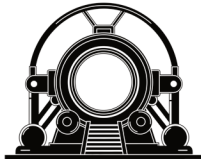


2



“Hey, Mom.” Grace showed her teeth in a weird smile-wince. “Shawn’s here!” She sounded like an announcer on a game show.

Delores Henderson blinked at Shawn, her eyes bulging. “What’s *he* doing here?” It was an odd question, since Shawn was there practically all the time. Still, Delores looked at Shawn like he was a burglar ready to raid their pantry. Which he also did all the time.

“Mom!” Grace said.

Mike’s adrenaline pumped. He had cooled off after the basketball game, but now he started sweating again. Mom never got her feathers ruffled like this. She was never rude to Shawn, either, even when responding to one of his lame jokes. But Mike also processed Mom’s words—*he missed reentry*. That had never happened with Dad.

Mom waved her hand and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Shawn, but you need to go home. Kids, I need to make a very important phone call. It’ll be okay. I’m just ... sorry.”

Delores rushed up the stairs, probably to the attic to talk to the Admiral on the secure line. It was an old-fashioned phone line, but with advanced tech supposedly impossible to hack.

After she left the room, Shawn whispered, “Guys? Delores needs to lay off the caffeine.”

Shawn only called the twins’ mom “Delores” behind her back.

“Didn’t you hear what she said?” asked Grace.

“Yeah, but I have no idea what it means. ‘Missed reentry.’ What? Is your dad an astronaut now?”

Mike shot Shawn a glare. “Grace meant about going home. You need to leave, buddy. This is serious.”

“Gotcha.” Shawn raised his hands in surrender. “But I need to take a tinkle first. That soda ran right through me.”

“Okay, but make it fast,” Mike said.

“My bladder thanks you.” Shawn darted toward the hall bathroom.

When they were alone, Grace stepped closer to Mike and whispered, “What’re we going to do? Dad didn’t come back?”

“I don’t know, but we need to find out what happened. Mom’ll be talking to the Admiral for a while, and you know how it takes them forever to make a decision.” Mike’s lips drew a flat line. “We should go to the basement and see what we can find out from the ...” His voice trailed off.

The Machine.

He hated that thing. Two things scared him when he was younger—the Machine and Tommy Newberry. But then Mike hit a growth spurt in sixth grade and, well, he’d conquered one of his fears one day after school.

The Machine was a different matter. Mike had spent enough time in the basement with Dad that the Machine didn’t freak him out like when he was little, but it still gave him the creeps. The Machine could send people hundreds of

years into the past, somehow scrambling atoms and reconstituting them in another time. Did people die for a second when going through the portal? He suppressed a shiver.

Grace slugged him in the arm. “Earth to Mike. Why were you staring off into space like an idiot?”

“What? No I wasn’t.”

She grunted. “Whatever. Come on. Let’s go see what the Machine can tell us.”

Grace led the way through the door, left open a crack by Mom, and they descended into the dimly lit basement. Workout equipment—a bench and weights—were scattered around the right side of the vast room. To their left sat the control station, a conglomeration of older knobs and panels connected to futuristic computers and big screens. Various-colored wires ran everywhere. Thick metal tubes traveled from tall, cylindrical fusion generators to a metallic arch set against the brick wall.

The arch glowed green—even now when inactive—throwing the whole basement into an eerie haze, and a constant low, droning buzz filled the room.

Mike stood beside the workout equipment, but Fruity Pebbles walked over to the control station.

“You remember exactly where in elsewhen Dad was visiting?” Grace’s hands hovered over the keyboard. “I know it was in the early days of the Revolutionary War.”

Mike stepped closer. “I can never keep the exact dates straight.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Grace started typing, her fingers a blur. “I thought by some miracle you knew exactly where he went and we could look it up. It’ll just take a minute longer now.”

Nodding, Mike crossed his arms and tapped his foot.

Grace stopped typing and growled. “That’s not helping.”

“Sorry.”

After a few more clicks on the keyboard, Grace gazed up at the screen. “There it is. The aberrance happened in Boston during the Revolutionary War.”

“What was the aberrance?”

Grace took a sharp breath through her nose. “George Washington was killed. Someone assassinated him.” Turning to Mike, her eyes grew big. “That’s General George Washington, the leader of the Colonial Army. He was one of the writers of the Constitution, and then he was the first president.”

“I’m not that stupid. Even I know who Washington is. Or was.” Mike squinted at the screen and leaned forward. “Dad’s reentry was scheduled for this afternoon. And he’s been back there for ...”

Grace gulped. “Two days. It’s been two days.”

Something heavy grew in the pit of his stomach. *Two days.* “How much longer does he have?”

“In the past?” Grace took a breath. “He’ll start fading in another, um, I don’t know exactly. Not long, though. Another day, at most?”

“Why does he always cut it so close?”

People weren’t made to live outside their own time and place. The Paladin scientists couldn’t explain why, but a person’s atomic makeup would begin to fray, then they would disconnect from existence, from any reality. They would eventually become what their parents called a “Fade,” like a ghost or something. And there was no coming back from that.

Grace shrugged. “Not too late yet. If they send back a team ...”

“That’s a big *if*.” The Paladin Admiral had many rules in place to keep the agents safe, and his parents often grumbled about how the rules slowed things down.

“They will, though, right?” Grace turned to him with pleading eyes.

“Maybe. But you know how they work. They’ll take forever to make a decision, and there’s no guarantee they’ll send anyone to help him. They might think it’s too dangerous.”

Grace craned her neck at the screen. “They might be concerned more agents would mess up the timeline. But Dad doesn’t have much time.”

Mike took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then opened them again. “I have to go.”

Grace flinched. “What?”

“You can send me back, right?”

“I mean, I *can*, but ...”

“You’re the one who knows how to work the control station,” Mike said. “You’ve got the math, and Mom trained you, showed you things.”

“True. But this could be seriously dangerous. That’s why Mom’s talking with the Admiral.”

“I know.” Mike glanced over at the glowing, buzzing arch that separated people’s atoms and tossed them across the boundary between now and elsewhere. “But you said it. He doesn’t have much time. And I can’t lose him.”

Not like Bobby, his little brother.

Grace’s gaze softened further, and tears gathered at the edges of her eyes. “I know. I *know*. Okay.” She wiped her cheek. “Fine. I can send you back, but it’ll have to be twenty-four hours after Dad’s original entry. Then you can find him before his extraction time.”

Time travel wasn’t as exact as one might think. One of the Paladin rules kept a buffer range between entries, something about wormholes and quantum entanglements messing with things, and there was no guarantee a person would arrive at the exact appointed moment. Usually they did. Mike didn’t know all the science behind it, hadn’t cared enough to listen

when Mom and Dad had talked to Grace about it. But he cared now.

“Got it,” he said.

Grace faced him and locked him with a stare. “Look. If you go back, you’ll have to follow all the rules. You hear me? I can help you on the comm, but I gotta trust you not to do something stupid. Those rules are there for a reason.”

“I will. I promise.” Mike would play by the rules but, if he was about to get his electrons scrambled, he would do what he had to do to rescue Dad.

Grace turned to the control station and spoke under her breath. “You’re about to become the youngest time-traveling Paladin in history.”

Mike caught the hint of jealousy in her tone. “Hey. Sorry. You’ll go next time.”

She smiled. “It’s just ... this is *my* dream, you know? Not yours. But you’re right. You can’t do this part.” Grace waved at the station. “I can. And it’s for Dad. I just think this is stupendously cool.”

Mike almost jumped out of his skin when he heard a voice from the stairs say, “Yeah, it really slaps.”

Shawn stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“You can’t be down here!” the twins yelled in unison.

“Well, I just found out my best friends are space aliens, so I guess we’re all pretty surprised.”

“We aren’t space aliens. That’s dumb,” said Grace.

Shawn nodded at the tech. “Earthlings don’t have Time Machines in the basement.”

“This isn’t a Time Machine.” Grace laughed awkwardly, the tone of her voice rising. “It’s a dehumidifier with a water pump for when the basement floods. It’s ... We found a big one from a factory that went out of business. My dad got a good deal on it.”

Shawn offered his trademark goofy grin.

Mike rolled his eyes. "How much did you hear?"

"All of it, I guess."

"You were supposed to go home," Grace whined.

"I was going to, but when I got out of the bathroom and came to say goodbye, I saw you two head into the basement. And I said to myself, 'Self, why are the Hendersons suddenly using their basement after five years of saying it was sealed up? And what's going on with Big Daddy Henderson? And do you think today is the day you can find out what all those weird mechanical noises are?' And I replied, 'Shawn, you have once again asked excellent questions. It's surprising more girls aren't in love with you.'"

Mike barked out a laugh despite himself, then shook his head. "Shawn, go home. Please."

"Are you seriously able to go back in time?"

Grace said, "No," and Mike said, "Yes" at the same time.

"Where are you headed?" Shawn walked toward them. "Or I guess I should say, *when* are you headed?" He snickered.

The twins shared a look. Mike shrugged, and Grace said, "Okay. When you go through the arch, you don't *go* anywhere. You're still right here, but in a different time. Our dad went back to the early days of the American Revolution, according to the Machine. And I need to send Mike back to check on him."

Shawn didn't move for a couple seconds. "Really and truthfully?"

"Really and truthfully. We aren't playing, Shawn," said Grace.

Shawn flashed his biggest grin.

Mike narrowed his eyes. "Why are you smiling?"

"Cause I know somebody who can help you big-time."