ She glanced over her shoulder at the living compartment doorway, as though she could see her sleeping daughter beyond the bulkhead. She decided she probably ought to get some sleep too. Not that she needed to particularly, but sometimes it was nice to do something old-fashioned. In any case, she could use a bit of entertainment.

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Aaron turned over in his sleep, mumbling. The sound of wind and rain echoed gently just outside the window. Thunder rolled back and forth somewhere in the distance, like an old man looking for his glasses.

There was a light tap, like the sound of a drop of water falling onto a skylight. Aaron opened his eyes slowly and rolled back to face away from the wall. He looked around the unlit room with his eyes barely open at all, toying with the idea of getting up and occupying his mind until he felt he could get some decent sleep. Something was keeping him awake, although he was unsure what.

A distant flash lit the room silently, sending a stretched shape of light from the window across it. It was a square patch, criss-crossed by the shadows of the pane dividers. In the middle it was blotted out by a large oval shadow, from a big tree in the garden. Aaron let his eyes slowly fall shut again, considering the possibility that perhaps some kind of schoolwork might be useful to-

Suddenly his eyes flicked open. It had just occurred to him there was no big tree in the garden. He was half asleep, not putting things together properly. And whatever it was that had made a shadow on the floor, it had been as crisp as the panes on the window, so it must be right against it.

Maybe some random object, blown about, stuck on the window? Not likely. Or a collection of different objects outside, conspiring to make disturbing shadows together. There was nothing Aaron could think of at all like that shape, other than a big egg-shaped balloon. He assumed it was something he hadn’t thought of. It could be a burglar, but it made no sense for them to just stand there looking in the window.

Aaron didn’t dare move to find out. A few seconds had passed and the distant thunder finally caught up with its light-based companion and slowly churned its way around him. Aaron

blinked. He wasn't going to sleep until he knew. It had to be done. As slowly as he could manage, he turned his head to look up at the window. There was nothing there but black panes.

He stared for a few moments. Just panes of glass. Nothing there. It was just one of those things.

Then came another flash of lightning.

In the window, for an instant, was a large, illuminated humanoid face, about the size of a large watermelon and of pallid grey skin, with huge black lemon-shaped eyes and tiny nostrils.

And it had been staring directly at him. *Through* him.

Aaron felt his heart leapt up into his throat and bounce around his body, gibbering to the rest of his organs. He wanted to scream out but nothing came. The image of the face burned into his eye's memory like it was still there, two black pits staring at him with such intensity it made his eyes water and his skin crawl. And though the light had only been a flash, he knew it was still out there, staring in at him. He shut his eyes, buried himself in his pillow and tried to wake himself from whatever cheese-pizza induced nightmare this was.

He remained motionless, eyes shut tight, for what felt like hours. It wasn't until he dared a glance at his alarm clock that he realised a mere ten minutes had passed.

He felt strange. He was positive he'd been awake, but then dreams often run into reality like wet paint. Or perhaps, he reasoned, he'd seen some kind of fake: a practical joke in bad taste. Nothing made much sense. Fear slowly migrated to irritation, then anger. He rolled over onto his back. The rain had almost entirely stopped; a total of eight rolls of thunder and thirty three minutes of windy drizzle making it a pretty big English storm.

He looked at the window, to check. His eyes had become accustomed to the light and indeed the face wasn't there, leaving behind only the near-black night sky beyond the glass. Aaron recalled just how much of a stereotypically alien face it had been. It had to be a joke, or a nightmare. He felt like an idiot, but he was also annoyed that someone would do that to him. Still it did seem a little over-elaborate that someone would pull that kind of prank.

At least it was over. A cold sweat had come over him. He sat up, trying to distance himself from the experience. Getting up off the bed, he nervously stepped up to the window as casual as he could, fearing something else was lying in wait to startle him.

Nothing. The garden outside was void of anything noteworthy. A small basket for clothes sat next to the washing line and was typically half full of rainwater. There was a hose pipe that

looked a little like a coiled snake, and four garden chairs, one of which was broken. The purple-tinted sky above was beginning to consider dawn, and sure enough Aaron's alarm clock confirmed it was almost 6 am. He reluctantly returned to his bed.

He lay for twenty minutes hoping to catch more sleep. The alarm blinked 6:22 when he next looked at it, so he decided it would be easier just to get up. Turning on his bedside lamp, he slung on his dressing gown and sat down at his messy desk. His homework from the night before, an essay on the Japanese Shinkansen, sat ready in a transparent plastic wallet. Aaron felt a certain sense of pride that he'd actually managed to complete a piece of homework without rush. Seeing it prepared on his desk was supremely satisfying. The fact he was kind of interested in it made him feel almost as though he'd cheated.

The strange face troubled him. He knew in his logical mind that it was either a waking vision or a joke, but something deeper inside haunted his feelings. It was instinct, primal, a troubling aura that hung in the air.

Playing computer games for the following hour didn't help. As he saved and quitted the game to get up properly and eat breakfast, the nightmare encounter came back in his daydreaming. Only this time, the face at the window was of Gorgon The Destroyer, from his game: 'Termite Invasion from Mars'. The angular, hostile face of the giant Termite King roared mockingly at his window; scoffing at his genetically-modified super Earth ants and foolish attempts at resource management.

'Morning honey.' Aaron's mother strode into the kitchen.

'Hey mum.'

He sat chewing his cereal, trying to forget about the laughing face of the Termite King.

'Sweetie, could you give me a hand setting up my new telly later?' She asked him. 'When you get home from school.'

'Uh- mum... It's not hard to do.' Aaron tried to explain in a way that was assuring rather than patronising. 'All you've gotta do is plug the aerial in the back and it tunes itself really.'

'Well I did what the manual told me to, but the stupid thing won't work. It's just that white fuzz, like. You didn't drop it yesterday didya?'

'No.' Aaron frowned. 'Don't worry. Probably some setting is bugged; I'll take a look later.'

'Thanks hun. Anyway, I've got to get ready...' She looked at her watch. 'Hey, you're up pretty early. It's barely half-seven.'

'Yeah. Guess I am.' Aaron said. He wasn't even going to try explaining it.

Moley rode up to the junction meeting spot to see Aaron standing expectantly, one foot on the pedal of his bike. Moley stopped beside him with a puzzled expression.

'You're here before me. That's got to be a first.'

'I didn't sleep so good.'

'What happened?'

Aaron glanced briefly at Moley in case he might catch a glimpse of guilt or amusement that would give him away. 'Some idiot, probably Liam, played a prank on me.'

'When?' Moley looked even more confused.

'Last night, at my window. About five in the morning.'

'Get bent. Liam Prester wouldn't get up that early if Cherry Leystone crept into his bedroom offering favours.'

Cherry Leystone was the sort of girl that could win attention-seeker-of-the-year award. She was well known amongst the boys for her 'assets', not to mention number of previous boyfriends. There were informal debates over which was larger.

'Well somebody did. I'm damn sure I didn't dream it.'

'What did you see?'

Aaron explained every detail he could remember about his nocturnal encounter, trying to keep to what he saw and leaving out what he thought of it. Moley, despite being skeptical, wasn't the kind of person to mock the unusual simply on freaky grounds, because in his own words 'Life is full of unusual things'. Aaron often cited Moley's family as one of them. Regardless, Moley was a razor sharp critic and Aaron generally preferred to play his cards after he saw Moley's.

'I'll tell you what that sounds like to me...'

'Yeah?'

'You're slightly nuts.'

Aaron's face contorted. 'I did consider that one.'

Moley laughed. 'Seriously, no matter what it was, it can't be that important. Unless maybe if it happens a lot.'

'Well surely if,' Aaron paused as his thoughts articulated, 'let's say for argument's sake, it was an alien that had come to invade Earth. Would that not be important?'

'And you would be able to change this how?' Moley raised an eyebrow.

Aaron grunted. His friend had a point. There wasn't much he could do about it, whatever the explanation.

‘Does seem strange though...’ Moley kicked his bike up into motion and Aaron followed suit. ‘Apparently there’s a lot of radio wave interference lately.’

‘Radio wave interference?’ Aaron recalled his mother’s trouble with the television earlier this morning. Wonder if that was it?

‘Yeah it was on the news this morning, supposed to be down to cosmic activity or something, y’know.’ He gave a cocky grin. ‘Loadsa dumb punters across Lancashire are taking their tellies back to the shops for refunds.’

Aaron nodded distantly. It was all weird. Much like the conversation with Mrs. Pittock; he could do little but keep all these strange occurrences bouncing around his brain until something made sense. *If* they even made sense. He was positive that life wasn’t usually this weird, though.

‘Tell you something else.’ Moley said, weaving through the entry bars of a bike path. ‘Somebody actually did nick that Fiat in the end.’

‘The one outside the warehouse?’

‘No, the one in my pants. Yes, the warehouse.’

Aaron sniffed. ‘Can’t see why. It was a piece of junk.’

‘Yeah, too right.’

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‘This is the best plan ever. I’m a genius.’

-‘Let’s not go that far, mother.’

Tethis snorted. ‘Oh come, on. It’s only a matter of time before he turns up at his dwelling, and with this photo ID from the chronological medical database I will be able to recognise him if I go there.’ She waved the picture in her hand as she walked, even though her daughter was some kilometre or two away inside the *Novodantis*.

-‘That’s if we’ve got the right house, and the right name. In any case, why do I have to stay in the ship all the time while you get to go out?’

‘Because I’m the boss, that’s why. ‘Mother knows best’. Did you know that’s a popular saying in 2.1.C?’

-‘This is coming from an era that considers watching people stuck in a house for 24 hours a day as national entertainment.’

Tethis shrugged. ‘Well besides that fact, I’m also in command of this mission. So you’ll do as you’re told.’

-‘Yes, mother... I suppose you are the ‘responsible’ one.’

‘Watch that tongue, young lady!’ Tethis snapped. ‘Don’t think I can’t tell when you’re pronouncing quotation marks-’

She abruptly stopped talking to her uplink as she came face to face with two boys on bikes. One of them looked just like the young boy in the picture she held in her hand. It was unmistakable. The long, dark and unruly hair, the naïve azure eyes, a slim face perhaps a little pretty for a boy but handsome in a way. He was a little older than her picture, but most definitely Aaron Sellafield!

As she met eye contact with him, he stopped and looked back at her. It was almost like he recognised her, although that was impossible. She opened her mouth to speak, at first unsure what to say.

‘Fancy a bite to eat?’ She asked bluntly.

Moley looked at her oddly. ‘Excuse me?’

Aaron was inspecting her carefully. Motorcycle leathers; a tall blonde in her mid-twenties. Maybe the woman Mrs. Pittock was talking about? ‘Do I... know you?’ he asked eventually.

‘Oh yeah! That’s right, you don’t.’ The woman replied absently, looking around as if she was supposed to be carrying some sort of proof. She eventually thrust an ID photo in Aaron’s direction; one of his old school photos from several years ago.

‘This is you, Aaron Sellafield? Am I right?’

‘Uh... yes?’ Aaron answered. ‘Where did you get that?’

‘And who are you?’ Moley enquired defensively.

‘Whoa there.’ She said. ‘That’ll take a bit of explaining.’

‘Are you from the government?’

‘Or MI6?’

‘Um, we didn’t do anything with that warehouse.’

‘Dude, shut up!’

She looked at them both and then grinned. ‘Ooooh, right. Nope, not government. Not... not yet anyhow.’

Moley sighed. ‘Well can you hurry up and tell us, because we’re gonna be late for school otherwise.’

The woman seemed to pause for a moment’s thought. ‘I’m here to interview you.’

‘What... *now*?’ Aaron asked. ‘I’m on my way to school.’

‘Yes, I know that.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘But I had trouble, uh... finding you. I’m from... National Archives. Yeah, and they asked me to interview you on your recent data. Very interesting! Uh-huh...’ She beamed a childlike grin. Aaron and Moley exchanged confused glances.

‘Can you tell me your name?’ Aaron asked.

'My name's Tethis.' She replied enthusiastically.

'Teh...thiss...' Moley rolled the two syllables together a few times. 'Moon of Saturn. That's an unusual name.'

'Uh... my parents were...'

~*Chronological Database check*~

'...hippies.'

'Oh.' Aaron seemed satisfied. 'Well anyway, yeah. I'm Aaron. This here's Mo- I mean, David.'

'Pleased to obtain acquaintance!' She said brightly. 'So is it okay to interview you?'

'Um, I don't see why not.' Aaron shrugged. 'When?'

'As soon as is convenient.' She said.

'This evening?'

'That would be great! Meet me at that park over there-'

Tethis pointed to the nearby green.

'Really? Ooh... 'kay, I guess.' Aaron looked at where she was pointing. Seemed pretty arbitrary.

'Don't try any funny business.' Moley narrowed his eyes.

'But I'm not a comedian. I'm a scientist.' She returned bluntly.

Aaron ignored the digression. 'See you this afternoon... at five?'

'You bet!' She winked. Aaron found the gesture somehow overblown and theatrical. She then abruptly skipped off down the road without another word, although in the distance he could hear her talking to herself.

'She was strange.' He said slowly.

'Damn whacko.' Moley nodded. They resumed a slow biking pace. 'Although, gotta admit, pretty hot...'

'Why did you say 'Don't try any funny business'? Aaron looked at his friend oddly.

Moley shrugged a little. 'I dunno. I've always wanted to say that. Gangster movies, n' all.'

Aaron laughed. 'I'm beginning to wonder if you should sit this one out.'

'Waitaminit!' Moley stopped his bike, leading Aaron to do the same. 'You're not actually going to go there are you?'

'Well of course I am.' Aaron replied innocently. 'Wouldn't you?'

'No of course not! She's a loony. I reckon... she's one of them government psychic spies. Y'know, from China, like in that song. She's come to steal our data.' Moley whispered conspiratorially. 'Or maybe our mind's elevation? Dunno, it was something like that.'

‘She seems a bit too bubbly to be a spy. Maybe she’s just a nice person?’

Moley’s eyes lit up. ‘She’s like those Bond girls, or one of them genetically engineered soldiers that are professionals from birth.’

‘You’re enjoying this way too much.’

Moley didn’t bother to continue his charade, reverting to normal again. ‘Maybe so, but in all seriousness I don’t know what to think of her.’ He looked in the direction she’d last gone off in. ‘She just isn’t right. I’d expect someone who works at National Archives to be... well, more mature. Know what I mean?’

Aaron nodded subtly. ‘Mmm. She was a bit weird.’

‘Anyone could have found out about our experiment and be taking the piss, don’t forget.’

‘That’s true. But I’ll see what she’s got to say. I’ve got nothing to lose, as I see it. Seems to be just another part of the strange things going on in my life.’

Moley smiled. ‘The thing about hanging out with you, man, is that life is rarely dull.’ He pushed his bike back up to speed as they accelerated off toward the school.

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The side of the *Novodantis* shimmered as the optical camouflage was disturbed and a small hatchway slid open. Tethis poked her head from the opening and glanced around to be sure nobody was looking. Satisfied, she swung out of the portal in a single, supple motion to land softly on the grass with barely a sound. As she stood, the intelligent fabric of her suit adjusted its thickness to match correct temperature retention for the cold of the early evening.

-‘So I guess it’s another few hours of keeping the ship out of the way of dog-walkers and birds?’

Tethis looked around as her daughter talked; then clicked her fingers, causing the hatchway to shut and the *Novodantis* disappeared entirely. ‘That’s right.’ She muttered.

-‘I’ll be at about 6 meters. Tree line seems to be the easiest place to hang around without something wanting to get in the way. Say, what makes you think this is Aaron Sellafeld if he’s still not on the ship sensors?’

Tethis began to walk away from the craft toward the town of Stradleigh. ‘Oh, I’m pretty sure it’s him. Maybe the scanners were looking up the wrong DNA traces.’ Her eyes picked up a sudden

motion, but a second look revealed it was merely the wind sifting through the bushes, so she continued to walk. 'Maybe you might want to check the sensors a few more times, I still think they're faulty. It's... *remotely* possible that the QDC didn't put them back together properly.'

-*'Okay, I guess.'*

'Good girl.' Tethis smiled. 'Keep an ear on me, I might need you to look things up, 'kay?'

-*'Yes, mother.'*

As the strange white-jumpsuit woman walked away from the shimmering hidden spaceship, 10-year-old Daniel Reynolds tried to contain his excitement from his hiding place in the bushes. This was just too cool! He watched the woman walk away for as long as he could wait, and then crept out to see if he could find the hidden spaceship he'd seen light up for the briefest of moments.

He wandered out into the clearing, looking up and around him. For a split second he thought he could hear a buzzing; the whine sound you get when the TV's broke or you've been listening to loud music for too long. But it seemed to disappear as he moved or looked in one direction or another.

'This is Captain 'Daredevil' Danny,' He said in a mock-radio voice to his curled fist. 'The alien spaceship has used its cloaking device! I'm taking a team to investigate!' He began stalking around the clearing, miming a scanning device in his hand and making bleeping noises.

Daniel stopped, deciding the ship was no longer around, and looked up into the sky. It must have gone back to space. He lifted his hand to his eye line, making the shape of a gun with his fingers.

'BANG!'

Then he giggled and ran back into the bushes for home.

Little did he realise, just a few meters above him from behind a sophisticated layer of thirty-second-century optical masks, his movements were followed by worried eyes.

3.

Aaron and Moley strode across the park to the bench Tethis had motioned, to find her sitting there patiently.

‘Hello there, Aaron.’

‘Hi.’ Aaron raised a hand in a meek wave. Moley just made shifty glances about, like a government bodyguard from a cheesy action movie. The two boys sat down opposite Tethis.

‘Please, have a mint.’ She offered a small green pellet.

‘Thanks.’ Aaron took it, deciding refusal would just be plain awkward. Moley took one also, inspecting it doubtfully, only putting it in his mouth when Aaron began glaring at him.

‘Now. I need to explain something important to you. I wanted to make sure you had the time to grasp it.’ She said with a precise, professional tone.

Moley eyed her suspiciously. ‘Is that so?’

‘...I’m not with National Archives.’

‘The cat is out of the bag, repeat, the cat is out of the bag.’ Moley said nasally, with a finger to his ear and several glances over his shoulder.

‘Moley, will you cut that out?’ Aaron punched his arm.

‘Dude, she’s winding you up. Why are you bothering with this?’

‘Please listen a minute,’ Tethis interrupted, ‘I’m not trying to trick you. I can, and will, back up everything I say. Just let me say it.’

‘Okay then, tell us.’ Aaron said calmly.

Tethis made a small, polite ‘ahem’, as though recalling a routine. ‘My name,’ she began, ‘is Tethis Lithi Arkwright, Chrononaut of the Third Age Unation. I arrived at precisely 4:30pm last Saturday, from October the 5th 3189, in my craft the *Novodantis*. This was made possible by data *you* collected, marking probably the earliest known time jump in human history.’

Aaron blinked. ‘...you what?’ Tethis seemed so sincere; it was somehow like truth, if just for an instant. Moley frowned as she went on.

‘I came here on a mission of Peace and Journalism.’ Tethis went on, unfazed by the looks she was facing. ‘I’m part of Special Temporal Operatives. We take all the tough and risky jobs like this deep jump into serious pre-history. Oh sure, there were a few others, but you were the first to do it right kiddo!’

Aaron stared blankly, his jaw slowly falling away.

'...I mean, Central were scurrying about for years trying to find any data we might use for proto-jumps. When they found your data from the global archive net, in some old European Federation files, they weren't sure if it'd be feasible to use them. Turns out they had accuracy approval. That's where I come in, you see.'

'Woah, hold it a second... time out, lady.' Moley urged. 'What the bloody hell are you talking about?'

'Oh. I'm getting ahead of myself.' She said guiltily. 'One second, I have a call.' She tapped her forehead deliberately.

-'Mother, we may have a problem.'

'Quick, run.' Moley whispered. 'She's a psychopath.'

'What is it now?' Tethis hissed, turning away from the boys slightly.

Aaron shrugged. 'I'll hear her out. Just keep an eye out for anything dodgy, there should be nothing to worry about.'

-'The problem with the sensors appears to be severe. The Novodantis was spotted by a child, though I think we got away with it this time.'

'WHAT?' Tethis yelled, startling the pair sitting opposite. 'Be more careful, will you!? Do you want to cause a Liang Cascade or something?'

'I still don't know what she's talking about.' Moley stared.

-'I told you, it wasn't me. It was the sensors. When you left, they failed to pick him up. He saw the ship during optical phasing.'

Tethis shook her head. 'The sensors have gotta be head-jammed. Just keep checking them until something shows up.'

-'But mom-!'

'That's enough! Just get to the root of it will you?' Tethis snapped back. She paused a moment, then sighed wearily. Her eyes slowly turned back to the boys and she smiled again politely.

'Trouble at home?' Moley asked dispassionately.

The smile fell from Tethis' face. 'Never mind that.'

Aaron took a deep breath. 'So... are you're telling me you're a... um, *time traveller?*'

'No, I'm not.' Tethis said tartly. 'The correct term is Chrononaut.'

Moley smirked. 'D'you think that talking to yourself some nonsense about spaceships is going to sell us your act?'

Tethis glared at him angrily. 'Will you just stop being so annoying for a minute and *listen?* I'm trying to do something important here. I've got next to no assistance. Any moment now, my dysfunctional ship will end up bumping into someone or

something significant, causing catastrophic alterations to the present back home. Success teeters ever more precariously on a knife-edge and it's all getting gradually worse. This is not a fucking children's game!

Aaron shifted nervously. He had just about followed what she was saying, but he'd abruptly gotten the sensation of reality dropping away, like the ground during a plane takeoff. 'We're just finding the whole idea a little unlikely.' He said, unsure himself whether he was a sympathetic believer or just underlining the insanity of her claim. 'I mean, we wanted something to appear. We really did. We just, um. Didn't expect this.'

'Fine, let's say you're right.' Moley leant forward, throwing Aaron a cautious glance before locking eyes with the chrononaut. 'You must have something you can show us to prove it?'

Tethis regarded them carefully, then gave a begrudging nod. She took a deep breath to disperse her flared temper somewhat, then removed a tiny flat device from her belt and held it before them in exhibition. 'Observe closely.'

She tapped her thumb against a pad on the device, opening her hand so it sat in the middle of her palm. The two boys watched transfixed as the upper face of the casing appeared to dissolve. Suddenly its edges expanded, scaling upward and outward as an intricate lattice weaved the metallic substance into a small box about twenty centimetres squared. It took less than a second. As the container materialised in Tethis' hand, Aaron was aware that his mouth was gaping again and made a conscious effort to close it.

The box appeared to be quite ordinary and featureless, with a grey metallic finish like a dull stainless steel. Tethis opened it naturally, as though containers constructing themselves from small flat objects was a perfectly normal occurrence. Inside it was an orb about the size of a clenched fist, which she removed from the box casually.

'What's that?' Aaron couldn't help but ask.

'Watch.' She replied simply. The moment she took the orb in her fingers, it moulded to fit them and sat in her hand comfortably. Then, there was a quiet whine and a pointed beam of bluish light shot from the device with a satisfying 'swish'. Upon hitting the grass, it became a glowing outline. A moment later the outline became a dog.

'A dog?' Moley said eventually.

'It doesn't actually exist.' Tethis explained. 'It's what we call a magnogram; magnetic force-field hologram.'

Aaron looked at the dog, which looked back in the vacant manner that he was accustomed to dogs looking. It really looked real. So much so that if he hadn't seen it materialise a moment before, he'd have easily assumed it was.

'It's a high resolution illusion which also can simulate the physical presence of its subject.' Tethis carried on. 'So it looks and feels like it's actually there.'

'That's... amazing.' Aaron said, reaching out to touch the dog's fur. It felt a little strange; but he couldn't figure out if it was just because his brain was playing tricks, knowing it was an illusion.

'It's nothing much really.' Tethis dismissed. 'Cheap, cheerful. Make good toys.'

'So...' Moley watched the dog run off to play with a passing spaniel wandering the park, which happily humoured it. 'That might be impressive, but can it do anything else other than dogs?'

Tethis nodded. 'As long as you've got the object you want, or a cubecode version of it.' She shifted her fingers across the orb's surface. As she did, the illusion leapt back into the orb with another 'whoosh'. The chasing spaniel fell forward on its face, then sat up looking very confused at the disappearance of its new friend.

'How about... uh, a helicopter?' Moley asked, grinning at the bewildered dog.

Tethis shook her head. 'This one has a maximum resolution of eight cubic meters. Big stuff doesn't work that well anyway, unless you've got the very expensive sort. They tend to glitch.'

'Typical.' Moley rolled his eyes. 'Technology never changes. Well before you convince *me*, you're going to have to do better than a fake dog.'

'Impressing you will be easy.' Tethis scoffed. 'But for now I just need your attention. I assume I have that?'

They nodded.

'Good. I would much like to continue this discussion somewhere more private.' She glanced worryingly in the corner of her eye, which Aaron noticed she kept doing periodically. He took a quick glance over his shoulder to see if he could figure out what she was looking at, but there seemed to be nothing there.

'Okay, I'm interested.' He looked back at her. 'Will my house be okay?'

'That would be much more preferable.' Replied the chrononaut.

'You're letting her into your house?' Moley whispered.

‘It’ll be fine.’ Aaron replied quietly as they stood. Tethis had begun hissing demands into thin air again.

Moley looked up at the evening sky with a half-laugh. ‘If you say so, man. S’your funeral when your mum finds out you invited a time traveller to tea.’

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Tethis walked into the Sellafeld residence like a deep space explorer peeking into some fantastic alien cave. Her eyes were full of wonder as she surveyed the hallway, a torch-implant near her eye emanating a brilliant light that followed where her head pointed. The beam cut through the dark corridor, illuminating pictures on the wall and a simple but graceful wallpaper pattern that stretched to the stairs.

Aaron stepped past her impatiently and hit the light switch.

‘Spoil sport.’ Tethis pouted, as her torchlight vanished automatically. He returned a sarcastic smile.

‘Looks like your mum’s not back yet.’ Moley stated.

‘It’s Friday.’ Aaron confirmed. ‘She’s taking the others to Youth Club.’

Tethis continued to ignore them both, inspecting the house with fascination. ‘By Hawking, an original digital-era fibre-optic telephone?’ she said giddily. ‘Oh, and I don’t believe it! All-natural wood stair panelling, authentic mortar and breeze-block wall construction...’ She prodded the wall with admiration, although to Aaron it was just a big surface with wallpaper on it.

‘You’re loving this, aren’t you?’ Moley interjected.

Tethis turned and drew up her stature above the two boys, suddenly taking on her professional tone again. ‘Yes, yes, of course. I have work to be getting on with.’ She said, as if she was about to undertake a momentous experiment.

‘Okay. This way.’ Aaron said, then led them to his room. It was downstairs; not particularly big by any account, but it seemed to intrigue their enigmatic visitor. Moley clicked the small portable TV on, which sprung into life on the news channel. Several stern looking people in suits quietly muttered about radio wave interference; that seemed to be on the news a lot lately. A scientist being interviewed explained that a cosmic storm was causing an unprecedented amount of radio disturbance at the moment; but it was no cause for alarm, he assured the camera.

While Tethis poked around, Aaron disappeared into the kitchen and came back some minutes later with three cups of tea and some biscuits.

‘Ah, thank you!’ Tethis beamed, taking a cup from him and sipping it. The two boys watched as she took the sugar pot from the tea tray and added a spoonful of sugar, then another, and another... some five or six times.

‘That’s better.’ She sighed, sipping at the drink. ‘Now then, to business.’

She promptly unfolded a tiny case she’d brought with her, no larger than a drinks coaster. Then she pressed something on it and it began to grow, much like the box in the park had earlier. It extended further and further, until it was the size of a small dressing table. As it completed its metamorphosis, it became apparent as a fairly normal prefabricated scientific desk, complete with a few screens and an attached chair. It certainly didn’t look like it just grew out of a small flat piece of metal.

‘Now then.’ Tethis began, indicating the newly formed seat to Aaron. ‘Tell me a little about yourself.’ She began to pace.

‘Well... I’m not sure what to say.’ Aaron replied, sitting down.

Tethis waited a moment. ‘Very well, I’ll start.’ She shrugged, and carried on pacing behind him. ‘I’m Tethis Lithi Arkwright, Chrononaut of the Third Age Unation. I was born in the province of Portugal, of the Northern Continental Zone. I’m now in 2.1.C and interviewing the planter of Chronozone... well, Zero, technically.’ She turned to him.

‘Am I on tape or something?’ Aaron asked.

‘In a way.’ Tethis said, squinting a little as though the real answer wasn’t worth the explanation.

Aaron deliberated a moment. ‘I’m Aaron Sellafeld... uh, I was born in Warrington and go to high school...’ He looked to Moley, who shrugged. He glanced at Tethis, who seemed exactly the same when being recorded as she was any other time, like it came as the most natural thing in the world. Whereas, he noticed, he’d already begun to talk differently; slower and with less decision.

‘Kay.’ She said, sensing Aaron’s pause was for lack of further input. ‘When did you and your friend here begin attempts at Chronozones?’

Aaron scratched his nose puzzledly. ‘You mean that time data we made?’

‘Well, yeah. Duh.’ Tethis answered. She didn’t even seem to take on the tone of a professional interviewer that he’d been expecting.

‘Um... I got the idea while in a class discussion, so Moley and our teacher Mr. Kaufman discussed-’

‘Ooooooh!’ Tethis blurted suddenly. ‘Your teacher helped? Can we include him?’

‘N-not... really.’ Aaron said slowly. ‘He lives in Oldham, and apparently goes away a lot at weekends.’

‘More to the point, he might not be so easily lured in as our young genius here.’ Moley spoke up, until this point watching the interview with folded arms.

‘Damn.’ Tethis clicked her fingers. ‘I meant to ask earlier. I keep forgetting stuff like that.’

‘They sent you on an historical mission and you forget who you’re supposed to be interviewing?’ Aaron asked, trying not to sound accusatory.

Tethis put her hands on her hips, striking a twisting pose in the form-hugging jumpsuit. ‘Look kiddo, I’m the best damn chrononaut there is. If I forget things every now and then, it’s all part of the package.’

Moley snorted. ‘If you say so...’

‘I do.’ She smiled childishly, then carried on pacing. ‘Okay, so you and your friend set up experiments to try and find the chronozone required information... how exactly?’

‘Trial and error.’ Moley grunted.

‘Tu-rer-ror?’ Tethis gibbered, cocking her head to one side. ‘You serious? You had nothing to go on at all?’

‘I was just brainstorming.’ Aaron twiddled his thumbs absently. ‘Lucky guess, right?’

‘Interesting... yes, interesting indeed...’ Tethis reached over and tapped a few discreet keys on the side of the desk-like device she’d sat Aaron with.

‘How many successful attempts did we make?’ Moley asked.

‘Oh, just the one.’ Tethis turned her attention to the corner of her vision again. Whatever she was looking at, it seemed to be something only she could see. ‘The last one.’

‘What was so different about that?’ Aaron asked.

‘Well we needed matter, you see. Something to work with at our destination. Something inanimate and inconsequential. There was a little footnote in the last recording that gave us the necessary clue. You know that ground vehicle, you called it a Fiat I think? The one you kept round the corner-’

KNOCK KNOCK.

The three of them stopped a moment upon hearing the door. 'Someone at the door?' Moley said eventually.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Aaron sighed. 'Guess I'll have to get it.' He stood and made his way out of the bedroom and into the hall.

As he walked through the doorway he was shocked to find a teenage girl standing before him.

'Hope you don't mind, I thought I'd better come in.' She said.

'Wha?' Aaron was suffering overload now.

'Who are you?' Moley asked, from behind Aaron.

'What the HELL are you doing here?' Tethis roared from behind them both.

The girl looked up at her. 'Calm down, mother.'

Mother?

The boys looked at Tethis then back at the girl. There was a marked resemblance.

'I told you not to leave the ship!' Tethis hissed.

'But it's really important, I had to come find you.' she replied. 'You weren't answering me.'

Tethis rolled her eyes. 'I switched off the com for the precise reason that I didn't want any more interruptions!'

'You're her... daughter?' Moley said eventually.

Tethis nodded reluctantly. 'Yes. This is Ro.'

Ro looked very much like her mother but for the fact that her hair was a swirling chestnut in hue, with streaks of strawberry blonde. Her figure was shorter, fuller; to go with her softer, wide-eyed face. She also wore the jumpsuit-like body overalls. Only Ro's were dark grey with a white and yellow stripe down the side. It was also not quite the same design, with bare hands and waist revealing a smooth and toned abdomen and some kind of padded jacket that seemed like a design afterthought. Fashionable and sassy, Aaron thought; yet befittingly sophisticated for the daughter of a scientist.

Another thing particularly startling to the two boys was just how close in age Ro and her mother appeared. Ro looked on the younger side of sixteen. Tethis looked like she was barely six years older. The boys wondered if the future had somehow mixed up the words for 'mother' and 'sister'.

'Um.' Aaron stuttered a little. 'Hi.' He extended a hand. 'I'm Aaron.'

Ro looked down at his hand detractedly. 'Please explain to me what to do.'

‘Don’t people shake hands in the future?’

Ro shook her wrist about and watching it puzzledly, as if to make sure she was doing it right. ‘I guess my mother may do things better than I. She’s more junked-up than me when it comes to 2.1.C, tebyaich.’

‘What’s junked? And two-one-see?’ Moley asked. This girl was even harder to understand than her mother.

Ro gave an incredulous but light-hearted glance. ‘It’s... ‘Junked’... you *know*? To upload data to the brain. Thereby learnin’ things? And as for 2.1.C, that is the century we are in. Yeah? I am speakin’ English, right?’

‘Well, yes.’ Aaron nodded. ‘Although I dunno what tehbeeaich means.’

Ro frowned. ‘Like, when you’re being up-front. Are you sure this is the right dialect, mother? I’ve junked the 2.1.C dictionary, so I *should* be using the chronolocal words.’

‘Well unless you haven’t noticed,’ Tethis interrupted impatiently, ‘we’ve still got a fair bit of 2.1.C that hasn’t happened yet.’ She glanced at Aaron with a knowing grin. ‘And the word ‘tebyaich’ originates from the acronym for ‘to be honest’. Incidentally, it was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2086.’

‘Hmm.’ Ro fidgeted. ‘I’m soundin’ unfamiliar praps.’

There was something a little awkward about the way she spoke, but it was still fluent. Like a foreigner who’d lived with English speakers for many years but still had their own native accent. Not that her accent was recognisable; it sounded a little like Swedish, or Russian. Aaron realised Tethis had the same accent, although it was much more subtle.

‘I might try junking more 2.0.C instead.’ Ro suggested. ‘I found those words fun.’

‘It’s okay. You speaking 21st century is kinda cool.’ Moley smiled.

‘Totally?’ Ro raised an eyebrow. She had a blank look; an innocent, almost robotic stare. She seemed so remote and foreign that she may as well have been from another planet. But Aaron had to agree with Moley on this one; she *was* pretty cool.

Aaron nodded and she grinned back. Her round, tanned face seemed to exude a vibrant and warm glow. It made him feel light-headed.

Moley was looking Ro up and down. ‘So. Tethis didn’t mention you.’

‘Yes, *well*.’ Tethis said testily. ‘I didn’t want to complicate matters. Now it seems there’s little I can do about that.’

Ro nodded patiently. 'Mother, have you seen the 'Gauge lately?'

'I know.' Tethis closed her eyes, massaging the bridge of her nose. 'Risen to seven over nine hundred.'

'What does that mean?' Moley beat Aaron to his question.

'It means that proverbial faeces may soon hit the rotary cooler.' Ro interjected.

'*BUT*. I am hoping to rectify that.' Tethis grumbled. 'And you hardly made it better by coming here.' She scowled at Ro. 'It was completely unnecessary. I already *knew* about the Liang Oscillation anyway-'

'That wasn't why.' The girl interrupted, her dark hazel eyes fixing on her mother. 'It's about the sensors. I think I know what the problem is.'

'Yeah?' Tethis said expectantly.

'They're bein' blocked.'

Tethis scoffed. 'Oh, yes I see, that solves everything, I *never* thought of that!'

Ro maintained her gaze, while Tethis' temper was clearly boiling up again. 'Dammit, aren't you forgetting when we are? This is 2.1.C! Blocking quazon sensors?' She slapped her forehead in exasperation. 'I mean THINK, child!'

'I know.' Was all Ro could manage.

'The only Chronozone for the next thousand years was used by us, therefore there's nobody here with such technology. Nothing here that can block quazon-based equipment. You're starting to see how impossible this is, hm?'

Ro paused a moment. 'Yes. But that's what the Novodantis said after I completed a thorough metaprobability sweep and associated scans.'

'It is wrong then.' Tethis folded her arms.

'Don't you think it's possible that the result's right, but our assumptin' of the cause is wrong?' She enquired.

'I'm not at luxury to entertain shot-in-the-dark theoretics.'

Tethis said dismissively. 'If something is impossible, it's impossible; no matter how hard it is to find another answer. Anyway. Now that you're here, you may as well help. Where'd you leave the ship?'

'Just outside.'

'Lazy. Well, that's typical.'

Aaron raised his eyebrows. 'Isn't that a bit obvious sitting outside?'

‘Nah.’ Moley shrugged. ‘Car, car, spaceship, car... blends in easily.’

‘Oh no no no...’ Ro said with a giggle, ‘it uses optical camouflage, silly.’

‘That’s like a big whooshy-thing that makes stuff invisible!’ Tethis said patronisingly.

‘We figured that bit out.’ Moley said.

‘They have them in science fiction.’ Aaron added.

‘Oh yes, that stuff’s a laugh.’ Tethis smirked. ‘I read some 2.1.C science fiction once. Couldn’t stop laughing.’

‘Mother.’ Ro interrupted. ‘You’re rambling again.’

‘Alright, alright.’ Tethis waved a hand in denouncement. ‘Let’s resume the interview, or we’ll be in the fourth millennium again by the time we’re done. Ro, move the ship into the back garden for now. Don’t want anyone bumping into it.’

Ro nodded, then pressed an index finger lightly on her temple as she stared into space for a few moments. Aaron watched her closely, much to Tethis’ mounting frustration.

‘If you must know,’ She said eventually, ‘The ship’s view is being projected onto her retina so she can move it and see where it’s going.’

‘Sounds uncomfortable.’ Aaron continued to gaze wondrously at Ro, who was still staring ahead with concentration. After a few moments she turned and looked at them, as if she’d just woken up to find them staring at her.

‘I’ve moved it.’ She announced. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Yeah.’ Aaron replied.

‘If you please.’ Tethis remarked, and they returned to Aaron’s room and the interview. She began to talk to the boys about the Chronozone procedure as Ro watched and listened silently. They discussed the calculations and attempts, while Tethis explained a little about why they needed this and that and how nearly the Council didn’t allow her to use the data to make a jump.

‘You see, it’s a complicated thing.’ Tethis leant back. ‘It isn’t like in your science fiction where you travel through time like getting on a train or a car. It’s a momentous procedure. It requires planning, permissions, chemical signatures, cross-permissions, tests, more signatures, sacrifice, risk, advisors, meetings, even more signatures... you’d be closer comparing it to a nuclear missile launch than a car journey.’

‘Every time there’s a chance you could scramble spacetime.’ Aaron mused. ‘I suppose that needs careful steps.’

‘But why was it so important you come here, now?’ Moley enquired.

Tethis shrugged. ‘Why is it so important to be the first into space? Or to climb a mountain nobody’s ever scaled? It’s difficult to question why we do these things; only that your Chronozone was the first by a long way, and that made us want to come see it.’

Ro slipped a smile, looking around as she spoke. ‘I still can’t believe I’m actually *in* 2.1.C! This is immeasurably cool, mother.’

‘Ro, please don’t interrupt the interview.’

‘Can’t we edit it out?’

‘The computer is editing it out as we speak. It’s *my* time you’re wasting.’

Ro snorted. ‘You normally don’t need my help.’

‘I said be quiet.’

Aaron cleared his throat politely.

‘Anyway!’ Tethis clasped her hands together, her tone light and pleasant again. ‘Before I get down to the important issues, have you got any sugar?’

‘Sugar?’ Aaron stared at her blankly.

‘A high-sugar drink would be good.’ She nodded.

Aaron went out of the room and returned a moment later. ‘Here’s some cola, my little brother drinks the non-diet stuff so it should have plenty of sugar in it.’ He handed the can to Tethis, who took a healthy gulp. Her expression changed to mild disdain.

‘That’s not bad I suppose.’

Ro leant forward to talk to the boys as Tethis swigged the can again. ‘She regularly gives herself diabetes, but it’s not a proper sugar addiction like some people.’

The two boys just nodded slowly like they knew what she was talking about. The afternoon had got weirder and weirder, to the point where it had become completely nonsensical. Aaron considered himself pretty unflappable anyway, but in this instance he supposed it was more down to the utter absurdity of the situation that kept him calm, as though he was expecting at some point to wake up and it’d all be a great big weird dream.

Eventually, as ever, Moley became bored.

‘Sorry Tethis, but when will we be impressed, as promised, by this future technology of yours? You’ve already got pretty much a whole interview out of us and we still haven’t seen anything special yet.’

Tethis glared at him. ‘Later.’

‘Do better.’ Moley countered, then turned to his friend.

‘Aaron, don’t say another thing until she makes up her end of the

deal.' He talked scarily like a business shark sometimes, Aaron thought.

Tethis' glare turned to a scowl, but it was Ro that broke the ensuing, uncomfortable silence. 'So that's why the Liang Gauge has been going berserk.'

Her mother looked affronted. 'How else could I get these *primitivos* to talk to me?' She rolled her eyes. 'And since when was it up to you?'

Ro looked at the two boys. 'If mom's been tryin' to, like, grab your attention with toys and gadgets, she shouldn't. Causes problems, seenot.'

'As you are now.' Tethis pointed out.

'The measure of which is-'

There was a clunk from the front door that cut Ro short. A moment later came the sound of plastic bags coming to rest swiftly with the floor.

'Aaron, I'm home.' Came the voice of Aaron's mum.

'Hi Mum!' Aaron called back.

'Did you have a nice day at school-' Her voice broke off abruptly as she stepped into the room. Tethis and Ro sat opposite Moley and Aaron, all looking up at her.

'Oh, hello there.' Aaron's mother said with a friendly smile. 'Are you from school?'

'I'm conducting an interview!' Tethis said dorkily.

Ro discreetly nudged her in the ribs, then added 'Yes, it is school-related endeavour.'

'Oh, I see.' Aaron's mum nodded. 'Well would anyone like a cup of tea?'

'No thanks, mum. Just had one.' Aaron dismissed.

'Okay. Well could you unload the shopping in the fridge? I've got to ring BT.'

'In a minute, mum.'

Tethis stood. 'I think it's time we were leaving, Ro.'

Ro nodded.

'I hope to conclude our talk soon, though!' The chrononaut smiled. 'You've both been very interesting.'

Aaron folded his arms. 'What about the demonstration?'

'I'll show you tomorrow. Meet us out the back here.' Then she strode out.

'Gotta run.' Ro gave a slight bow, then followed her mother out of the house.

Aaron's mum watched them go puzzledly. 'Isn't that the back door they went out of just now?'

'Yes.' Aaron replied with a sigh. He got up then walked to the kitchen, looking out the back door. Sure enough, the pair had disappeared. As he stood in the kitchen doorway, Aaron suddenly became aware that their cloaked ship could be staring back at him and he wouldn't even know it.

Hang on, what was he thinking? It couldn't be real, could it?

Yet there were too many things he could not refute. The holographic dog, while a modest display, was still unexplainable. Ro's appearance made the possibility of a ruse even more intricate; they definitely looked related. And then there was the whole interview desk that had materialised from a cigar case. Which, he remembered, was still in his room. Tethis was just too haphazard to be a scientist.

None of it made sense, but it was certifiably real.

'They were rather unusual.' His mother said as he walked back into his room. 'I didn't know you had any motorbiking friends, Aaron.'

'And older girls too.' Moley grinned. "Cause he's such a gentleman, Mrs. S.'

Aaron glared at Moley dryly.

'Oh, he is, isn't he!' Aaron's mum pecked his forehead with a light kiss, then nudged him toward the hall. 'Now go unpack some shopping for your dear mother.'

'...Okay mum.'

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