

STORY BY

**NEIL GAIMAN
MICHAEL REAVES
AND
MALLORY REAVES**

CONCLUSION TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING INTERWORLD SERIES

ETERNITY'S WHEEL

Joey Harker is the only
one left — and about to
face his destiny ...



WRITTEN BY
MICHAEL REAVES & MALLORY REAVES

Neil Gaiman
Eternity's Wheel

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The heart-pounding conclusion to the InterWorld series, by award-winning writers Neil Gaiman, Michael Reaves and Mallory Reaves. As the threat of FrostNight looms ever closer, Joey Harker seeks out more of his fellow Walkers across the Altiverse, training them as fast as he can. But even a solid team of recruits can't prepare Joey for the ultimate showdown with InterWorld's enemies, old and new. Joey never wanted to be in charge. But he's the one everyone is looking to now, and he'll have to step up if he has any hope of saving InterWorld, the Multiverse, and everything in between.

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AN INTERWORLD NOVEL

story by

NEIL GAIMAN,
MICHAEL REAVES, AND
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For CAL COTTON and THERESA MACWILLIE, who I think must have had the ability to Walk between conventions.

—Mallory Reaves

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INTERLOG

*Mom, Dad, Jenny, and Kevin the Squid,
I'm sorry.*

I'm sorry I left and I'm sorry I can't come back, and for everything I'm sure you've been through in the past however many years. I'm sorry you were given this note and know I was here but left without saying hello or good-bye. I was never even supposed to come back—it was a fluke, a one-time thing, and the longer I stay, the more likely it is I'd put you in danger.

I shouldn't even be writing this. But I couldn't come back, even accidentally, and leave without saying I miss you. I think of you guys every day. I bet the Squid is so big now! You probably don't call him that anymore. If you do, when he's old enough, tell him I'm sorry he got stuck with the nickname. He can blame his older brother, even though he won't remember me.

Jenny, I hope you're enjoying my music collection, and everything else, really. I'm not coming back again, so everything is yours. I miss you, kid.

Dad, I'm sorry I didn't say good-bye when I left. It was hard enough to tell Mom, and I knew you wouldn't let me go. Everything I'm doing is to keep you all safe, even though you may not understand it. I'm doing it to keep everyone safe. I think you'd be proud of me.

Mom, I still have the necklace you gave me. It helps to remind me of home and what I'm fighting for. I met a girl. Her name is Acacia. I don't know if it's even ... anything, but I think you'd like her. She's tough. She doesn't take crap from anybody, especially me.

I miss you all so much. I know the chances are astronomically slim, but I hope I can see you again someday. That thought is part of what keeps me going.

I love you.

J. H.



CHAPTER ONE

Have you ever had to walk with a broken rib? If not, count yourself lucky—and if you have, I sympathize. If you've ever had to walk three blocks with a broken rib, wrist, and fractured shoulder, all while trying to make it look like you were out for a stroll in the park ... well, then you and I should exchange stories sometime. For now, here's mine.

My name is Joseph Harker. I'm almost seventeen, and I'm back on my version of Earth for the first time in two years, if not longer. It's hard to tell exactly how much time has passed when you're hopping from world to world.

When I left, I gave up everything I'd ever known. My friends, my family, including the little brother who hadn't quite learned to say my name right yet. The possibility of straight As on my next report card. My favorite breakfast cereal and riding my bike through the crisp fall leaves on Saturday afternoons. My mother's smile, my father's laugh. Everything I thought my life would be. Still, I gave it all up, and willingly.

I'd lost so much more than that in the past two days.

It was dark; the sun had just been going down when I'd arrived. I'd stayed in the park to watch the red-gold light set the familiar town afire one last time, then started off toward my school. My old school, I should say. "School" now was the long, sterile halls and compact rooms of InterWorld Base Town; the Hazard Zone combat sessions; and the trips that were all for field training. At least, it had been. Maybe InterWorld Base Town was my old school now, too.

No, I thought fiercely, as I concentrated on keeping my feet moving across the grass. I would get back there. I would see InterWorld again.

I had to.

Through the park, off the grass, onto the sidewalk. Even after being away for so long, I knew where I was going—which wasn't due to any innate sense of direction, believe me. I just knew that the park was between my house and my school, and I had landed house side instead of school side. Not too difficult, even for someone who might or might not have a concussion. I hadn't hit the ground from that far up when I'd been shoved through dimensions, but it'd sure *felt* like I had.

I kept moving, resisting the urge to keep my head down; the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself. I didn't know how my parents had explained my absence these last two years, but I couldn't risk being recognized. I was here to see one person, and one person only. Someone who had helped me through any number of crazy situations even *before* I had turned into an interdimensional freedom fighter.

My social studies teacher.

His house was right next to the school, and I only knew where *that* was because he'd made it a point to tell every kid in his class that if they ever needed anything, day or night, his address was 1234, the same street the school was on. I once asked if he'd picked that number on purpose so it

would be easy for us to remember. He shook his head and said, “No, I picked it on purpose so it would be easy for *me* to remember.”

1218 ... 1220 ... It was getting harder and harder to move without stumbling, but I did my best. There were still a few people out walking dogs or supervising young children. I could see a familiar-looking green Jeep in the distance, parked at the end of a short driveway. 1226 ... 1230 ... Almost there. I reached the mailbox marked 1234, stepped around the Jeep, and went up to the front door. The lights were out.

Please be home, I thought, pressing the doorbell. After a moment I pressed it again, and then I sagged against the wall. He was probably still at the school, grading papers. I should have gone there first. I wasn't sure I could make it there now.

I stood there for a few minutes, weighing my options. Could I wait? *Should* I wait?

“Joey?”

My knees almost buckled, though it was with relief rather than fatigue. I knew that voice.

I lifted my head, turning to see my former social studies teacher, Mr. Dimas, standing there holding a laptop bag in one hand and a stack of papers in another. “Joseph Harker?” he asked again, and I nodded.

“Mr. Dimas,” I said. “I need help.”

He peered at me over the rim of his glasses, apparently trying to figure out if I was on the level. I must have looked pitiful, or at least harmless, because he nodded and moved past me to unlock the door without another word. He didn't seem any older ... but then, last time I'd been at InterWorld for about five months, I'd only been gone from *here* for two days. I wasn't sure how the time discrepancy would translate from two *years*, but I didn't feel like doing the math. Come to think of it, for all I knew I could have been thrown back (or even forward) in time; I hadn't come here on purpose, after all. Could they even do that?

That was an unsettling thought. I was used to not knowing *where* I was, but I'd never really had to question *when* I was. Not until my recent association with a Time Agent, anyway.

Acacia. God, I was worried about her.

Mr. Dimas led me inside, turning on the hall light and gesturing for me to sit on his couch. I started to, but hesitated. I could feel the sticky, warm, wet feeling of blood matting the back of my shirt under my hoodie. “I might get blood on it,” I said, and he fixed me with a long look. I could tell what he was probably thinking: that I wasn't *visibly* bleeding (except for the cuts on my wrist, which I'd kept in my pocket on the way over), but if I was worried about staining his couch it might be worse than it looked.

“It's just a deep scratch, I think,” I said. He sighed.

“Ordinarily I wouldn't care about furniture stains, but they still haven't closed the case on your disappearance. One moment—take off your sweatshirt, if you can.” He left the room.

I stayed where I was, dizzy from all the sudden implications. Of course my disappearance would have been reported to the police; I'd been young enough when I'd left to still be considered truant. I'd told Mom and Mr. Dimas the truth, and Mom would have told Dad and maybe Jenny, but there's no way they would have been able to tell anyone else.

“No one's being blamed for it, are they?” I blurted out as Mr. Dimas came back into the room. He was carrying two trash bags and a roll of duct tape.

“No,” he said immediately, and I relaxed a hair as he started to tape the trash bags over his couch. “Your parents reported you as a runaway two days after you left, but the police still looked into everyone you had contact with. Someone saw you come in to talk to me after school the night you disappeared, so they've investigated me more thoroughly.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“No need to apologize. Your mother has firmly and publicly stated she does not believe I had any involvement in your disappearance, which has helped. It isn't as though they suspect me of murder

or anything, though they *will* if you get your blood on my furniture.” He finished the last of the taping and stepped back, nodding to himself. “Sit,” he told me, and I did. The plastic crinkled beneath me, but all the cloth was covered. I leaned back, with no small amount of relief. My ribs were killing me.

He sat down across from me in a comfortable-looking armchair, and leaned forward to assist me in removing my sweatshirt, like he’d told me to do before. “I don’t know where to start,” he said. I wasn’t sure if he was talking about my injuries, or my story.

“Neither do I,” I admitted.

“Why did you come to me, instead of your family?”

“I can’t stay,” I said immediately. The answer was that simple, really. I couldn’t stay, and my family would want me to. *I’d* want me to. It wouldn’t be fair to raise their expectations, give them false hope that I was back for good, or that I could at least visit for a while. I wasn’t, and I couldn’t, for their own safety.

He was nodding, accepting my answer and the unspoken reasons behind it. “Okay. That scrape doesn’t look too bad; you’re not going to bleed out if I run to the drugstore. What do you need?”

“Ah.” I hesitated, trying to think. “My right wrist is definitely broken, and some of my ribs might be. I also might have a concussion; I fell pretty hard a few ... on the way over here,” I stumbled, not wanting to give him the impression I’d been in trouble right before coming to his door. “My shoulder was fractured”—I paused, trying to figure out how long ago it had been—“in a rockslide,” I said, stalling. “It was tended to and mostly healed, but it’s still aching.”

“How long ago was it seen to?”

It was so hard to tell. The last few days were a blur of places and people and injuries, and I hadn’t slept or eaten with any kind of regularity. “Ah ... a week ago? Two? I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“I’ll get you some aspirin. A brace for your wrist is the best I can do, since I’m assuming you don’t want me to take you to the hospital.” I shook my head, and he continued. “I’ll get medical tape for your ribs, but if one of them *is* broken, the best you can do is not move for a while.” He eyed me. “I take it that’s not an option?”

I shook my head again.

“I’m leaving as soon as I can stand again,” I said.

“To where?”

“Another dimension,” I said. “Somewhere I might be able to find help.” I’d already told him some of it, after all.

“I see,” he said, and stood up. He sounded regretful, and offered his hand. I took it with my left one, not really sure why. “Joseph Harker,” he said, “I’ve never been sure if you’re crazy or if I am, but I’m glad to know you either way.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, and he paused at the honorific. It was habit for me; I’d gotten used to calling the Old Man that. To his face, anyway. “Mr. Dimas,” I amended.

“Call me Jack,” he said. “I’m not your teacher anymore.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I nodded. He patted his jacket to make sure he had his wallet, and moved toward the door. “If you can wait on the aspirin, I’ll pick up some extra-strength painkillers.”

“That’d be great,” I said, though the thought of waiting a few more minutes wasn’t awesome. Still, I’d live, and it would be better for me in the long run.

“I’ll be back,” he said. I nodded again, even though he wasn’t looking at me anymore, and listened as the front door opened and closed behind him. I heard the click of his key in the lock. I wasn’t sure if he was locking me in or making sure to keep everyone else out. Probably both.

I’ll admit it: I was nervous about going to *anyone* for help. Not only was it entirely possible he’d be coming back with some nice men in pristine white coats but there was no telling what kind of trouble I might have brought with me. My enemies had sent me here on purpose, which meant they probably wouldn’t be coming after me ... *probably*. There was no way to know for sure. Even aside

from that, I had already had one teammate turn on me in recent memory. I was having a few trust issues right now, not that I think anyone would blame me.

I tilted my head back against the covered couch, listening to the crinkle of plastic around my ears. I was dizzy. What I really needed was to sleep for about a decade, but I'd probably get about an hour. I'd been sent here to witness the destruction of everything. I didn't know how soon they were planning on making that happen, but I probably couldn't afford to rest for too long.

Despite that thought, I must have passed out on the couch while I was waiting for Mr. Dimas—Jack—to get back from the store. One moment I was sitting there, thinking about how I couldn't rest for long, and the next I was hearing the key in the lock again and realizing I'd fallen asleep.

And I woke up with a headache, which is pretty much the worst thing *ever*.

"How long were you gone?" I asked, as he stepped into my line of sight.

He looked at his watch. "Twenty-three minutes," he said, raising an eyebrow at me. "Are you okay?"

"Water and painkillers," I said. "Please."

He brought me a bottle of water and two maximum-strength aspirins. I swallowed them both at once, along with half the water. Mr. Dimas (I kept thinking of him that way, no matter what he'd said) was laying out supplies on the table: a wrist brace, an Ace bandage, medical tape, butterfly bandages, gauze, disinfectant, etc.

"Tell me what happened," he said, sitting on the table across from me and dabbing the disinfectant on the gauze.

"It's not going to make much sense to you," I said apologetically.

"That's fine. Just talk to me. This is going to hurt."

Oh. I nodded, trying to figure out where to start. I had told him some the last time I'd been home, before I'd made the decision to fully commit my life to InterWorld. ... "How much do you remember from what I told you before?"

"I've never forgotten it," he said. "You went missing for a day and a half, and then you came to see me at school one evening with a story about how you'd discovered you could travel through dimensions."

"We call it Walking," I said. He was cleaning the cuts on my wrist left by Lord Dogknife's claws, and they were starting to sting. A lot.

"Right. You were being chased by this magic organization. ..."

"HEX," I filled in. "They're the bad guys. One of them, anyway."

"And you were rescued by an older version of you, who was killed in the process."

"Jay," I said, the ache of the words and the memories nothing compared to the stinging of my wounds. Thinking of Jay no longer hurt as much as it used to; everything healed eventually. "And I brought his body back to InterWorld. That's where I met the other versions of me."

"Because you all have the same power," he said.

"Right. See, since *I* have the power to Walk between dimensions, every other version of me in every other dimension has that same power. I don't know why me—or, why *us*—but there it is. We can all do it, some better than others. Apparently, I'm ... pretty good at it."

"Which is how you did it by accident at first," he said, pinching my skin together as he placed a butterfly bandage over the worst of the cuts. I continued to speak, watching him with a vague, detached fascination. "And then you went on a training mission, correct? The one that turned out to be a trap?"

"Yeah. Everyone got captured by HEX, except for me. I only escaped because of Hue."

"Your little extraterrestrial friend. You called him an ... MDLF?"

"Yeah, M-D-L-F, standing for multidimensional life-form, or mudluff. He's not an extraterrestrial, exactly, he's a ... well, a multidimensional life-form. He looks kind of like a big soap bubble, and communicates by changing colors, so I call him Hue. Or her, I really don't know. ..." I

stopped talking for a moment, taking slow, even breaths. Mr. Dimas was cleaning the scrape along my side. I didn't even remember getting that one, but it was hurting quite a bit now that he'd found it. Fights were like that; half the time you didn't feel your bruises until later.

"Your team was captured by HEX," he prompted me, and I closed my eyes to concentrate.

"Yeah. Except for me, because of Hue. But it still seemed pretty suspicious, so the Old Man—he's our leader, another version of me—wiped my memories and sent me back here. That's when I showed up again after almost two days and came to talk to you."

"Because you'd gotten your memories back."

"Yeah. Hue came and found me, and seeing him, I just ... remembered everything. I guess they couldn't take that away from me, for some reason. ..."

"So this mudluff creature came here," Mr. Dimas said, looking interested, "to our Earth."

"Yeah. I don't know if they do that all the time, or if it was because I was here, or ..."

"Where is Hue now?"

"I don't know. He's kind of like a stray cat. He hangs around when he wants attention or if I'm upset and he's trying to help, and he's saved my life more than once, but sometimes he disappears for days or weeks at a time."

Mr. Dimas nodded, gesturing for me to sit up. I did so, gingerly, and he started to rub some sort of minty-smelling gel onto my ribs. "For the bruising," he explained. "Tell me what happened after you went back to InterWorld."

"Well, I thought I'd remembered everything at first, but I couldn't *quite* grasp the way back to Base Town. So instead I tracked down where the rest of my team had been taken, and we all managed to escape." It was an incredibly condensed, watered-down version of what had actually happened, but it was true enough. I had tracked my team through the Nowhere-at-All to a nightmarish HEX battleship, gotten myself recaptured, caused a ruckus in the prison cells, set hundreds of captive souls free, and more or less accidentally destroyed the entire ship. There had been some quick thinking and a few almost heroic moments, but most of it had been dumb luck.

"Go on," Mr. Dimas urged. He was wrapping the tape around my ribs now, which hurt nine ways from Sunday.

"Uh, so, we escaped ... and I was accepted back into InterWorld. It's been about two years for me. I've been training, going on various missions, doing okay in my studies ... business as usual. Nothing too weird happened until my team and I were sent to retrieve some data from a Binary world last ... ugh, I don't even know. A week ago? Two, maybe?" It was so hard to keep track. ...

"Binary world?"

"Binary are like HEX: bad guys. They're two different factions who both want the same thing, though the Binary are what they sound like: machines, mostly, run by a sentient computer who calls itself zero-one-one-zero-one, or 'the Professor.' They're the science; HEX is the magic."

He glanced up at me over his glasses. "Magic?"

I couldn't help giving a small grin. "Yeah. I had the same reaction, but I've seen it. Magic. I could go into how it works and what it is and all that, but it doesn't really matter. It *works* and it *is*, and HEX has the monopoly on it—except for the fringe worlds closer to the high end of the Arc, but—"

"You're losing me," he said, tying off the end of the tape now wrapped firmly around my torso.

"I'm losing myself, I think," I said, trying to concentrate on breathing. I was starting to get tunnel vision.

"Sit back for a minute," he advised, looking me over. "And drink more water."

I nodded, following his advice. At least the pills were kicking in, and I could feel my headache starting to ebb. They weren't doing too much for the rest of me, though.

"What's this?" he asked suddenly. I turned my head; he'd found the small bruise and little puncture wound of an injection site on my arm.

“Ah, that. I got injected with a tracer for safety reasons, after the rockslide. It's advanced technology, it'll dissolve harmlessly within another week or so.”

“Nothing that needs my attention?” I shook my head. “All right. What's a fringe world?” he asked, once I started to feel less like I was going to pass out.

“It's ... it was explained to me like this: the Multiverse is *everything*. Think of it kind of like the moon: a giant circle, partly in shadow. The shadowed part is the Altiverse. The bright part, like a crescent moon, is the Arc. The Arc has all the main versions of our universe, with our Earth, and they vary from high magic to high science, depending on where they are in the Arc. That's mostly because HEX and Binary each rule over opposite sides, but they're trying to rule over ALL of it. We call those worlds, closer to one side or the other, fringe worlds. Make sense?”

He was nodding, though he looked a bit dazed. I suppose I couldn't blame him; I'd essentially just given him hard facts about our much-speculated cosmology. I'd probably rocked his world a bit. “Go on,” he said.

“Okay. Um ...” I paused. I'd been explaining about fringe worlds, but why ...? “Right, magic versus science, or HEX versus Binary. The Professor is the leader of the Binary; HEX's leader is a ... kind of like a demonic dog. They call him Lord Dogknife. He's the one who did most of this damage.” I held up my wrist and indicated my ribs. “And sent me back here.”

“Okay. So, you said you were sent to retrieve some data from a Binary world?” He started to wrap the Ace bandage around my wrist.

“Right, yes. We weren't able to get the data; there were too many rutabagas—that's what we call Binary soldiers; they're basically unintelligent clones—and it was looking like things were about to get bad. Then this girl appeared. Dark hair, violet eyes. I'd never seen her before, but she rescued us. Her name was—is—Acacia Jones. She's a ... an agent for another organization.” It occurred to me, sort of all at once, that perhaps telling him about TimeWatch wasn't the best idea. I knew next to nothing about it, aside from the fact that it was called TimeWatch, they'd once sent me thousands of years into the future, and Acacia was something called a Time Agent. It seemed like the sort of thing that might be pretty classified.

Mr. Dimas looked like he might be about to ask a question, but I kept talking. “I showed her around InterWorld a bit, but then I had to go out on another mission. Another Walker—that's what I am, a Walker—was found on the same Binary world we'd just been trying to get the information from. The Old Man sent us back to get the info and the Walker.” I remembered all of that quite vividly. Crawling through the air vents in the shut-down office building, finding the other version of me held captive, feeling an instant connection ... “His name was Joaquim,” I said, feeling my stomach churn. There was a sour taste in my mouth, though whether from the remembered betrayal or the lingering pain of my injuries, I couldn't be sure. I sat still for a moment, just breathing. Just remembering.

“Joseph?” Mr. Dimas asked, pausing as he reached over to pick up the wrist brace.

“I'm fine,” I lied, taking another drink of water. “Long story short, we thought Joaquim was one of us, but he wasn't. He was a clone, like the rutabagas Binary makes, but infused with souls and powered by HEX's magic. That was when we discovered HEX and Binary were working together.” I shook my head, the weight of it all descending upon me once again. The only thing that had given InterWorld a fighting chance was HEX and Binary's war with each other. Now that they'd called a truce, however temporary it might be, they'd be turning all their focus on us.

“Infused with souls?” Mr. Dimas repeated, looking at me seriously.

“Yeah,” I said bleakly. “HEX and Binary keep the souls of any Walker they catch. Apparently, that's the source of our power, the very essence of what we are. They use us to power their ships, so they can travel between dimensions as well.”

“So they made a clone of you.”

“Using Jay's blood from where he'd died.”

“And powered him with ...”

"The souls of dead Walkers."

"Okay," he said, looking grim. He shook his head. "So he wasn't really one of you."

"No. He was sabotaging InterWorld from within. He caused a rockslide during a training mission that injured a bunch of us"—I gestured to my shoulder—"and killed a friend of mine. His name was Jerzy."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Dimas. I nodded.

"Hex and Binary were using Joaquim to try and power a ... HEX called it FrostNight. It ... was basically created to restart the universe. So they could make it into whatever they wanted."

Mr. Dimas looked like he was having trouble grasping this. I didn't blame him. "Restart the *universe*?"

"Or the Multiverse, depending on how far they got. I ... Acacia and I tried to stop it, but ..."

"Did you?"

"I—I can't assume we did."

"I imagine we'd know if you hadn't. Or, perhaps we wouldn't know, but we also wouldn't be here?"

"Maybe. I don't know how fast it moves, or ... It's a soliton, which means it will maintain a continuous speed without losing momentum or energy ... or, that's what they told me. So it would still take a while to erase *everything*."

"I see. How did you try to stop it, or is that too complicated?"

"They were trying to use Joaquim *and me*," I admitted, holding up my other hand. The skin around my wrist was still chafed raw from where I'd gotten out of the restraints. "I got out, with Acacia's help," I added quickly, seeing he was about to ask. I didn't want to tell him the truth: that while Acacia *had* helped me, it hadn't been her who'd broken the machine. It had been me. Thousands of me, scattered through the air like fireflies ...

I'd used the souls. I'd called them to me, added their power to mine, and directed them to do as I wished. I still wasn't sure if the ends had justified the means, or if it made me just like the monsters I fought against.

"So you think, without you, it may not have been powered completely?"

"Maybe, but like I said, I can't assume that."

Mr. Dimas nodded again. "What happened after you got out?"

"We tried to go back to InterWorld, but we couldn't get there. The Old Man had figured out Joaquim's energy drain on the ship, and thrown the engines into overdrive to get away. We were waiting for our ship to pick us up when we saw it warp away, followed by a HEX ship. It's ... that HEX found InterWorld Base Town is ..."

"Bad, I imagine?"

"Very bad." I watched as he secured the wrist brace around my hand. It hurt, but I relaxed immediately now that I didn't have to concentrate on trying not to move it too much. "InterWorld might be able to stay ahead of the HEX ship, but they're gonna have to keep running, which means they're essentially trapped. They can't stop, not even for a second."

"Let me see if I have anything for that burn on your wrist and the one on your side." Mr. Dimas stood, leaving me in momentary confusion. What burn on my side? I shifted, finding the rough texture along my skin, and the pain that came with it. *Right* ... It was from J/O's laser. That was something I'd left out of the retelling. My teammate J/O, a cyborg version of me, had been turned against us by a Binary virus. Acacia had saved me from him, too, left him wandering through time looking for us. ...

"He wasn't on the ship," I said suddenly, as Mr. Dimas sat back down across from me.

"Who wasn't?"

"J/O. A teammate of mine, he's a cyborg me," I explained, only half listening to what I was saying. My brain was moving too fast for my mouth. "He'd been infected by a Binary virus and was working with Joaquim. He attacked me—that's where I got the burn on my side from his laser cannon

—but Acacia threw us through time and he couldn't find us ... but that means he wasn't on Base Town when they had to punch it, he must have been left behind. He's still out there somewhere—" I stopped, not wanting to alarm him, but the sentence continued on in my head. *He could come find me. He could come here.*

"I have to go," I said, but Mr. Dimas was shaking his head.

"Not with your injuries," he said firmly, putting a hand on my fractured shoulder when I tried to stand up. I winced, and he gave me a look that said *see?* "You can barely walk, and what little medical attention I've given you won't help much unless you *sleep and heal.*"

"You might be in danger," I tried.

"You *are* in danger, and you're not going to get out of it without dying unless you rest, not to mention eat." He fixed me with a stern look over the top of his glasses, the look I remembered from sitting in his classroom.

My stomach gave a loud growl just then, as if to punctuate his sentence. I glanced down, betrayed, and felt heat rise to my face. "Okay," I said quietly, making the decision to leave as soon as I'd eaten. I wasn't going to put him in more danger than I already had, and besides, I had things to do. My army wasn't going to gather itself.

"Good," he said, straightening up. "Now. Important question: What do you want to eat?"

"I—" I stopped, it suddenly occurring to me that I could have anything I wanted. InterWorld kept us fed, of course; protein bars and enhanced vitamin water, very nutritious and not at all delicious. But I was *home* now, back on my world, and I could have anything. "Pizza," I said. I know it's cliché, but cut me some slack—I'm a teenage boy. What would *you* have asked for? Broccoli?

"I'm not surprised. What do you want on it?"

"Pepperoni and broccoli," I said. Shut up, it actually sounded good.

Mr. Dimas left to get the pizza ("I'll go pick it up," he'd said, "and you'd better be here when I get back, Joseph. I mean it.") and I relaxed back on the couch again, seriously considering passing out. Instead I forced my mind into some semblance of meditation. It was the best I could do right then; I was still exhausted and hurting and worried, and every passing car or creak of the house settling made me jump.

Even with all my injuries and fears and concerns, I couldn't stop thinking about Acacia. I hadn't gotten to that part of the story in my retelling to Mr. Dimas, of how we'd been standing together watching the HEX ship stalk its InterWorld prey, and Lord Dogknife had attacked from out of nowhere. ... She hadn't even seen him coming. I didn't know what he'd done to her, except that the second time he'd knocked her down, his claws were slick with blood and she hadn't gotten back up.

I remembered her expression just before we'd been attacked. Most of my memories of her were like that, actually, moments of action frozen in time. I remembered her grinning at me a second before the sound of laser fire filled the air when J/O had found us; I remembered the way her face had been tilted toward mine before Lord Dogknife had attacked. I leaned back against the couch, remembering how she and I had sat back-to-back in a moment of respite, both of us injured, talking strategy and keeping each other going. I wondered if our friendship (relationship?) would be any different if we hadn't formed the majority of it while running for our lives.

Most of all, I wondered where she was now. I didn't know if she'd vanished of her own volition or if Lord Dogknife had sent her away or if she'd been rescued. I didn't know what the chances of seeing her again were, and I wondered if I ever would at all.

The rest of the night went by in a daze. I ate five slices of pizza and downed three bottles of water, as well as two more painkillers. Mr. Dimas had tended my injuries, fed me, and let me use his shower. He gave me his guest room (after making sure I wasn't going to bleed on anything) and made me promise not to leave without telling him. I finally collapsed into bed around nine, still dizzy from the whirlwind of events.

I remember that the food tasted good, and I remember enjoying it, but I was hard-pressed to remember what it had actually tasted *like*. My body was working overtime trying to heal, and in order to do that, it had to make me sleep.

I was afraid to. I'm not gonna lie, I've seen things that would give the devil himself nightmares (if he even existed anywhere; that kind of theology was something we'd never really gotten into in basic studies), and I'd come through the other side just fine. Now, though ... not only was I afraid of the dreams I might have, I was afraid of something coming to find me. I was afraid of being so exhausted that I'd sleep right through something breaking in and hurting Mr. Dimas before it ever even got to me.

That, ultimately, was why I was here instead of with my family. Because I couldn't risk danger coming right to their door, to Mom and Dad and my little siblings. But my social studies teacher? Apparently I was willing to risk him.

Utterly disgusted with myself, I fell into an uneasy sleep.



CHAPTER TWO

I must have slept deeply for at least a few hours, because the first time I startled awake at a noise was around three A.M.

It had been a quiet noise, the kind you can't really identify once you're awake even though you know it's what woke you up. It might have been a thump or a creak. ... Had I shut the door when I went to sleep, or left it ajar? It was open now.

The bed jiggled as something jumped up onto it, and I bolted upright, simultaneously aggravating my injuries and startling the hell out of a cat.

"Right, cat ... Mr. Dimas has a cat," I mumbled, staring at the creature hunched down near my feet. It was an orange tabby whose name I didn't remember, but I recalled him using the cat's habit of bringing in dead mice and birds as a parallel lesson for something or other in his class.

I took a deep breath and looked out the window. No sign of sunlight anywhere. I pushed myself out of bed, testing my balance and the general functionality of all my limbs. I was incredibly sore, but I could move. I'd had a plan before I even got to Mr. Dimas's, and now that I was in slightly better shape, I could get started. It was time to go collect my first recruit.

I know I'd promised, but I really didn't have a choice. Mr. Dimas would try to convince me to stay, and it was better for everyone if I didn't.

Still, there was something I had to do before I left.

Since I was staying in a teacher's house, it wasn't hard to find paper and a pencil. The cat followed me around as I put my socks and shoes back on, and he purred and nuzzled against my hand as I tried to gather my things. I couldn't help but smile. I'd always liked animals, and the cat reminded me of Hue. Sometimes when the mudluff wanted attention, he'd just get in the way of whatever I was doing.

I had two letters to write. The most important one was also the hardest, so I put it off until last. Instead, leaning against a desk with the cat winding itself around my ankles, I wrote:

Mr. Dimas (Jack),

Sorry to run out like this, but you had to have expected I would. I know I promised, but it's safer for you and my family if I'm not on this world anymore. Speaking of my family, the other letter here is for them. Please make sure they get it.

Thank you for everything you've done for me, first and foremost not assuming I was crazy when I brought you this whole harebrained tale. The supplies will help immensely, and I'm sure I won't be the only one who'll be grateful for them.

Not much else to say. I know it sounds (again) crazy, but if the world is ever destroyed, you'll know I've failed in my mission. I'll do the best I can to make sure I don't.

Thanks again.

I debated signing my name for a few moments—it could be seen as incriminating, but Mr. Dimas was smart enough to burn the letter after he'd read it. Still, I decided not to chance it. He'd know who it was from.

I made my way silently out to the living room, grabbing the rust-red backpack he'd filled with granola bars, bottled water, and medical supplies for me. Another thing I was grateful for, particularly the aspirin. I stopped long enough to take two of those, then slipped soundlessly out through one of the windows so I wouldn't leave his front door unlocked. It seemed the least I could do.

The cat sat on the windowsill, watching as I made my way alone down the dark street.

The park was the best place to Walk from. It had a lot of wide-open space but enough trees that I could easily slip into a ring of them and not get caught disappearing—or reappearing, as the case may be. Many of my InterWorld lessons had explained that I had an instinctive navigational system for Walking, sort of like when you close your eyes and can still tell you're about to run into a wall. The chance of trying to Walk between dimensions and ending up occupying the same space as a car or trash can—or another person—was slim to none, but Walking in a wide-open space made it far *less* likely.

There was no moon tonight, though there were a few scattered streetlights. It was light enough to see, but dark enough that someone would have to get fairly close to recognize me. Unfortunately, since Greenville is a small town, any local police officers passing by might decide to stop and ask what I was doing out here at this time of night. I avoided the few cars on the road just in case. Finally, I stood in the park, breathing deeply. I wanted to smell what my old life had been like one last time.

Greenville is close to a huge river, and there was always mist in the early morning, even during the summer. It always smelled like wet grass and damp asphalt at night. There was the faintest hint of gasoline from the station down the street and the warm, sweet smell of the doughnut shop in the opposite direction. The shop opened at five A.M., so the owner, Mr. Lee, started baking at around three. The doughnuts were almost always gone by seven thirty, but if you stopped by on the way to school and he had one left, he'd give it to you for free.

I breathed carefully in and carefully out, committing everything to memory once again. Then I Walked, whispering a quiet good-bye to that sleepy little town.

Walking between dimensions, once you get used to it, is like walking normally—except easier, if that makes sense. Better. It feels *right*, like a good, satisfying stretch. It feels like doing what you were born to do.

I felt cold mist on my skin and heard a few tinkling notes, like from a music box. Random sensations are common when Walking, since you have to pass through the In-Between in order to get anywhere, and the In-Between is ... well, it's pretty much everything. At once. It's the place we pass through when we Walk, sort of like its own pocket dimension. Or, more accurately, the dimension between all dimensions.

The park was spread out before me, looking almost the same as it had a moment ago. There was a tree about a hundred yards in front of me that hadn't been there before, but that was the only notable difference, at least at first. I started moving through the park, glancing around with fascination as the tiny changes became more noticeable.

I didn't smell the doughnut shop anymore; instead, the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafted over me from a twenty-four-hour diner across the street. I had to admit I was jealous. *My* Greenville didn't have a twenty-four-hour anything.

I walked to the corner, crossing the street at the protected crosswalk. The little light-up man was blue, not white as I was used to. I'd missed that the last time I'd been here. I passed by a McDonald's with arches that were green instead of yellow. I had to smile; that was the first thing I'd noticed when I first wound up in this version of my town.

I hurried as I went down my street. My injuries weren't bothering me as much as they had been (aspirin for the win!), and I needed to get this done as quickly as possible. The first time I'd come here, I'd run into the first other version of me I'd ever met. A girl. Josephine.

I remembered her name like I remembered my own, because in a way, it sort of was. I'd gone into my house, lost and confused, and there she'd been. She'd lived in my house with my mom, who'd looked at me like she'd never seen me before and called her daughter Josephine. Her daughter, not her son. A female version of me, living a life parallel to mine.

She would be my first recruit.

I was about halfway to my house when I stopped to cast out for her. We can sense each other, sort of, like when you're alone in a room but you can tell when someone walks in without turning around. I paused for a second and closed my eyes, expanding my senses, and that's probably what saved my life.

They'd been waiting for me.

I threw myself to the side as a netlike thing hurtled over where I'd been standing. They started to come up out of the shadows, or maybe they were the shadows themselves. It was hard to tell. All I knew for sure was that they were agents of HEX, and they had found me.

There were maybe four or five of them. I was trained in thirteen different styles of martial arts and immediately recognized six nearby objects that could be used as improvised weapons.

I also had no defensive gadgets on me whatsoever, and I was injured in five different places. Not to mention these were HEX agents, not Binary. The Binary at least were predictable; they had their plasma guns, their sheer numbers and one-shot shields, their grav disks. Basic stuff. HEX agents? Those were unpredictable. I'd taken three different Magic Study courses on InterWorld Prime, and I probably knew about a quarter of what they could do.

I was more than a little outgunned.

They were slowly surrounding me, moving like liquid, fanning out in a semicircle. The moonless night and scattered streetlamps made some of them all but invisible in the dark. I did the sensible thing: I ran.

Well, I Walked.

I heard the music box again and a sound like bowling pins toppling over. I smelled something salty and saw a splash of bright pink as I slipped through the In-Between and into yet another version of Greenville.

The street was empty again, but I kept moving anyway, back the way I had come. There was no point in going to Josephine's house, not in that dimension and not in this one. I couldn't sense another version of me here; I didn't know if that was because that version had died, or been captured by Binary or HEX, or if this was the home world of one of my fellow students back on Base. I didn't spend too much time thinking about it.

When I'd expanded my senses to look for Josephine, right before I'd felt HEX's attack, I'd felt her—and she hadn't been home.

What was a version of me, not even seventeen years old, doing away from home at three A.M.? It wasn't like Greenville had an active nightlife (although I suppose this one had a twenty-four-hour diner, at least ...) and I had never been the most popular of kids. I certainly hadn't been cool enough to hang out with anyone who'd stay out all night. Maybe this version of me was different, but I doubted it.

I kept moving, occasionally hopping into a different dimension to throw off any pursuers. When I'd first started Walking, I'd done it instinctively—and, apparently, badly. One of my teachers had explained that I'd basically punched a hole in the wall instead of finding the door. I'd gotten better at it since then, and it was easier to slip between the worlds without causing as many ripples. I could Walk as many times as there was a portal around; HEX and Binary were operating on borrowed power, so my hope was that being a moving target would discourage them from chasing me too far.

I eventually made my way back to Josephine's Greenville, a few blocks over from where I'd started. The HEX agents didn't seem to be following me anymore; I couldn't sense them when I tried.

I *could* sense her. She was a couple of streets away from where I was now, out of the residential area. I could see the brighter lights of the business district off in the distance, which was definitely where the familiar tug was leading me.

I sighed. Nothing was ever easy. ...

With my senses on high alert and my ribs aching again from all the movement, I started down the street.

It didn't take me long to track her down, though I was still at a loss as to why she was apparently in an abandoned office building. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end. The last time I'd been in a place like this, I had found Joaquim, the Walker who'd turned out to not be a Walker at all, who'd betrayed my team and caused Jerzy's death. He'd been pretending to be a captive of Binary so we'd "rescue" him. ... Had Josephine been taken captive, too?

It was seeming more and more likely. The HEX scouts outside her house ... maybe they hadn't been waiting for me, after all. Maybe they had found her.

This was bad. I was still running on borrowed time, dealing with several injuries, and had no weapons. I had no one I could call for backup. Josephine was supposed to *become* my backup.

The smart thing to do would be to cut my losses and go—head to another version of Greenville and find another me. Like I said, as long as there were portals, I never had to stop Walking. I could go anywhere I wanted, as long as I got there before FrostNight destroyed everything. ...

I was berating myself for not ever being able to do the smart thing as I picked the lock on the abandoned building.

See, when HEX and Binary capture a Walker, they don't just kill them. They *use* them. I'd explained that to Mr. Dimas, but I hadn't explained how. HEX boils us down, literally puts us in a giant cauldron, still alive and screaming, and boils us like lobsters. Down past the skin and bones, to our very essence. Then they put that essence in a jar and cast some kind of spell on it and use it whenever they need to Walk. And that's not the worst part, no way.

The worst part is, in some small way, we're still alive. Still *aware*. And we know what's been done to us and what we're being used for.

I'd rather die right now—rather let all the worlds be destroyed—than allow that to happen to even one more of us.

I stepped through the door, stopping to let my eyes adjust. It had been dark outside, but it was darker in here; the only light that found its way in was through the windows, and most of those were covered with signs saying RENT THIS SPACE.

The floor was marble, one of those nice-looking entryways that made you forget you were probably here to see a therapist or dentist. There were doors on either side of me, both closed and sporting tinted-glass windows, and the lobby stretched out into darkness ahead of me.

Everything was silent as I moved, walking carefully across the pristine floor. I listened hard, alert for any sign that I wasn't alone, and a subtle change in air pressure warned me a second before I heard a distinct *click* behind me.

I whirled, going immediately into a crouch, only to discover the figure behind me doing the same.

"Don't move," she hissed, and in her hands was a gun. It was pointed directly at me.



CHAPTER THREE

Now, I'd seen all kinds of guns since I started training at InterWorld, from all worlds and times. Blasters, emitters, ray guns, laser guns with detachable Bluetooth scopes, plasma guns, you name it. This was a modern handgun, a Colt .45. Basic, easy, and still able to kill me twice before I hit the ground.

"Whoa," I said, holding my hands out in front of me.

"Don't move," she repeated. The gun was leveled at me unwaveringly, and from the look on the face behind it, this wouldn't be its maiden voyage. I wondered if that's how I looked in my weapons training classes. I imagined it wasn't far off, since we shared the same face.

"Josephine," I said, trying to make my voice as soothing as possible. "It's okay. My name is Joe, I'm—"

My words didn't have the calming effect I was hoping for. "It's *you*," she snarled, and her hands began to shake. "You're the one who was in my house that day!"

"Yes," I said, but didn't get any further. She started to stand. So did I, but she gestured me back down with an angry jerk of the gun.

"You ruined my life," she spat, edging closer. I was well versed enough in weapons to know what a bullet from that gun would do to my head if she fired. She was still shaking, though it was obviously from anger rather than fear.

"You don't want to fire that," I said, trying to be reasonable. I hoped she couldn't hear the panic that was threatening to shatter my calm. "The police station isn't too far from here, they'll hear the shots." That was a guess, actually; I remembered that the police station was on a street of the same name as this one, but I had no idea how close or far it was from here.

"I don't care," she said, standing just out of my reach. She was about my height, dressed in loose jeans and a baggy hoodie, both of which looked like they'd seen better days. Her frizzy red hair was short, barely touching her cheeks, and looked like it hadn't been brushed in a while. Despite the baggy clothes, I could see that she was thinner than was healthy. All this added up to a desperation that made me believe her next words. "It'll be worth it. Even if I go to jail, it'll be worth it. They'll finally stop coming after me."

I didn't bother pointing out that if she killed me, it wouldn't matter if she went to jail or not; she'd likely be dead either way when FrostNight destroyed everything. There was something else I could use to make a far better point.

"No, they won't. They aren't after me! Well, they aren't *just* after me. They're after you." The pieces had all fallen together. The HEX agents outside her house had been waiting for *her* to come home. The bad guys had found her because I'd Walked there unknowingly. I'd led them to her.

Simply put, I *had* ruined her life.

"Shut up! You're lying. Why would they be after me? They started coming after you showed up in my house that day. They must be after you!"

"They were, but now they're after *us*. You have to trust me. Look, look at me! We could be twins!"

"You're just one of them, trying to ... to do whatever weird magic crap they do, to take my place!"

"No, Josephine, listen!" I told her my full name, my birthday, my mother's and father's names and birthdays. I told her where I went to elementary school and what my favorite dessert was. From the look on her face, I could tell everything I said was true for her, too. "If I was trying to take your place, first of all, why would I be a *boy*, and second, why wouldn't I be living your life right now? You're obviously not. You haven't even been home, have you?"

"Not in months," she admitted, though the gun was still pointed at me.

"So why would I come find you?"

"To lead them to me," she said, but she sounded less certain.

"No," I said, as forcefully as I dared. "I'm trying to help you. I *am* you, you from a different world. And you are me, from *this* world."

"And those things?" she asked.

"Those are the bad guys," I said. "I know it's a simple explanation, but we don't have time to get into it. I promise I'll explain on the way, but we can't stay here. They can sense us, and they'll find us eventually. You have to trust me."

She just looked at me, indecision plain on her face. I could almost read every thought as it went through her mind; after all, I knew what I'd be thinking, if I were in her shoes. I knew what I *had* thought, when all of this had first happened to me.

"The alternative is staying here, on your own," I said. "Not being able to go home, not being able to trust *anyone*. I promise, you can trust me."

Her lips twitched, twisting into something halfway between a snarl and a grimace. Her chin trembled, just for a second, and she started to lower the gun.

I heard a faint, cheerful pop behind me, and Josephine's eyes widened. So did mine, as I realized what was going to happen. I shouted, "No, wait!" as she raised her gun and fired, the sound loud enough to temporarily deafen us both.

I darted forward, not even turning to see if Hue was okay. Josephine was taking aim again. I grabbed her wrist, turning it and jabbing my thumb into the soft tissue below her scaphoid. She dropped the gun, her other hand clenching to a fist, which she swung clumsily at me. She didn't have a quarter of the training I did. I had her in a hold immediately, despite her struggling.

She may not have had my training, but she was definitely used to fighting for her life. She brought a knee up, though not into my groin as I would have expected. Instead, she tried to bring her foot down hard on my instep. I barely avoided it, tightening my grip on her as I looked for Hue.

The little mudluff was bobbing up and down in the air, alternating between a spooked shade of white and a confused blue-gray.

"Hue, are you okay?" I asked, more than a little anxious. I'd once seen him take a laser bolt and come out mostly unscathed, but ...

"I knew you were one of them," Josephine spat, still struggling.

"I'm not, and neither is Hue. He's a friend of mine, and you almost shot him." The mudluff was spinning slowly, as though to prove to me that he hadn't been hit. I didn't see any marks or discolorations on his surface, which was a small blessing.

"He looks like a demented balloon," she said. "And I've seen weirder from those ... other things. How was I supposed to know he was a friend of yours? I'm still not sure *you're* a friend of *mine*."

"Well, you'd better get sure," I told her. The slow wail of a siren started up in the distance. I didn't know if someone had called in the gunshot or if it was a coincidence, but I wasn't willing to chance it.

I said as much, letting her go (though I picked up the gun before she could). She stood there uncertainly, alternately watching me and Hue.

"Hue showing up doesn't change anything," I told her, holding the gun nonthreateningly at my side. "You looked like you were about to come with me. If you stay here alone, they *will* catch you. If you come with me—and Hue—they won't. It's that simple." It was too simple, really; I couldn't promise that HEX or Binary would *never* catch her, or that something else wouldn't happen to her, but it was better than leaving her here. I needed her, and she needed me. Us J names had to stick together.

"Come on," I said, and she finally capitulated with poor grace. She growled something that sounded like "fine," and turned to stalk back in through the door she'd surprised me from. I followed.

Through the door was another wide room and an elevator. There was a broom and dustpan leaning up against the wall near the up/down buttons. As I watched, she jabbed the thin part of the dustpan into the slit where the elevator doors met, then pushed until she had enough room to wedge the broom in. Then she pried the doors open, revealing what appeared to be her temporary living area.

She had a ratty-looking sleeping bag and pillow, two beat-up backpacks, and three or four books piled up in the corner of the elevator car. The emergency exit in the roof was propped open, and there was a rope hanging down from it. Honestly, it wasn't a bad setup; all she had to do was take the broom with her when she went out or in, and open the doors barely wide enough for her to slip through so she could get them closed again. She had an emergency exit if anyone did try to come find her, which she could use to get to any floor of the building.

It was exactly what I might have done, if I'd been in her shoes.

She finished stuffing the books into one of the backpacks, and rolled up the sleeping bag before turning to glare at me. The siren was getting louder.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Now," I said, "we go for a Walk."

What I really wanted to do was go straight to InterWorld—the future InterWorld, that is. I haven't explained about that yet, have I? I hadn't said anything about it to Mr. Dimas; there wasn't much point, and I really hadn't wanted to get into the whole time-travel thing. It was messy at best, which was why I'd skimmed over Acacia. I hadn't told him about how I'd been a prisoner of TimeWatch, or how they'd sent me thousands of years into the future to InterWorld. A broken, run-down, destroyed version of InterWorld.

It had been the saddest thing I'd ever seen, and that was saying a lot.

Still, I couldn't get to *my* InterWorld, not now. It was lost in some kind of dimension shift, pursued by a HEX ship. But that other InterWorld, thousands of years in the future ... I could get back there. Or, more specifically, Hue could.

See, Walkers can't time travel, really. But Hue is, as I've said, a multidimensional life-form—and time, in its own way, is a dimension. TimeWatch had sent me into the future, and Hue had brought me back to the past. That meant he could take me there, again. Me, and Josephine.

That was the part that would take some convincing.

I was explaining all this to her as we sat on a bench in the middle of a park that bore only the slightest resemblance to the one I'd been standing in before; I'd taken a chance and Walked to a farther dimension. If the experience of Walking itself hadn't convinced her, sitting on a bench of green wood under a purple sky watching the blue sunrise probably would. Walking so far had a higher potential to call attention to us, but it also helped to prove my point.

I'd mentioned punching through a wall instead of using a door before, right? Walking without going through the In-Between was kind of like that. The In-Between was the door; but it was also *crazy*, and I wasn't sure she was ready for it yet. There were some stories among the older Walkers at InterWorld about new recruits who'd gone insane and needed to have their memories wiped after their first trip through the In-Between. I wasn't sure I believed those stories, but why take chances?

"So you can travel through time," she said, watching me like the jury was still out on my sanity.

"I can't," I clarified. "Hue can."

"And he can take us with him."

"Yes."

"To the future."

"Yeah."

"To this 'home base' of yours that was completely destroyed." I nodded. "Why can't he take us *back* in time, to before it got messed up? Or forward to some other time when everyone is okay?"

"It doesn't exactly work like that," I said, but she clearly wanted more explanation. "I think he needs to have something to anchor on," I said, trying to recall everything Acacia had told me about timestreams and anchoring and all that. "Like, he's kind of fixed on me, so he can follow me wherever, even through time. And *I'm* fixed in my personal timestream, so I can only go back and forth within that one."

"That's inconvenient." She looked like she was trying to figure out whether I was making excuses or not.

"Maybe, but it also stops regular people from messing with time, which could cause all sorts of problems," I said, but an idea was nagging at me. If I *could* go anywhere, if Hue could take me anywhere, would the Time Agents come pick me up? Jay had said they were kind of like law enforcement for the timestreams. ... If I started messing things up, would that get their attention? Could I get them to help me?

Too risky, I decided, remembering how I'd been treated at the TimeWatch headquarters. They'd kept me in a jail cell and ejected me into the future without a word; I wasn't going to risk letting them do it again. There was too much at stake.

"So you and I are going to go into the future and start recruiting more of us, before the bad guys can use a combination of science and magic to remake the universe," she said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"That's essentially it, yeah."

"And you're saying there are hundreds of us, spread out over every dimension."

"The number is probably incalculable," I said, recalling when I searched for my name in InterWorld's dimensional database. I'd come up with a few thousand matches on my name alone; who knew how many versions of the rest of there were, all with names like Josephine and Jo and Jakon and Josef.

Those last three were teammates of mine. I missed them.

"It's hard to say how many of us there actually are," I continued, pushing aside my sudden melancholy. "Since there are more dimensions being created and destroyed every day. Every second, even. But that's too much to get into right now," I said quickly, seeing her open her mouth to ask. She shut it irritably, her expression heated. "What matters is getting back to the base we've got, getting you and whatever others we can find trained, and stopping FrostNight."

She was staring at me, and I was starting to realize how crazy I sounded. Not just in terms of "You expect me to believe things that sound crazy." Even if you bought everything I was saying about HEX and Binary and time travel and multiple dimensions, even if you decided that was all completely real and sane, I still sounded crazy. My plan was to pick up as many untrained recruits as I could and go head-to-head with the worst baddies in the universe—*both* of them—with no backup or plan B. No matter which way you looked at it, it was both insane and suicidal.

But it was also my only option.

"Okay," she said abruptly. "Let's do it."

I just looked at her.

"What?" she said finally, her tone and posture ratcheting up a notch. "Isn't that the answer you wanted to hear?"

No, I thought unwillingly. To tell the truth, I'd never really thought about whether she'd agree or not. There was never an option in my mind. The plan had been to find Josephine, convince her to help me, take her back to base, then go find all the others and do the same. The fact that she'd agreed to fight in a war she hadn't even known about until five minutes ago made me feel sick, like I was knowingly sending her into a minefield without a map.

In a way, that's exactly what I was doing.

"Yeah," I said, but I don't think she believed me. I know I didn't.



CHAPTER FOUR

Getting Josephine to agree to let Hue take us into the future was easier than I thought it would be. Getting her to actually *do* it, however, was harder.

“No way,” she said adamantly, watching the way Hue rippled over my body like a suit of Silly Putty.

“It just feels a little weird,” I insisted. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“I don’t care if it feels weird, I don’t want that *thing* that close to me.”

“His name is Hue,” I said, pushing down my temper. “And he’s a friend of mine, *and* he’s helping us. You don’t have to do anything except trust me, okay?”

She fell silent, a muscle twitching in her jaw. She was only willing to trust me so far.

“Look,” I said, taking a step closer. Josephine drew back but didn’t step away. I held out my hand. After a hesitation that started to grind on my nerves—we didn’t have *time* for this—she took it.

Go to her, Hue, I said silently. Slowly. She’s scared. With Hue wrapped around me like a second skin, I’d found we could communicate without speaking. At least, inasmuch as I could ever communicate with Hue; he seemed to understand basic language (several different ones, in fact), but sometimes there were concepts or nuances that confused him. Or he just ignored me; it was hard to tell.

The Hue putty began to flow down over my arm, toward our hands. I felt her fingers tighten in mine and a resistance like she wanted to pull away, but I held her firmly. Hue moved over our fingers, slowly covering her hand to the wrist. There he stopped, waiting.

“It does feel weird,” she said, though she didn’t seem as spooked.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Like Silly Putty, right?”

“Like what?”

“Never mind.” I sighed. This was a common cultural difference with para-incarnations of myself. Even though both our worlds had McDonald’s, there was nothing saying that whoever had invented something like Silly Putty in my world had also done it in hers.

“It’s kind of like Putty Dough, I guess,” she said.

Close enough. “Sure,” I agreed, still holding her hand. “Now, *trust me*, okay? We’re going to do exactly what I said. You have to get closer to me so that Hue can cover us both; he’s not that big. Then I’m going to Walk. You’ll understand it when you feel it.”

“Fine,” she said shortly, like she was agreeing before she could change her mind. I stepped forward, putting my arms around her shoulders, while hers settled somewhat hesitantly around my waist.

Honestly, I wasn’t really sure how this was going to work. I didn’t know if Hue needed to be covering Josephine as well, or if I just needed to be touching her. All I knew was that the chances of something going wrong if she panicked were pretty high, which is why I was holding on to her.

Hue stretched paper-thin over us both, and I felt Josephine press closer against me. It was like being in a sensory-deprivation tank, I would imagine, at least at first. I ceased to feel the air on me, to hear the birds, to see the brightness of the rising blue sun.

And then, as I opened my eyes, I could see and hear and feel *everything*.

Hue was like the universe's best looking glass, like the missing element that made everything fall into place. That made everything make *sense*. Walking was no longer about finding the door, it was about suddenly realizing you were surrounded by doors and you knew exactly where every single one of them went. It was like sitting down at a test you'd never studied for and finding you knew all the answers anyway.

I could feel everything. I could feel Josephine's wonder and terror, her slow understanding and her deep yearning. She was experiencing what she'd been born to do, and I could already feel her fear giving in to eagerness, to the desire to learn.

Even though I theoretically knew where *all* the doors would take me, it's always easiest to go someplace you've already been. I followed the path to future InterWorld flawlessly, and all too soon we were standing there in the purple dawn light, there on that crumbling base.

Josephine let go of me as soon as Hue receded, taking a few steps back, though she didn't look afraid. She looked like she understood.

She walked slowly down the gravel path, alternately staring at the smoke-blackened trees and the scorched ground. I still didn't know what had happened here; perhaps at some point, when I had time, I could have Hue show me.

All I knew was that sometime in InterWorld's future, the base must have been attacked. There were burns all over the place, areas where the ground was dark, rust red with the memory of violence. There was nothing here, not even a breeze. We were alone on a dead world.

"This is the future," Josephine asked, though it didn't sound much like a question.

"Several thousand years from where we were, yeah. I don't know how far exactly," I said, catching sight of something glinting in the morning sun. I knelt to inspect it, finding a twisted scrap of metal that could have been anything from a blaster shell to a piece of jewelry. It wasn't recognizable as anything but junk now.

"So why keep fighting?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why even bother? You said you have to get back to your InterWorld, but it'll just be this eventually. Even if you save it back then, it'll wind up like this." She gestured at the area around us, the shattered glass and dead trees and broken doorways. "You'll lose anyway."

I was silent for a moment, watching Hue float off toward one of the rooftops. He settled there, perched on the edge of it like a balloon-shaped gargoyle, and turned the same color as the metal. I'd never really seen him camouflage before, but the guy had a hundred little tricks I wasn't aware of.

"Yeah, maybe," I said, shoving my hands into the pockets of my sweatshirt. "Eventually."

"So why are you even bothering?"

"Because if I don't, all this"—I shrugged, indicating the devastation around me—"will happen everywhere a lot sooner. There won't even be this left. There won't be anything."

She scuffed her foot against the gravel path, watching the pebbles scatter this way and that. "But doesn't the existence of this ship in the future, even if it's deserted, mean that there *is* a future? That the world doesn't get destroyed?"

"It doesn't work like that," I told her. "FrostNight will erase everything, past, present, and future, all at once. If it's released, this entire dimension, this entire timestream, will all be gone."

She seemed to accept that, though she folded her arms and huddled in on herself, as though she didn't like what she was about to say. "Okay. But, still—let's say you do gather us all up, and we go stop this FrostNight thing. Let's say we save the world, or all the worlds. Why not just let us go home, then?"

I took in a breath, held it for a moment, let it out slowly. “Because InterWorld guards against HEX and Binary. That’s what we do. We track their movement, and we thwart them. We make sure they don’t get more of us, don’t get more weapons. Don’t hurt innocent people or take over entire worlds and use the inhabitants for cannon fodder. We’re the thorn in their sides, and that’s all we can manage. We may not be much, but we’re the first line of defense. We’re the *only* line of defense. We’ve gotta keep being that, no matter what. It’s all we’ve got, even if in the end, this is all that’s left.”

To be honest, I hadn’t really been sure what I was going to say when I opened my mouth. The words had just come to me, based on a bunch of different things, mostly stuff I’d heard the Old Man say. He wasn’t a man of many words, but the ones he did use tended to be pretty effective.

Josephine was looking at me with her eyes narrowed, like she still wasn’t sure what my game was. “I still think you’re crazy,” she said, “but now it’s for different reasons.”

“Yeah,” I said, and turned to walk into the base. After a moment, I heard her follow me.

“First order of business is to get to the control room,” I told her as we picked our way through the debris in the hallways. “There might still be some auxiliary power cores laying around. I have no idea when this happened, so I don’t know if they’ll still be good.”

“What if they’re not?”

“Then we hope they can be recharged.”

“Recharged? How?”

“That depends on how old they are,” I explained, shoving down my rising impatience. I had nothing to do but explain things as we made our way to the control room, and she really didn’t know any of this. I imagine I was much the same when Jay had first picked me up. “They can be charged a few different ways, if the transducers are still working. Thermal energy, chemical, electromagnetic, etc. The ship mostly runs on kinetic energy, as I understand it.” I glanced back to see if she was following all this, then elaborated. “Meaning, once it gets started, it’ll work up its own momentum and charge itself.”

“I see,” she said, climbing her way over a pile of rubble. “So how do you get it started?”

“Well, some kind of pulse. A shock, or—”

“Like a static shock?”

“It’d have to be more powerful than that, but that’s the right idea.”

“So if the transducers aren’t working?”

“We fix them somehow.”

“How?”

“I don’t know how,” I admitted. “So let’s hope they’re working.”

“Okay,” she said, sounding dubious. I could practically hear her second-guessing her decision to come with me, as I obviously didn’t know what I was doing.

She was pretty much right.

It didn’t take long for us to make our way to the control room. I was anxious every step of the way; I kept expecting to run into bad guys, or worse—what was left of the good guys. There was nothing, though, no bodies of any kind or evidence of anything living. On the one hand, I was glad. On the other, I wanted to know what had happened here. I wanted to know how to stop it.

We did find some used-up power cores, and some of them still had juice. Not enough to get the ship up and running but enough to give us a boost for the mechanisms that still worked. Such as activating the solar panels.

“At least we’ll have some power once the sun rises overhead,” I said, flipping a long line of switches that activated the panels all over the roof of the main building.

“So this is both a ship and a town, sort of,” Josephine observed, carefully watching what I was doing.

“Yeah. The whole thing is a ship—it just doesn't *look* like one. It doesn't look enclosed, but it is. At least, it is when the shields are working, so we can phase to worlds that don't have the right kind of air for us.”

“But this world does, right?”

“Obviously, or we wouldn't be breathing.”

“How did you know it would?”

“I've been here before. The ship can't phase without the engines, and the engines don't run without power. I knew it'd be in the same place.”

“So we can phase again if we get power?”

“Maybe. I know power makes the ship run, but I don't know exactly how we make it phase. I know how HEX and Binary do it with *their* ships, but ...” I shook my head. That wasn't on the table.

“How?” I should have seen that question coming.

“They use us,” I said as bluntly as I could to keep from discussing it further. “They take our ability to Walk and use it for their own ships.”

She pressed her lips together, looking away. Even as new to this as she was, she knew what it was like to Walk, and I think she already couldn't imagine having that taken away. I knew how she felt.

“Come on,” I said, flipping one final switch. “It's time for a lesson.”

I hadn't really bothered looking out any windows the last time I was here. I'd been in too much of a hurry, too desperate to get back to where I belonged. Back then, I'd assumed the ship was still floating above the ground, cruising along at about five thousand feet as usual.

I'd realized it slowly as we made our way through the ship this time, but we were actually docked: completely and utterly still. We were sitting on the ground in a wide-open field, nothing but grassy plains visible as far as the eye could see. There might have been a sparkle of water in the distance, but it could just as easily have been a trick of the light.

“Are we alone on the planet, too?” Josephine asked, once she'd taken in the size of InterWorld itself. We weren't talking the size of New York or anything, but it certainly would have taken a while to walk all the way around it.

“Depends on your definition,” I said, pointing to a group of butterflies collecting around some flowers. “We're the only people. This is a prehistoric world.”

“But I thought we were in the future.”

I paused. *Oh, boy. This is about to get complicated.* “We are. But InterWorld operates on a broad spectrum of locations. Not just back and forth”—I moved my hand from side to side—“but forward and backward. There are thousands of different dimensions programmed into the soliton array engines, but only three basic Earths. The ship moves—or moved—forward and backward in time over a certain period, as well as sideways into different dimensions on those three Earths. Even though the ship *can* move further into the future, we tend to stay in prehistoric times and move sideways. Less chance of startling the locals that way.”

She was glaring at me. “Did you actually answer my question, or did you just spout a bunch of bull—”

“Sorry, sorry. I got carried away. Basically, *we* are not in the future. We're in the past, because that was the last place this InterWorld docked. But *this* InterWorld came here, to the past of this world, from the future.”

She frowned, considering. “But ... we went into the future. Sort of. I mean, that's what it felt like. It was like taking a giant step forward, when your bubble thing—”

“Hue.”

“—was wrapped around us.”

“Yes, but we went forward into InterWorld's future, which took us to the past,” I explained. “So the ship is from the future, but the planet is in the past. Make sense?”

She hesitated, looking like she had a question that she thought might be considered stupid. After a moment, she asked, “Are there dinosaurs here?”

I didn't laugh. I kind of wanted to, but I understood why she was asking. I mean, wouldn't you have? I know *I* would have. “I honestly don't know,” I told her, and she glanced around as though she might see one. “On some planets, yes, there are. And, yes,” I said, unable to help a grin, “I've seen them. But I don't know if it's this one. I don't know which planet we parked on.”

“Okay,” she said, still looking up at the sky, which was brightening to a blinding blue. It was chilly out here in the early morning, but we both had our sweatshirts on, and the sun was warm where it was rising over the horizon. “So what now?”

“Now I teach you to Walk,” I said, gesturing for her to follow me. “You want to be away from everything for your first try. It's really difficult to Walk into something that's already there, but it's not impossible.”

“You mean, I could get stuck in a rock, or something ...?”

“Like I said, it's unlikely, but it *is* possible. We've basically got built-in subliminal algorithms for that kind of thing, like an instinctive navigational system. Reflex, kinda. But when you're first learning, it's better not to take any chances.”

“Okay,” she said, watching me closely. She had a familiar look of determination on her face; familiar, because she looked so much like me. “Teach me.”

I spent the better part of the afternoon teaching her how to Walk, and discovered that not only was she a fantastic student, she had a particular ability for it. Not that it came easier to her than to any of the rest of us (in fact, it took her the better part of an hour to follow my instructions correctly), but once she learned it, she slipped through the dimensions like a cat burglar on an easy heist. I even lost her once, which was a frightening moment, considering she was my only recruit. I wound up having to sidestep through four different dimensions and cast my senses about for her every time, which was more than a little tiring.

“And you've never Walked before?” I asked once I'd found her, sitting in the middle of the field, blowing tufts of dandelions into the wind.

“Never before today,” she said, looking pleased with herself. “Why?”

“Well, you're pretty good at it,” I said, readjusting the brace strapped around my wrist. I'd had an itch there I'd been trying to ignore for the past fifteen minutes.

“I thought it was taking me a while to learn.”

“It took you a while to get it, maybe, but once you did ... You're almost undetectable, you know that?”

“Yeah?” she asked, looking up at me. She didn't look guarded anymore or angry or like she was about to run. She looked happy, the way I remembered my sister looking when she was having nice dreams. Content. Peaceful.

“Yeah. It's like when you step into the water, you don't make any ripples. You just sort of slip in.”

She smiled and shrugged, though I could tell she was pleased to be good at something in particular. I know I would have been.

“Will that be helpful?” she asked.

“Yes,” I told her honestly, offering my noninjured left hand. She took it, allowing me to pull her to her feet. “If you do the Walking, we'll be able to gather up the others without being detected. Gives us a lot more breathing room. Why don't you give it a try now? Walk back to the world we parked on.”

Usually, when teaching a new Walker how to get back to base, they're taught a formula. It's an address, an equation that tells us exactly how to get home, wherever home happened to be. It tells us that no matter where the base is, we are connected to it, and we can find it anywhere.

This future InterWorld—InterWorld Beta, as I'd come to think of it—might or might not have the same address, when it was powered on. Since it wasn't currently on, I had no way of knowing; I just

knew that the address *I* knew, the one for what would be InterWorld Alpha, was a dead end. Maybe it wouldn't be if the ship ever stopped, or if it turned out the address could be used for InterWorld Beta when the ship powered up again. Either way, it was useless; there was no reason to teach it to her now.

Josephine kept hold of my hand, closing her eyes and focusing. I kept mine open; it was easier to Walk when you weren't watching your surroundings change around you, but I was just along for the ride this time.

The scenery shifted; we were standing in shadows one moment, then again in sunlight.

A flock of birds passed above our heads. ...

The ground trembled beneath us for a moment, as though a herd of something large was stampeding nearby. ...

The brief, salty scent of the ocean and the cry of a seagull from over the mountains ...

And then InterWorld Beta rested in front of us, sad and majestic, like a ship run aground. An abandoned city lost to time.

Josephine kept hold of my hand this time, as the world settled back around us. It was lonely, somehow. It was our salvation and our hope; it was part of what let us witness the extraordinary things we'd seen and experience the amazing things we'd done. It was the wind in our hair and the travel dust on our boots, and it wasn't right for it to be stuck here, dead and lifeless.

She looked at me, subdued and determined, and let go of my hand. We had an understanding, then, and I think she finally knew why I was willing to risk everything. I think she was willing to, as well.

It was a small comfort, at least.



CHAPTER FIVE

We raided the storeroom, gathering anything and everything that might be helpful. We brought cleaning supplies as well as thick gloves and kneepads into the hallways, and we spent the rest of the morning clearing out the debris and making sure there were easy paths to get to the main places we needed to go.

From the control room to the storeroom, down to the lower decks where we could get out onto our temporary home planet, to the living quarters, the mess hall, and back up to the control room. It took until well into the afternoon, and we were starving despite the few snacks and energy bars we'd taken from our backpacks.

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