

.real world.

a fan fiction novel

A crossover between Back to the Future, The Matrix, Star Wars, Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, The Frighteners and, to some extent, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

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PROLOGUE

At precisely twelve midnight on the first of January 1885, the skies of Hill Valley, California had been lit up by a brilliant flash of electrical blue light of a kind never seen before. This had been preceded by the sound of a triple sonic boom, and had the sound and light been reversed in time, the phenomenon might have gone unnoticed, mistaken for mere lightning and thunder. Even with things happening the way they did, if it had occurred on any other day in the year, scant attention would have probably been paid to it due to almost everyone being in bed. As it was, many of the citizens of Hill Valley had stayed up late that particular night to welcome in the New Year. When the sudden flash in the heavens came, many clutched to each other in fear, convinced that the end of the world had come.

It hadn't, and they soon let down their guard. Had anyone gone to investigate the source of the noise and light, however, they would have seen a strangely modified 1982 DeLorean DMC sports car come plummeting out of the clouds, carrying in its driver's seat an extremely frazzled Dr. Emmett L. Brown trying desperately to regain control of the malfunctioning time machine.

The lightning bolt that had sent the vehicle through time had caught Doc completely unawares, despite his flying in a lightning storm. The last thing he remembered before getting hit was his young friend, Marty, asking him if he was sure he wouldn't get struck by lightning. Less than a second later, they got him: not one, but three magnificent bolts of lightning. The inventor had scarcely had the time to ponder the irony of it all when he found himself falling out of the sky into the late nineteenth century in a car that used to be able to fly.

Perhaps 2015 technology wasn't all it was cracked up to be, although it is highly doubtful that any kind of technology, no matter how advanced, can survive being hit by three lightning bolts each containing more than a gigawatt of energy.

Emmett blacked out the second the DeLorean hit ground, but otherwise miraculously escaped any injury beyond a few minor bruises. He regained consciousness around six the following morning, whereupon he discovered that the DeLorean could still drive, albeit not fly, and backed it into a nearby cave for the time being. A quick inspection of the time vehicle had showed it incapable of being anything more than a normal, damaged car without the assistance of tools and equipment that would not be available for another half-century or so. Leaving it in the cave, Emmett then set out to explore the land in which the accursed lightning bolts had so unceremoniously dumped him in.

Eventually, after a few weeks or so, the time traveller had come to accept the fact that there was no way for him to go home. Emmett settled down in 1885, got a job as a blacksmith, and soon became just another member of the late nineteenth century population of Hill Valley. But he never forgot Marty, stuck in a similar situation in 1955. In September 1885 he finished drawing up the repair plans for the DeLorean, and together with a letter of instructions to his past self and Marty entrusted it into the care of the Western Union postal service with explicit directions to deliver the package to a Marty McFly in seventy years time. That done, he drove the DeLorean into the Delgado mine and buried it there to be found by the recipients of the letter.

That letter became an object of much interest throughout the seventy years it stayed with the Western Union. Many doubts were raised, and not without reason, on whether there would really be a teenager named Marty to receive the letter just after ten p.m. on the twelfth of November, 1955, at the given location. Bets were placed regarding the matter, and theories given on the purpose of the letter and its contents – several more ridiculous than others.

Suffice to say, the letter did reach its intended recipient, and despite instructions not to, Marty made his way to September 1885 in the repaired DeLorean with a very disturbing photograph in his pocket. The photograph in question was one of a tombstone – Emmett's – and Marty had gone back to warn his friend of his imminent murder at the hands of Buford Tannen.

Back in 1885, after succeeding in his rescue mission, Marty was then faced with the problem of getting the DeLorean, which was out of fuel, to accelerate to the eighty-eight miles per hour necessary for temporal displacement – also known as time travel – to take place. He and Doc solved the problem by planning to get a train to push it up to the required speed; but Emmett was unwilling to leave, having fallen in love with a local schoolteacher by the name of Clara Clayton. Finally deciding to do what he knew was right and go back to the future with Marty, he revealed to Clara who he really was. She didn't believe him and Emmett received an angry slap in the face that left him heartbroken.

On the day of the departure, however, Clara discovered that he had been telling the truth, and rode after the speeding locomotive on her horse just as Emmett was about to climb out of it and into the DeLorean. Clara got onto the side of the locomotive, trying to reach him.

With the time machine going to travel anytime then and the locomotive fast approaching the edge of the ravine, Emmett knew that going to join Marty would mean almost probable death for Clara. Using a hoverboard that Marty sent over from the DeLorean, he managed to get Clara onto the board as well and the two of them sped off together. Meanwhile, the time machine hit eighty-eight miles per hour and sent Marty back to 1985 where the time vehicle sans Marty was destroyed by an oncoming train.

Doc and Clara were married on the fifteenth of December that year in Hill Valley. Their first son, Jules Eratosthenes Brown, was born on August ninth of 1886 followed by his brother Verne Newton Brown on the twenty-ninth of October 1888. Both boys remained unaware of their father's true history until early 1893. That was the year Emmett completed his construction of his second time machine, and he thought the time had come to reveal to his sons who he really was.

He did, and the family had several adventures through time, some more dangerous than the next. Over time, their home in the late nineteenth century became slowly but surely filled with objects from various time periods, noticeably those of the future, but none of them brought such trouble as the latest addition.

It was a computer: one that had the ability to access the Internet of 2004. Things went fine for several months, but then Emmett made the decision to install a similar computer in his old garage home in 1985. He felt he owed it to Marty; he had, in certain respects, abandoned the teen, but he thought that if they could still communicate through e-mail, perhaps things wouldn't be so bad.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

One computer continuously breaking across the barriers of space-time was fine. Two computers doing that was a totally different matter all together, and this is the story of what happened.

It begins on a Thursday.

REAL WORLD: PART ONE
Eddies in the Space-Time Continuum

*“Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real?
What if you were unable to wake from that dream, Neo? How
would you know the difference between the dreamworld... and the
real world?”*

- Morpheus, The Matrix

Chapter One

12th December 1985, Thursday
One-and-a-half months after the *Back to the Future* trilogy
Hill Valley, California

It wasn't a building that would normally have attracted much attention. An old, large, relatively run-down garage, it was nothing very remarkable to look at. In truth, it would have remained largely ignored, had it not been for the fact that it also happened to be the house-cum-laboratory of the town lunatic, Dr. Emmett Lathrop Brown. That in itself was reason enough for the majority of Hill Valley citizens to stay away from that garage, and stay away they did... fuelled in part by their fear of the unknown and the many rumours surrounding its owner.

Had they got to know him better, however, they would have perhaps learnt that Emmett had departed the late twentieth century more than a month ago and was currently living happily in the nineteenth with his wife and two kids. As it was, only two people had any idea that he had left.

And just as few knew of the existence of a 2003 computer inside the garage, one which ran on a Windows 2000 operating system and had a connection to the World Wide Web.

In 1985.

On that computer on the afternoon of December the twelfth, a seventeen-year-old teenager by the name of Martin Seamus McFly was typing away. Beside him on the table was strewn a mass of wires that showed some form of organisation only when one looked closely at them, and these were attached to a strange, fluxing Y-shaped contraption – a flux capacitor – that was in turn hooked up to both a modem-like device and the computer.

Behind Marty on the opposite end of the dimly lit garage was located the remains of a gigantic amplifier that had blown up somewhere in the vicinity of late October that year, and next to it was now a much smaller one that Marty had brought there to use in its stead.

Jennifer Jane Parker, Marty's girlfriend and fellow time traveller, sat beside him and stared at the screen in rapt fascination as he concluded his brief introduction to the Internet of 2004.

The brown-haired boy turned to her and smiled. “Cool huh?” he asked, although her reaction was already more than obvious. “And the whole thing's connected to Doc's computer, so when one day passes for me and in 2004, one day passes for him too. That way everything's kept in sync.”

Jennifer nodded slowly, eyes still fixated on the screen. “Doc just gave you the computer?”

“Yeah. He said he got it cheap at a garage sale in 2009. But he didn't exactly give it to me... I mean, it's not like I can just take it home or anyth...”

The entire collection of clocks in the garage chose that precise moment to chime loudly, cutting Marty off in mid-sentence. The teen cringed slightly at the sound. Even after more than three years of dropping by at Doc's garage before and after school, he still hadn't got used to it.

“You've gotta go now, right?” he asked, when the noise had finally subsided to the usual quiet, relatively unobtrusive ticking.

Jennifer sighed regretfully, getting up. “Yeah.”

Marty got off his own chair and walked towards the door to let her out.

"Do you think Doc's ever coming back?" Jennifer asked.

Marty hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe just for short visits or to drag me off to save the universe again, but nothing permanent..."

"You want him to come back, don't you?"

"Yeah," the other teen admitted quietly. "But I think he's happier where he is now. If he comes back here, there'll be all those people who keep avoiding him because they think he's crazy... and he'll have to explain his family. Maybe it's better if he just stays..." His words drifted off into the air.

"I guess I'd better be going now."

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

They paused, looking into each others' eyes, and then their lips met in a quick kiss. Marty emerged, grinning, and waved goodbye as Jennifer made her way down the driveway.

When Jennifer had gone out of view, Marty went back into the garage, shutting and locking the door before returning to the computer to find a new message sitting in his e-mail inbox – the first he had ever received. He eagerly opened it and read:

From - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: Does it work?

Marty,

This is a test to see if everything works. Reply if you get this.

- Doc

Marty clicked on 'Reply' and typed out a short message:

From - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: Re: Does it work?

Hi Doc.

Yeah, it works perfectly fine.

Thanks again for the computer!

- Marty

P.S.: Whenever he hears the title 'Star Wars', my father sort of freaks out. The same goes for Star Trek whenever they mention Vulcan. Maybe it has something to do with what I did to him in 1955.

The teen clicked on the 'send message' button, then lay back in the chair and smiled wistfully. Even if Doc wasn't going to come back, at least he could still talk to him through e-mail. Everything was going to be great.

Around him, the afternoon sun filtered through the small windows to land on significantly fewer things than it used to. Apart from the clock collection, the garage was no longer as cluttered as it once had been. Doc had moved most of his belongings back to the nineteenth century, and it was now possible to walk around without tripping over something. The inventor had decided to leave the clocks behind for lack of space to put them where – or when – he currently lived.

The place almost looked neat. On those few occasions when Emmett decided to visit 1985 for some reason or another, he still stayed here, but otherwise Marty had begun to find the garage a nice hideaway that he could go to after school to finish his homework, practise on his guitar or do whatever he felt like at the moment. Now, of course, the presence of the computer just made the place all the more appealing.

Pulling out his homework for that day, Marty glanced at the question for his history essay and sighed. He had no idea how to go about answering it. After all, who would have been able to pay much attention in class if they had just spent the previous night riding through time and trying to save the universe?

Marty gazed aimlessly around the room, hoping for inspiration but getting none until he suddenly remembered the computer sitting right in front of him. A slow, mischievous grin spread across the teen's face as he accessed the Internet and typed in the key words of the question into the Yahoo search bar. Several results appeared.

Feeling rather guilty, Marty clicked on one of the links. He wondered briefly if this was considered cheating, and then decided that it wasn't really. It was just about the same as getting answers from a textbook, after all, something the teacher didn't mind them doing.

The page downloaded and Marty got down to his work.

Chapter Two

10th November 1895, Sunday
Hill Valley, California

The future.

That was what six-and-a-half-years-old Verne Brown longed for more than anything else in the world. He yearned to belong there, instead of in the late nineteenth century where he currently was. Ever since he could remember, he had always had the feeling that he didn't belong. And then, when Verne was four years old, his father had revealed his greatest secret to him and Jules: he was actually from the year 1985.

And Verne believed him straight away. He had known, somehow, that there had to be an explanation for why he felt different from everybody else, an explanation for his ever-present feeling that he was missing something important. From that day forth, not a minute passed without Verne dreaming of that faraway time his father had come from, wondering if he would ever be able to return to his true home.

The family's short trips in their train – and later the new DeLorean – time machine served only to deepen the boy's desire. The more he saw of the future, the more he loved it and the more he longed for it. Several nights would find him staring wistfully out of his bedroom window into the starry sky, wondering what it would have been like if his parents had managed to return to the future with Marty all those years ago.

He imagined how his life would have turned out then, as he created various scenarios in his mind down to the tiniest detail. He imagined not having to hide in the secret room whenever he wanted to watch a movie or use the computer or play on his Game Boy; he imagined what his house would look like; what kind of friends he would have; he imagined being able to live in the same kind of world as the people he knew online did...

The installation of Internet access in the family's computer earlier that year had seemed to Verne like a dream come true. After painstakingly teaching himself to type, he would spend hours online instead of watching parts of his family's movie collection in front of the television set as he used to before. Most of his Internet time was spent playing his favourite online multiplayer game, Runescape, where he went by the name of RuneJedi.

Online, no one knew who he was. No one knew when he was really from. Best of all, no one cared. Slowly but surely, Verne built up his online identity. He pretended to be like everyone else, from the year 2004 and not 1895. He had fun building up his fictional background. No one doubted him; who would have?

He made friends from the future and learnt about their lives, wishing more and more each day that he could be just like them. Verne couldn't understand those who kept complaining how boring their lives were – to him, their lives were the most interesting he had ever known and he would gladly have swapped with them any day.

Verne lived a dream so intense that he almost believed it to be true. He was living a lie and he knew it, but he didn't know how he could carry on if he were to just face the truth – he was stuck here in this time, and no amount of hoping would change that.

But Verne continued to dream.

Chapter Three

Somewhere in the late twenty-second or early twenty-third century
About two months after *The Matrix*
Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

The hovercraft moved silently through the underground sewers.

Neo lay on his bed in the darkness of his cabin, listening to the quiet hum of the *Nebuchadnezzar's* engines and hoping that the storage compartment hanging over his bed would not decide to fall on him.

If you fall on me, I'll bash you, he thought darkly. *And I know kung fu, so I can probably bash you pretty hard*. Neo gave the wire frame of the storage compartment a warning look and then wondered why he even bothered.

He rolled over in bed and stared at the metal wall, stained here and there with bits of grime, rust, and who knew what else. Staring so intently at it made him feel a little uncomfortable, so he rolled back over and tried once more to fall asleep.

He'd spent the better half of that day flying around inside the Matrix and freaking out the occasional person who might spot him. Some time later, he had gone to get himself a cup of coffee from Starbucks for no apparent reason other than the fact that he missed the beverage. So what if it wasn't actually real? The taste of the drink was good enough for him; in fact, it had been so good that he'd bought another cup. Unfortunately, Neo had overlooked one of the more common side effects of consuming too much caffeine. Somehow he'd never thought that it would be an issue, what with the coffee not being real and all that.

The mind makes it real, Morpheus had once said to him what, a month or two ago? It felt much less than that.

The mind makes it real. For some reason, Neo had always thought that that only applied to injuries, death, and that sort of thing.

Apparently, though, that wasn't the case.

So here he was now, suffering from insomnia because of too much digital-coffee-derived imaginary caffeine in his system. It was kind of pathetic, when he came to think of it. Neo closed his eyes. "There is no caffeine," he thought aloud, waited a few seconds to let the words sink in, then opened his eyes again. It didn't seem to be working. He swore under his breath.

Maybe it would help if he walked around a little. Getting off the bed, Neo left his cabin and turned right into the dimly lit corridor, running his fingers lightly against the wall, which soon turned out to be a mistake for the walls were kind of greasy.

Several seconds later, he entered the mess hall, illuminated at this time by a single light near the food dispensers. Ah, the wonderful food dispensers that dispensed the nutritious glop which the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* had to eat three meals a day, twenty-four seven.

The mess hall was empty and devoid of any life forms, humans or otherwise. That is, unless you were one of those people who believed the rumours that the aforementioned nutritious glop had a mind of its own and came alive at night.

Neo missed real food. Then he realised that he'd never actually had real food before. Until he was unplugged, he had been just another one of the many billions of humans jacked into the Matrix – living off nutrients fed through tubes, with the occasional dead guy thrown into the mix. But at least he hadn't known back then that the slice of pepperoni pizza he was eating technically didn't exist and was merely an artificial construct of the Matrix.

Ignorance was bliss. Neo wondered what a real Big Mac would taste like. Two flame-grilled patties, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, on a sesame seed bun... Oh, great. Now he was hungry, and save for the possibly alive stuff in the food dispenser – which was a rather unappetising option – there wasn't anything to eat.

Neo left the mess hall and went back to his cabin. He thought he might just as well lie down, even if he couldn't sleep.

Back in his room, on his bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering what his life had got to.

He didn't want to be The One, not really; didn't want to know that so many people were depending on him to do something he didn't know much about. At any moment, he felt as if something would happen and he'd be exposed as a fraud... just like the so many potentials Morpheus had picked up before him who had turned out to not be the real deal. Sure, so he'd defeated several agents that time when he'd first been unplugged – something no one else before him had been able to do – and he'd sort of come back from the dead too – but what if all that had just been flukes? Improbable, but the possibility was still there.

What had he done to deserve all this, anyway? What made him so special? Back then in his life in the Matrix, he was just a normal guy – Thomas A. Anderson, employee of a respectable software company by day, computer hacker by night. He'd spent most of his life trying to escape from it all, always feeling that there was something else beyond the world he knew.

And now he was here, and things weren't much better.

Sometimes he envied all those people still plugged into the Matrix, blissfully oblivious about anything and everything that happened in the real world. They went about their normal, routine lives day after day, year after year, completely ignorant of the fact that all around their physical selves, a huge war was being waged between the free humans and their AI creations.

Yet Neo had the feeling that quite a few of those plugged-in people would give anything to be in his position now. The chance to escape from all they knew just like that: no more work, no more school, no more stress... who wouldn't want it?

The grass was always greener on the other side.

It struck him that he'd never actually seen real grass before. Down here on the *Nebuchadnezzar*, travelling through the sewers, there wasn't a single green blade to be seen. There were probably none in the underground city of Zion either, unless some people grew plants of their own.

And it wasn't just grass. The sky, the sun, the moon, the stars... he'd never seen them before. The memories that he had of those things were all fake, mere shadows, mere imitations of the real thing.

Nature. Neo had never really realised it before, but that was what was most lacking in the real world. The surface above, dotted with the last vestiges of humanity: crumbled buildings, now deserted, scattered under the blackened sky. Somewhere above the clouds, perhaps the sun still shone... but its rays would never penetrate far enough for green life to start again. And somewhere, the machines waited, waited for the day when they would finally overthrow the last of their creators, the humans. The humans who were relying on Neo to save them.

He didn't want to think about that now. Eventually, the time would come when he'd have to, but not yet. Not now.

Neo rolled over in bed again, mentally cursing the day's coffee indulgence whose effects were starting to drive him crazy. *Right*, he thought to himself, firmly pushing away all distractions from his mind. *Concentrate. Step one: close eyes. Step two: try to sleep. There is no caffeine...*

Chapter Four

5th November 1998, Thursday
About two years after *The Frighteners*
Christchurch, New Zealand

Frank Bannister surveyed his new home with satisfaction. A large haunted mansion, somewhere on the outskirts of Christchurch, New Zealand – perfect. From behind him, the moving van trundled through the open iron gates – set into the ivy-covered brick wall – and came to a stop on the driveway.

New home, new beginnings. No one ever needed to know about all that had happened back there in the little Northern Californian town of Fairwater. The place held too many memories for him – most of

which weren't good ones. And even though his name had been cleared regarding the series of serial killings that had gone on two years before, he still attracted occasional hostile stares.

But over here, he could start again. Here he was just known as the weird-new-guy-from-America, which he figured was better than being known as the weird-guy-who-thinks-he-can-see-dead-people-and-killed-his-girlfriend-when-his-half-built-house-fell-on-her.

Frank had come determined to act as normal as possible whenever he ventured out into the public eye. To be honest, a haunted house wasn't the best choice of residence for someone hoping to make a decent first impression, but it was cheap and that was what mattered.

The house was well worth it. Enormous, fully furnished, cheap, with its two friendly resident ghosts, and not to mention the tidy little packet of money he could make by selling bits of unwanted furniture off on eBay. And there was a lot of unwanted furniture around. There were also a lot of unwanted rooms around, which could be rented out...

If that wasn't a good deal, Frank didn't know what was. Besides, he didn't think too favourably on the idea of splurging what little was left of his unexpected inheritance on a house with a better reputation. He had known poverty for the past few years; through it he had learnt to be thrifty, and sudden riches weren't going to change that.

Almost a year ago, some obscure relative of his had passed away and left him quite a substantial amount of cash – way more than the little he might manage to earn in several good years. Maybe it had been a downright foolish idea to spend the bulk of it migrating to New Zealand, but he had wanted so much to get away from it all.

The moving van guys weren't all too keen to stay any longer than necessary. They'd heard the rumours about this place. Fortunately for them, there wasn't much to move into the house: mostly boxes of personal belongings and the odd piece of favourite furniture. Frank paid them, and they drove off thankfully.

Frank watched them go, giving them a small farewell wave that went unacknowledged. The wind blew through the trees in his new garden, rustling up the leaves and causing several to drop off in annoyance.

Whistling, Frank strolled through the main door of his house, used a leg to kick the door shut, and gazed causally at the boxes of stuff lying around the entrance hall. To his right lay the open kitchen; an archway lay on his left with rooms beyond; before him the hall went on a while before leading up a staircase. Down this staircase now floated a semi-transparent dead man, glowing with blue ectoplasm.

"Hi," Frank greeted. "Are you Bob or Eddie?"

"Bob Alkies," the ghost replied. "Eddie's the psycho with the sofa, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

Frank had loved the opportunity that the movie *The Sixth Sense* had given him. Now, he could truthfully inform people that he could see dead people, but instead of freaking out like they used to, most just laughed and assumed he was joking. Which was just fine with him.

From above floated down strains of Eddie's voice.

"Sofa... my sofa... my precious, oh my sofa, yes my sofa, ohhh... sofa... sofa..." There was a contented sigh as Eddie spread himself out on his blue Chesterfield sitting appliance.

"You'll get used to it after a while," Bob assured Frank.

Bob Alkies couldn't have been more than twenty-five when he'd died. He was a fairly skinny fellow, slightly taller than Frank (most people were), with tousled fair hair and an almost perpetual spaced-out look on his face. Now he sat down on the bottom stair, sunk through it, and stayed there.

The doorbell rang.

"Freddy," Bob said in response to Frank's unanswered question.

"Who?" Frank opened the door to catch a brief glimpse of a ghost in pizza delivery uniform leaving through the outer brick wall. On the doorstep lay a box of piping hot pizza.

"Freddy the Pizza Dude," Bob explained. "I knew him when we were in school. He used to work in that pizza joint down the road, but one day there was an accident and he got killed – fell into the oven or something. Never forgave them. Now and then he steals a pizza or two and gives 'em to others for free. I told him you were coming."

"I guess lunch's settled then," Frank said, picking up the pizza box and placing it on the somewhat dusty kitchen counter. He gazed around and his eyes settled on the pile of boxes lying in the room. "Now I just gotta unpack."

"Sofa..." Eddie breathed from upstairs.

Chapter Five
13th December 1985, Friday
Hill Valley, California

Marty McFly drummed his fingers impatiently against his school desk as he stared at the clock, counting down the minutes to the end of school. He wasn't the only one doing the latter, for the teacher was speaking on a particularly boring topic today, and about half the class were either asleep or on the verge of doing so. Only two or three students were staring enthralled at Mrs. Ferguson, hanging onto her every word with looks of rapt wonder on their faces.

Marty didn't understand them, and neither did anyone else.

Come on... he thought desperately, willing the clock to hurry up. He couldn't wait to go to Doc's garage and have another go at the computer, and it wasn't as if the teacher was saying anything remotely interesting or important that he couldn't find out for himself on the Internet.

Finally, the school bell rang, and the class joyfully ran out of the room amidst the sound of Mrs. Ferguson yelling out their homework for the day. Grinning as he slammed his locker door shut minutes later, Marty turned to leave when he saw a classmate, David, rushing towards him.

"Hey, Marty!" he yelled. "Strickland wants to see you in his office. I think you'd better go... he looks kinda mad."

The grin vanished from Marty's face as he trudged along the corridor to the principal's office. *What now?* Marty wondered as they entered the room.

"You asked to see me, sir?"

Mr. Strickland, sitting behind his desk, looked Marty squarely in the eye. "Mr. McFly, do you have any idea how many tardy slips you've collected since January this year?"

Marty blinked and tried his best to be polite. "Uh... no, sir." So this was about his lateness again? It was probably about the thousandth time he'd been sent to the principal's office for that... although the teen had to admit that Mr. Strickland's next words had a point.

"*Eighty-three*," Strickland hissed in a dangerously soft voice, which suddenly went up in volume, causing the teen to jump. "EIGHTY-THREE! That's more than last year's sixty-one! It has to be a record!"

Marty gulped.

"Mr. McFly, I do not tolerate tardiness in this school," the bald principal continued, his face red. "It appears that you have already accumulated twelve since the start of this school year. If you continue to carry on like this, sooner or later you shall be expelled. You hear me? *Expelled*."

Marty tried his best to look apologetic. "Yes sir."

Mr. Strickland didn't look as if he believed him, but decided to let it go for that time. "That's all. You may go."

"Thank you, sir."

"By the way..." Strickland added, as Marty turned to go, "I think it's good that you've finally decided to stop hanging around that crazy Dr. Brown."

Marty stiffened and turned around slowly to face the principal.

"Where is he, anyway?" Strickland asked, eyeing the teen carefully.

Not now, Marty thought, forcing a smile onto his face. Just ignore him, he's just trying to get you into detention again...

"He's... he just went out of town for a while," Marty replied as casually as he could, hoping that Strickland wouldn't ask any more questions.

"Ah. I see. I was just wondering." The principal went back to his deskwork, leaving Marty free to go.

Marty left the office, heaving a sigh of relief at the close call. If Strickland had decided to probe further... One simple reply on Doc's whereabouts could lead to another, and if the matter of time travel happened to slip out along the way... who knew what would happen?

He ran down the steps of Hill Valley High and skated straight over to Doc's garage, his short visit to the principal's office almost completely forgotten by the time he had unlocked the door and sat down by the computer.

Almost. Marty wondered just how many people knew that Emmett was no longer living in 1985. His parents, for one, probably thought that the inventor was still around and Marty was hanging around with him as usual, or they would have been wondering just what it was that a seventeen-year-old found so intriguing about an empty garage that he had to visit it every day.

Jennifer knew, of course. He had told her about everything that had happened since the twenty-sixth of October that year; it felt good to share all that with someone else besides Doc. At least he had someone to talk to in his own time period regarding his time travel experiences. No one else would believe him.

Marty turned on the computer and accessed his e-mail to be rewarded with the sight of a new e-mail message:

From - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: RE: Does it work?

Marty!

I can't believe it! I invented something that actually works! Again!

I believe I told you this when I first gave you the computer, but just as a reminder, DO NOT look yourself up on the Internet. By now, you would very likely have an idea of the kind of danger that might pose to the space-time continuum.

- Doc

The teen logged off his e-mail account and spent the rest of the day happily surfing the 'Net for answers to his homework, his guitar practice forgotten.

Chapter Six

11th November 1895, Monday
Hill Valley, California

Verne was mad. His Game Boy Advanced was missing, just when he wanted to play with it. A confrontation revealed Jules to be the one who had taken it, and Verne tried desperately to think of something that would make his brother return his precious toy to him.

He couldn't think of anything.

"Give it back!" Verne yelled again with all the energy a young boy could muster.

Jules stood in the doorway and smirked. "Not a chance, little brother. You spend too much time on that thing, and Dad thinks so too. If you're not on it, you're on the computer, or watching TV... when do you think you are, the future?"

Verne heard Jules' last few words and looked ready to cry. "Give it *back!*"

Jules shrugged. "I already said you could have it if you gave me a million dollars, so pay up if you ever want to see your Game Boy again."

The younger boy lunged out with his fists, narrowly missing his brother's face by several millimetres, which had the effect of making Jules run out of the room yelling to his mother that Verne was hitting him again. Verne scowled and slammed the door shut. Spending some time on the computer would probably calm him down, he thought, so he went to it switched it on.

The computer booted up, and Verne logged onto MSN Messenger as he had done so many times before in those last few months. He had no new messages. Several 2004 friends of his were online, though most had the 'away' symbol next to their name. Verne noted the absence of one of them – he had deleted it himself, and blocked off J.T. from talking to or e-mailing him ever again.

He missed Jeff. They had been really good friends since the time they met on one of the Hill Valley Online message boards. Like everyone else he met on the Internet, J.T. had no idea that Verne lived in the nineteenth century, but that did little to prevent their friendship growing nonetheless.

At least, that was until Verne discovered who Jeff was. It hadn't been intentional; both of them respected each other's privacy and didn't go trying to find out the real-life identity of the other. That day, he had just been surfing the message boards as usual looking for anything interesting he might want to comment on when he saw a reply to one of Jeff's topics. It was from one of his classmates, someone who knew J.T.'s full name and didn't think much of revealing it online: Jeffrey Tannen.

Verne had been scared.

As far as he knew, there had only ever been one family by the name of Tannen in the history of Hill Valley. And if that was true, it had been one of Jeff's ancestors who had tried to murder Verne's father not that many years ago. It had been another one of his ancestors – particularly his grandfather, Biff – who spent his childhood and teenage days tormenting Marty's father George McFly. Come to think of it, Jeff had once mentioned he had a younger brother who he only referred to by the initial 'G'. If that were who Verne thought it was, then according to what he knew of future history from his father, Jeff's brother Griff Tannen would have been the one that got Marty's future son into jail if Doc and Marty hadn't gone to 2015 and prevented that from happening.

Verne didn't know what his family would do to him if they found out that he had been making friends with a descendent of the man who had, in some other timeline that hopefully didn't exist any longer, murdered Emmett. He didn't know what Jules in particular might do to him. Not knowing what else to do, Verne had deleted J.T. from his MSN contact list – thus deleting him from his life.

He missed J.T.; he really did. Jeff had been a good friend to him, encouraging him on days he felt depressed, telling Verne to stand up to those who liked to bully him in school, and the two of them had spent countless hours sharing computer game cheat codes or exploring the wilderness together in Runescape.

Verne had known little of Jeff's family. The older boy didn't like to talk much about them, and Verne had sensed that perhaps things weren't all too right between his family members. But he didn't ask about it. Jeff didn't ask about his family, so Verne saw no reason to either. They both understood that some things were personal.

After kicking J.T. off his contact list, Verne would sometimes spend his days wondering what Jeff had thought when he saw that Verne had blocked him, especially since they had been on such good terms just the day before. Verne felt guilty, somewhat, knowing that Jeff hadn't done anything to deserve it apart from coming from the wrong family, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to move on with life and leave the past – or future – behind him.

Verne accessed his e-mail account, and his spirits were dashed again upon seeing the newest addition to his inbox:

From - death_to_verne@hotmail.com
To - runescape_jedi@hotmail.com
Subject: Hah.

Hi Verne.

Like my new email address?

- Jules, Ruler of the Universe.

Die, Verne, DIE!

When will Jules ever leave me alone? Verne wondered, frustration etched all over his young face. He kicked angrily at the table with his foot, then immediately regretted it because it made his foot hurt. Furiously, he typed out a reply to his brother.

From – runescape_jedi@hotmail.com

To – death_to_verne@hotmail.com

Subject: RE: Hah.

One day I will steel the Time Train and erays you from existanse.

Verne

Jules didn't care when he lived. Jules *liked* being in the time they were, and never gave up poking snide fun at his brother's never-ending yearning for the future. Jules found living in the nineteenth century a learning journey, a chance to see and experience things that people from the late twentieth would never be able to.

According to Jules, they weren't missing out on anything important. They had the time machine, after all. They could take a trip to any time period they wanted for a short while, as long as their father didn't consider it too dangerous and if he went with them. No one else in the world had that opportunity, and Jules couldn't see what Verne was always so unhappy about. There were people in the world who would kill for a time machine, and to Jules, Verne was just an ungrateful brat who couldn't appreciate what he had.

The computer still on, Verne left the secret room for a moment to use the toilet, not noticing as his brother came in upon seeing his departure and sat down by the computer, deciding to use the time to check his e-mail.

He discovered Verne's latest e-mail sitting in his inbox, and scowled as he read it. Jules heard Verne re-enter the room, and he turned around in the swivel chair to face him.

"Good morning, Verne," Jules greeted. "I just received your little threat. Pay me another million dollars by this afternoon or I'll tell Dad that you're planning to steal the time train."

"But..."

Jules shook his head. "Two million or I'm telling. Take your pick."

Verne was left speechless as the older Brown child walked past him and out of the room, unable to think up an idea that would enable him to get hold of the two million dollars to give his brother in exchange for his beloved Game Boy Advanced, on which was saved a particularly successful Pokémon game.

Jules therefore acted on his word and went to see his father that afternoon when the latter was working in his lab. "Dad?"

Emmett glanced up at the sound of his son's voice. "Yes?"

Jules got to the point. "My little idiot of a brother is planning to steal the train. I thought I should inform you."

His father sighed and turned back to his work. "Don't call your brother an idiot, Jules."

"Just keep an eye on the time machines to make sure Verne doesn't make off with it."

Emmett looked at him again. "Jules, you know I trust both of you not to do that, and I think Verne knows that too. Even if he does decide to leave with one of the machines, which is highly unlikely, he won't

know how to operate them.” Emmett paused. “Just leave your brother alone, Jules. He’s having a hard time here.”

“Yeah, well, if he spends less time on the computer and watching television, he’d probably appreciate his life here more!” Jules burst out. “All he does all day is think of the future and how much he wants to live there... doesn’t he understand how lucky he is to be able to live here? Doesn’t he know that there are so many people in the future who dream of having the life he has? Can’t he just *appreciate*...”

His father’s voice was stern. “Jules...”

Stopped in mid-sentence, the boy seemed to realise he had gone too far. Jules bit his lip and looked down as he trying to avoid his father’s gaze. “Sorry,” he said after a while, then left the lab in a considerably subdued manner.

Emmett shook his head slowly as he watched his elder son leave the room, and not for the first time he wondered if he should have just moved the whole family back to the future upon the completion of the train time machine. That would have at least given the boys a chance at having a somewhat normal life – which they deserved as much as anyone else – and all these problems wouldn’t exist...

Pushing his thoughts aside for the moment, Emmett went back to working on a modification for the time train – a cloaking device, made with technology he had got from the future.

Outside, Jules yanked a science-fiction storybook off the bookshelf and headed for his favourite armchair to read, but the book didn’t manage to hold his attention for long.

Verne didn’t understand anything at all, Jules thought bitterly. Didn’t he know what would happen if they moved back to the future, as he wanted so desperately to do? What were the chances that their father would still be as able to spend as much time with them if Marty McFly was there as well? It wasn’t as if Emmett would be able to just ignore his best friend.

Jules couldn’t help but feel a little jealous towards the teen. From what he knew, his father and Marty had been best friends – almost like family to each other, until Emmett had decided to stay behind in the nineteenth century and start a real family of his own. But before that, the two of them had been through so much together, and Jules knew that his father missed him sometimes. That was one of the main reasons why he had set up the whole Internet thing in the first place: so that he could still communicate with his young friend despite living in a different time period.

And the worst thing was that if it hadn’t been for Marty, neither he nor Verne would exist and his mother would be dead. Jules didn’t like to know that the teen was responsible for the existence of his family. He didn’t like to feel indebted to him.

But it wasn’t as if he had a choice. Jules could only hope that his father considered the whole e-mail thing sufficient to continue his friendship with Marty, and that he wouldn’t even think of moving back to 1985.

Chapter Seven
13th December 1985, Friday
Hill Valley, California

Robert Galkis¹ of Lightwater Studios flipped through the screenplay of the movie adaptation of George McFly’s best-selling science fiction novel, ‘A Match Made in Space’, as its author watched him with anxious eyes.

“So how is it?” George asked nervously. “If it’s too long, I could cut it...”

Galkis waved aside the suggestion. “Nah, the length’s fine, absolutely fine. You’re keeping the original title, huh?”

“I, uh, haven’t really decided on that yet, but I thought it could do for the time being.”

¹ Robert Galkis, a cross between Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis, was the invention of Eternal Density from FanFiction.Net.

Galkis' face lit up. "Really? Hey, in that case... can I suggest a title? How about... let's see... how about... *Spaceman*..." – he paused for dramatic effect – "...*from Pluto*.² Huh?"

"Uh..." George said, but Galkis remained unfazed.

"Okay, see, so you have the main guy here – whatisname – Jason, right, and he wakes up one night to find this *alien* standing by his bed, and that alien tells him to go to that... dance with that girl and... so maybe, *maybe*, the next day he mentions it to a friend, and they refer to the alien as the Spaceman from Pluto, see, so that's where... that's where the title comes in..."

"Then... then after some time Jason starts to wonder why an alien from Pluto would care about him and, uh – Lauren, right? – getting together... I mean, he's just this normal guy in high school. Why would some extraterrestrial worry about his love life, unless it was... *important* in some way... maybe like... Hey! *Maybe*... maybe... this alien is from the future or something, and the, uh, *union* of Jason and Lauren is somehow an integral part of space history, 'cause maybe one of their kids turns out to be some... some universal leader or something in future, but perhaps some evil alien went back in time and broke them up, so now this new alien had to go back too and make sure they get together..."

"Uh..." George said again, but it didn't do any use, for the movie producer didn't seem to have heard him. Rob was on a roll now.

"...and then *meanwhile*, Jason starts to get *curious*, see, because he wonders what this alien wants with him, so he starts up all these *investigations* to find out what's going on, and... and maybe he gets some of his friends in to help, and they all call this... this alien guy the Spaceman from Pluto, and... and... what d'you think?" Rob Galkis looked eagerly at George, his face shining.

George just gave an apologetic smile. "I... uh, I'm sorry, but I... I think I'd like to keep the original story, thanks."

The delight faded from Galkis' face. "Oh," he said, and shifted his gaze to the floor. Then a thought occurred to him, and he looked up again. "Where'd you get the idea for the story, by the way?"

George hesitated. "Well, it's like this," he started, feeling slightly uncomfortable with Galkis staring at him so intently. "Thirty years ago in 1955, I woke up to some horrible alien noise to see this creature standing by my bed."

"What kind of creature?"

George gave a nervous laugh. "That's the strange thing, see... he claimed to be Darth Vader."

Galkis raised an eyebrow. "Darth Vader? As in that guy from *Star Wars* with the big black cloak and the breathing problem?"

"Yeah, that one. And I seem to... remember him holding a hairdryer in one hand, only that hairdryers weren't around in 1955."

Rob's interest was piqued now. "Neither was *Star Wars*."

George laughed again. "I *know*. That's the crazy thing, but I swear it's all true! Really."

Galkis' voice was sincere. "I believe you."

George blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. Hey, have you ever thought of sending in your story to one of those UFO newsletters? *SpaceWatch*, or something.³ They're always running stuff like that... they may be interested."

George shook his head. "Nah. I... I don't think so. It, uh, might not be good for my... reputation and all that..."

² This title was suggested for *Back to the Future*, but Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis thankfully refused to change it to that.

³ *SpaceWatch* was a parody of an UFO magazine that two friends and I created for a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* fan fiction story entitled 'So Long, and Thanks for All the Phish'.

"Oh," said Rob, looking a little disappointed. "Yeah, I see. Well, then... I guess it's getting late, huh?" He fingered the screenplay in his hands and held it up. "I'll send this over to the guys and see what they think of it... and I'll try to get back to you by next week."

"Thanks."

"No prob."

Walking home that evening, George ran through for the umpteenth time in his mind all the events that time and again had led him to think that there was something very strange going on in his life. Firstly, there was the Darth Vader incident that he had told Rob Galkis about. Secondly was that time in 1977 when then-eight-year-old Marty had set fire to the living room rug – an event that had been predicted in the same week in 1955 that the Darth Vader thing had happened.

That had been one eventful week, if George remembered completely. It was the week when that strange person named Calvin 'Marty' Klein (*Calvin Klein?*) had first made his appearance and seemingly disappeared without a trace when the week was over; it was the week that had the day a yet-to-be-invented *Star Wars* character scared him early one morning with a hairdryer; it was the week when he'd first kissed Lorraine at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance; it was the week when he'd first stood up to Biff; it was also the week of the great Hill Valley lightning storm.

George had the strange feeling that there had been something more going on in his life, something that he didn't know anything about. Then again, of course, maybe he was just going senile and his past memories were getting a little distorted. But he could remember it all so clearly...

There had to be a logical explanation for all this. There was always a logical explanation for everything, no matter how outrageous, and he had a feeling he knew where to start.

Letting himself into his house – which was deserted; everyone was out – George went to his room and did a search among the older junk in his cupboards, finally emerging triumphant with the Hill Valley High 1955 Yearbook.

He flipped through the yellowed pages until he had found the ones he had been looking for: several black-and-white photographs taken of the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance.

Flip. There was a photo of Mr. Strickland in his younger days, still bald as usual though and looking rather annoyed. There was a photo of George himself, dancing with a spaced-out expression on his face. On the other side was a photo of Biff Tannen with some book stuck in his back pocket. Next to it was a photo of some people he didn't know. Flip. There were *more* photos of people he didn't know. Flip flip. Ooh, a picture of the floor, taken when someone tripped the photographer mid-photo-shoot. *Which editor had decided to include that in the yearbook?* Flip. Finally, George found what he wanted: a photo of Calvin Klein standing on stage with an electric guitar and singing.

For some reason, it didn't come as much of a shock as he would have expected as George realised for the first time just how much Calvin looked like his youngest son, Marty. The photograph showed only the teen's side profile, but George had the strange feeling that if his whole face had been visible, it would have looked uncannily similar to Martin Seamus McFly's.

George stared at the picture... and he wondered. Something told him that his son was hiding something, and that in some crazy, bizarre way, Marty was connected to that photograph somehow. The only question was, how?

That week in 1955 had been a really weird one.

Chapter Eight

Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

Plop.

The white glop slid off his spoon and back into the bowl from whence it came, sinking slowly down until the surface was level once more.

His breakfast seemed to be calling out to him. *Eat me*, it said. *Eat me, Neo. I'm nutritious and healthy and tasteless, and I'm all you're ever going to eat for the rest of your pitiful little life. And what's more, there's nothing you can do about it. Hah. So there.*

Neo stuck his spoon into the food and swirled it around. After a while he took up a spoonful of food, the excess bits slopping off back into the bowl, and he brought it into his mouth.

The breakfast, lunch, and dinner of champions. If you close your eyes, it almost feels like you're eating runny eggs. Or a bowl of snot.

Neo swallowed. There was no need for chewing. Half-heartedly, he scooped up more of the nutrient mix masquerading as his breakfast and mentally prepared his tastebuds for Round Two.

Tastee Wheat, the late Mouse had said. *It tastes like Tastee Wheat.*

Neo had never eaten *Tastee Wheat* before – technically, none of them had – but he was sure it tasted better than this. If *Tastee Wheat* really tasted like this, then it wasn't the least bit tasty. In general, however, it seemed that the machines knew how to simulate good food in the Matrix.

Like the coffee. The blasted coffee that had kept him up all night. He didn't feel fully awake yet. Maybe this was all a dream, he thought sleepily. Maybe he hadn't actually woken up yet, and when he *did* wake up he'd have to eat breakfast all over again...

Or maybe he'd discover that everything that had happened in the past few days had just been one long dream, and wake up back at his computer in the dingy little apartment that had been home for so long. And everything would be normal again. He'd go to work, arrive late as usual, get yelled at by Mr. Rhineheart, go to his cubicle and try to look busy, get dinner, go home, vegetate in front of his computer, fall asleep, then wake up the next day and do it all over again. He'd have a social security number, he'd pay his taxes, and he'd help his landlady carry out the garbage. No Agents chasing after him, nobody expecting him to save the world on a diet of glop, no navigating the sewers in a hovercraft... and no Trinity.

But he supposed that everything had a price to it.

Plop.

Neo looked up from his bowl to the others, picking away at their food with varying degrees of enthusiasm and enjoyment, faces bathed in the eerie white light of the ship's fluorescent lamps. No one was talking. The only sounds in the mess hall were the quiet ones of eating and the ever-present hum of the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

It was a surreal scene. And once again, Neo sensed it: that elusive feeling that he was being watched. And not only him, but all of them.

Uneasily, he scanned the top of the wall in front of him. He wasn't too sure what he expected to find – cameras, perhaps? – but there was nothing.

Neo went back to staring at his food and reluctantly consumed another two spoonfuls. Vaguely, he found himself thinking that anyone who wanted to lose weight should spend a week or two in the real world. No delicious, scrumptious eatables here to tempt you. Just your average gooey white stuff, take it or leave it.

Plop.

Neo gently shook the now half-empty spoon a second time, and another lump of food fell off to land in the bowl beside the first. They looked like two eyes. He used the spoon and drew a little mouth underneath them, forming a smiley face of sorts.

A rare grin flicked briefly across Neo's face.

The food was alive, it had a mind of its own...

Stop it, said the little voice in his head. *You're thirty-seven years old, for crying out loud. Stop playing with your food and eat it up.*

But... he protested silently.

I said...

Who are you, anyway?

EAT IT!

Okay, fine, whatever...

Grudgingly, Neo obeyed. He supposed he could always stop by at McDonald's or something for a bite the next time he jacked into the Matrix. But for now, he needed something to sustain him until lunch.

Lunch. More of this stuff. Just thinking about it made him feel like throwing up.

The breakfast, lunch, and dinner of champions. Oh yeah.

Chapter Nine

11th November 1895, Monday
Hill Valley, California

Verne looked on in wonder as the television screen filled with images he'd never seen before, channelled straight to their little set all the way from another part of the space-time continuum.

Real television. Before this, all he had ever been able to watch were the videotapes, VCDs and DVDs that the family had collected during their various trips through time. But now... The television set could now show no less than twenty different channels from the future – in particular, the year 2004.

Doc emerged from behind the television set, which had been shifted from its original position in the room to make it more convenient for the wires to connect it to their Internet modem.

"How is it?" he asked.

"*Great!*" Verne enthused. "Thanks, Dad!"

"I'll get you some blank videotapes from the future when I'm free," Emmett said. "That way you can tape movies straight of the television and we won't have to buy them."

For Verne Newton Brown, the world's first ever TV addict, this was possibly the happiest day of his life. All the events of that morning with Jules seemed far away and irrelevant now. Why would he need his Game Boy when he had *real TV*?

He loved the movies. He loved the TV programmes. He even loved the commercial breaks. And he also loved the fact that for some reason, there were *more* than twenty channels available although his father had been fairly convinced that the twenty were all there were. Several of the extra channels seemed the same as one of the original ones, but with slight variations. Verne didn't care. He loved them all.

As he sat in front of the screen watching *real television* like people in the future did, Verne could not recall ever being so happy.

Chapter Ten

5th November 1998, Thursday
Christchurch, New Zealand

"So that's Eddie, huh?" Frank asked.

"Yeah," Bob replied.

The ghost lay spread out on the blue Chesterfield sofa and appeared to be asleep, until Frank heard soft whispers coming out from Eddie's general mouth area.

"*Sofa... my sofa... my precious...*"

Curious, Frank walked over to the sofa and placed a hand on it.

The effect was immediate. Eddie's murmuring stopped... and then he leapt up at Frank. "GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY SOFA!" he shrieked.

Frank raised an eyebrow. He didn't scare easily.

Eddie went into hysterics, fitfully flying about and yelling incoherently at Frank.

"I told you, he's a little particular about that couch," Bob said.

"IT'S A SOFA!" Eddie yelled, frothing at the mouth and spitting as he spoke.

Frank finally removed his hand, wiping bits of ectoplasmic spit off his face. "Hey, calm down," he said.

Eddie whipped out a ghostly cloth and aerosol can from a pocket and proceeded to painstakingly clean the area of the sofa that had come into contact with Frank's hand.

Frank tentatively reached out a finger and touched another part of the sofa. Eddie rewarded him by bashing the aerosol can against Frank's head.

Frank winced. "Nice guy," he said to Bob, then strolled out of the room.

"He'll calm down after a while," Bob assured him, following him out. "He's not always like that. Just don't touch his couch."

"IT'S A SOFA!" came Eddie's loud retort.

The aerosol can flew whizzing out of the doorway and hit Bob squarely on the head.

"Ow," he said, and collapsed in an ectoplasmic heap on the floor.

"How long has Eddie been here?" Frank asked when Bob had picked himself off the ground.

Bob shrugged. "He was here before I moved in. All the other haunted houses were occupied, and I didn't like living in a house full of living people who screamed whenever I picked up something or moved about. This place is big, and Eddie never knew I was here until quite late. He was too obsessed with his couch to notice me."

"IT'S A SOFA!" came Eddie's angry shout. A damp cloth flew out the doorway and fhwapped Bob on the head.

"He's got a good aim," Frank observed.⁴

Chapter Eleven
14th December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

"These are the rules for the Hill Valley Band Competition 1985," Mrs. Challis said slowly, as if she were speaking to very young children. She passed out two sheets of paper to each of the four bandleaders in the school, ignoring the incredulous looks most of them gave them. On the first sheet was a list of rules Marty considered simply ridiculous, and on the other was a list of the competing bands. Seeing the name of one particular band there, Marty's face fell.

"If you don't follow the rules, you will be disqualified," the head of the Hill Valley High music department continued. "Simple? There will be bands from other towns coming in to play as well, so please do not give them a bad impression of our school, or of Hill Valley. Understand?"

Half-hearted nods filled the room that didn't seem to satisfy Mrs. Challis very much, but there was nothing much she could do about it.

⁴ This chapter was adapted from a screenplay version of this novel that my brother wrote for fun.

"All right, you can go now."

Leaving the dismissed meeting, Marty ran up to his fellow band members sitting around outside the school.

"Hey, guys!" he yelled, trying to pull their attention away from the bass guitarist's pet ant, Howard, on the table. "Rules are here. I just received them from Mrs. Challis... you're supposed to read through them." Marty sighed and slumped down onto the bench.

J.J., the drummer, was the first to look up. Few people actually knew what his initials stood for; his full name was James Jello Kenbridge. Rumour went that his parents had let him choose his middle name when he was two years old, and he had chosen 'Jello' – a decision he was to regret for the rest of his life. His parents had apparently had a warped sense of humour, for they had agreed to it and actually made the name official. It was currently the number one embarrassment in J.J.'s life, and he always introduced himself by his initials alone whenever possible; he wasn't that fond of his first name either because he already knew too many people named James.

"Let me see that," he said, grabbing the paper from Marty and reading aloud. "To all bands participating in the Hill Valley Band Competition 1985, a few points to note... *Number one: The maximum sound volume allowed is fifty decibels. To facilitate this change, no microphones shall be allowed on stage.*" J.J. stared open-mouthed at the other three members of The Pinheads. "Fifty decibels? What are we, mice? It's not possible to play that softly!"

"Look," Marty started, but J.J. interrupted him.

"No, don't give me any of that 'If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything' stuff, Marty. It's just... not possible."

Marty raised his hands in a 'whatever' position and flung them down again in resignation as the drummer continued.

"*Number two: No kicking over of any stage object is allowed. Violators of this law will be punished accordingly. Number three: Keep all clothes on. Number four: Patriotic songs are not allowed on the grounds that they give you an unfair advantage.*' Yeah, like we've ever played any. '*Number five: All band members must be human. So no parrots. It's called 'showing off'.* Uh, Marty, does that mean I can't go? I'm not human... am I?"

The bandleader gazed at a random spot on the floor. "Disaster Area is going to be there too. Think we can beat them?"

"WHAT?"

There was a nervous laugh from the keyboardist, Nick. "Um, it was nice knowing you guys; see you all in the next life." Nick got up to go and Marty yanked him back down. He sighed. "Seriously, Marty, we can't win this if they're in. They're good and the judges like them, so we're doomed, okay?"

"If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything," Marty said, sounding very unconvinced even to his own ears.

J.J. grinned. "SEE? What'd I tell you? I *knew* he was going to say that."

"Shut up, Jello," Steve said, then ducked as J.J. sent a punch flying his way. J.J. missed and hit the table instead, whereupon Steve yelled.

"WATCH IT! You nearly squished Howard!"

"We *can* win this," Marty continued, ignoring the bass guitarist and the drummer. "We have to. Please. We've practised so much..."

Nick gave him a pitying look. "C'mon, Marty. Be a little realistic here, 'kay? We didn't even survive the dance auditions in October, so what makes you think we can win a competition? Why don't we all just quit the band and concentrate on our studies like good little kids? I'm sorry, but I *really* don't think we can win this. Especially since we lost that amplifier at Dr. Brown's garage because you blew it up. I don't know why you're so confident, Marty. It's not like you know the future or anything."

Marty stared at Nick. "What?"

Nick stared back at him. "What?"

"What did you say?"

Nick shrugged. "I said that I don't know why you're so confident."

"No, not that. You said something about the future..."

"Yeah, I said that it's not like you know the future."

Marty nodded slowly, feeling strangely detached. "I know. Look, don't give up practising, okay? We can win this. Ah... I've got to go." The teen suddenly leapt up and left in a run, leaving the rest of The Pinheads band staring after him.

"Marty?" J.J. yelled. "Where're you going?"

He didn't reply.

Steve stared. "What's up with Marty?" he asked. The bassist suddenly felt his fingers squish something, and he looked down, gapping in horror at the smushed insect. "Howard... NO!"

The keys to Doc's garage were in their usual place under the mat. Marty grabbed them and unlocked the door, then hurried inside and locked the door behind him. Dashing over to the computer, he switched it on and tapped impatiently on the table as he waited for it to boot up.

"Come on... come on..."

Doc would probably go ballistic if he knew what Marty was using the computer for, but the teen really didn't care as he typed in 'Hill Valley Band Competition 1985+results' into the search bar.

The search engine gave him several results, and Marty was about to click on a promising looking one when another link lower down caught his attention. It looked different, somehow, a very slightly different shade of blue from the other links and indented one space more than the others:

[BTF.COM – Your Definitive Guide to the World of Back to the Future](#)

Not knowing what he was doing, Marty hesitantly moved the cursor over to it and clicked on the link.

The page downloaded and opened up, and the teen stared wide-eyed as he slowly scrolled down the main page, taking in the words, taking in the pictures.

There was something very weird going on here. Something *very* weird...

In what took less than ten seconds, Marty closed the Internet window and shut down the computer. He stared unseeingly at the blank screen and took a shaky breath. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the chair, trying to catch his breath and calm down at the same time.

He didn't know what that site had been. Something about it, however, told him with a definite certainty that whatever it was, it was a website that he had never been meant to see. And he had seen it. He didn't understand what he had seen. He didn't think he wanted to, either, and his mind would not permit him to think any more about the website than necessary.

Half of him expected something dramatic to happen at any moment, but minutes passed and nothing did. Slowly Marty opened his eyes. The place was normal. Everything was normal.

Then the phone rang, and he jumped.

Marty stared at the telephone as if it were an alien that had just appeared out of nowhere. About several seconds passed before he finally got off the chair and reached out a trembling hand to pick it up.

"Hello?" he asked in a shaky voice, prepared to yank the phone off the hook and throw it out the window at the first sign of anything abnormal.

He had never before in his life been so thankful to hear Nick's voice. "Marty? Is that you?"

"Yeah," the teen replied, heaving a small sigh of relief. "Yeah, it's me."

"You weren't at home, and Jennifer said she thought you'd be here... Why'd you just run off like that? Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Nick remained unconvinced. "You don't sound okay. I... can call back later if you want."

"No, I'm fine. Really."

"Okay then. I just thought I should tell you that... uh, the school band is having a concert on the same day as the competition, and the drum major won't let me go for it."

Marty took a while to digest that piece of information, and his face fell. "So... you're not coming?"

"Yeah. Sorry. Oh, and Steve told me to tell you that his dog trashed his guitar and ate up all the strings, so I'm lending him mine. It's kind of old, but it still works okay. But his dog wasn't as lucky – the vet said that..."

Marty nodded miserably, more depressed over the guitar than the dog. "J.J.'s still coming, right?" he cut in.

"Should be. Hey, Marty, I'm really sorry."

"Nah, it's okay," came the lifeless reply. "We're doomed anyway."

Marty hung up the phone dejectedly and sat back down on the chair. He might as well go home. There was nothing more he could do here... well, there was. He could at least e-mail Doc and see what help the inventor might be in finding out the results of the competition.

Somewhat apprehensively, Marty started up the computer again, but nothing strange happened. Logging into his e-mail, he started a new message:

From - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: Help

Doc, I know you said that I'm not supposed to do so, but just for once, can you please let me check the results of the 1985 Hill Valley Band Competition? Please? Half my band already wants to drop out, and I don't know how to convince them that we can still do this if we practise hard enough. They don't believe me. I don't believe me either, so I don't blame them.

I know this might cause a paradox or something if we end up getting different results from what we're supposed to, but you can solve that, right?

Thanks.

- Marty

And it was with some hesitation that Marty typed the final line:

P.S.: Do you know of the site BTTF.com? It's... strange.

He figured that that would do for the moment. Marty shut down the computer and left the garage.

Skating home, he entered his house and went to his bedroom where he lay down on his bed, all thoughts of the strange website gone for the moment. Everything had been replaced with just one: *Why me?*

This competition meant so much to him. Ever since its formation in late 1982, The Pinheads had never before entered any kind of major contest. They'd never even performed to an audience larger than fifty, and more than half of those people had just happened to be walking by when they were playing. Marty saw this competition as a way to finally get themselves some publicity, to show Hill Valley and perhaps later the world what their band could be... but with his other band members so convinced that they would lose, how ever could they achieve that?

Marty sighed, sitting up in bed and throwing an impassive glance around his room. His gaze finally settled on one of the three books some classmate had given him for his seventeenth birthday that year – *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* by Douglas Adams, the second book in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series. The other two he'd received had been the first and third in the series. Marty had already read the first one (he thought it was funny, though still stupid all the same) but hadn't touched the sequels yet. He never really had time to, and they weren't exactly his kind of books. Besides, the later half of 1985 had been a particularly stressful time for him. He had too many things to worry about to have time to read anything outside of schoolbooks and lesson notes.

Reaching over his pillow to the shelves at the head of his bed, Marty picked up the paperback and flipped aimlessly to the last few pages. "*Six by nine. Forty-two*," he read. Forty-two: The Ultimate Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything, as he had learnt from the first book. So six by nine was the Ultimate Question to the Ultimate Answer?

What the...

Marty turned back to the front page and read from the beginning, immersing himself in the crazily weird world of Arthur Philip Dent and Ford Prefect. He could well do with some cheering up.

Several chapters later, however, he learnt what Disaster Area had named themselves after – Disaster Area was the name of a band from *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Was that legal? Hadn't the name been copyrighted or something?

Just what I needed, Marty thought bitterly, chucking the book aside and slumping back down onto his bed. Why did everything have to remind him of the competition?

Disaster Area. The one he knew comprised of six members: Lewis on lead guitar, Ashley on bass, Eric on keyboard, Ivan on drums and two kids named William and Theodore who just seemed to hang around backstage and help move things around.

Disaster Area. The bane of The Pinheads. The members of the two bands had met before, once or twice; that of the D.A. were actually quite nice people if not for the fact that they had a nasty habit of always winning all the competitions Marty's band hoped to.

They'd probably win this one too, Marty thought morosely, wondering if it might not be better to just pull out of the competition and save his band the embarrassment of losing to Disaster Area yet again.

Chapter Twelve

Inside the Matrix

Two months earlier

The knocking on the door repeated itself a third time, more insistently than the last. A short moment passed as the knocker paused to listen, but no sound was heard coming from the apartment.

"Thomas?" an elderly woman's voice called out. There was no reply, so she tried again. "Thomas, are you there?"

When only silence met her ears, the landlady dug into her pocket and withdrew a set of keys. Holding them out to the dim light to make out their labels, she chose one and stuck it into the lock of Neo's apartment. The door creaked open, and Mrs. Thatch stepped into the blackness beyond.

Blinking as her failing eyes tried to get used to the dark, she fumbled for the light switch and flicked the lights on. The overhead lamp lighted up after some hesitation, for it had not been used in a while; the room's owner had a certain penchant for living only by the light of his computer.

Better able to see now, Mrs. Thatch surveyed the mess in the apartment and wondered how anyone could live in such a cluttered place. A light covering of dust over everything gave rise to the inference that the place didn't seem to have been touched in several days, but at the same time, it didn't seem to have been deliberately abandoned either. The computer still on, equipment strewn all over the tables, old food packets in the dustbin, unwashed cutlery in the sink...

The room bore an eerie resemblance to one that Mrs. Thatch had read about in the newspapers some time ago – the room's owner had spontaneously combusted, and no one knew she had died until several days later when they found her charred skeleton sitting in a remarkably unscathed chair.

"What would happen if you melted? You know, you never really hear this talked about much, but spontaneous combustion? It exists! ...People burn from within... sometimes they'll be in a wooden chair and the chair won't burn, but there'll be nothing left of the person. Except sometimes his teeth. Or the heart. No one speaks about this, but it's for real."⁵

Mrs. Thatch shuddered. She couldn't remember where she had heard or read that – in a dream, perhaps? – but it had stuck in her mind ever since.

Apart from her, however, the apartment was devoid of humans, burnt to a crisp or otherwise.

What could have made him leave so suddenly like that? Without warning, just gone – disappeared. Thomas' boss at Meta Cortechs, Mr. Rhineheart, had called her up demanding to know why he hadn't been coming to work and if she knew anything regarding his whereabouts.

She didn't.

A cockroach scuttled out from under the bed and disappeared into a dark corner.

It seemed unlikely that Thomas had run away – the state of the room implied that he had left with the intention of returning. And if he had been attacked and murdered while he was out, surely there'd be something on the news by now?

Shaking slightly at the thought of Thomas lying dead in some alley somewhere, Mrs. Thatch turned off the light and left the apartment.

And then, that night, her doorbell rang. When she answered the door, he was standing there.

Slowly, Mrs. Thatch's mouth opened. "Thomas?"

Neo gave a wan smile. "Hi. I... just thought I'd say goodbye, Mrs. Thatch. I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly..."

The old woman was still stunned at his sudden reappearance. "But... where'd you go?"

"I can't tell you that. I'm sorry."

"Why not?"

Neo hesitated. "Maybe... maybe one day you'll find out."

A moment's silence passed between the two of them, then he broke it.

"I'll just go over to my apartment now... clear up some things... Yeah. I'll come back later."

Mrs. Thatch nodded, and Neo turned to leave, reaching into his pocket for his apartment key that had been recreated in the Construct. He went down the corridor as he had done so many times before, then arrived at his door and unlocked it.

Neo stepped inside and turned on a light.

He missed this place. It was a dingy old apartment with bad lighting, but he missed it all the same. In the past he'd never really thought too highly of his home, but now that he had left it, nostalgia had transformed his old apartment into something much better than what it really was.

This was where he'd spent each night in front of his computer searching for something called the Matrix; this was where he'd lived off an unhealthy amount of instant food and pizzas; this was where he'd once accidentally locked himself in his closet, because one day he'd come back from work feeling stressed and needing a nice, dark place to coop up in – it just so happened that that aforementioned nice, dark, place had a faulty lock. (He had yelled until Mrs. Thatch had heard and come to save him.)

Neo moved over to his computer and shook the mouse to bring it out of sleep mode. The screen flickered on to reveal the results of the last search he had done. Funny how it all seemed so irrelevant now. He closed the Internet windows and shut down the computer.

⁵ Quote by Keanu Reeves; taken from the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

Around the table and shelves were all the CDs he'd accumulated over the years, several filled with illegal programmes that could land him in jail for a substantial amount of time if discovered. More stuff lay in his filing cabinet by the side and under his unmade bed.

Neo went to his bed and sat down on it. He ran his fingers over his blanket, his hand coming eventually to rest on the pillow. So many times he had woken up here to discover he was late for work... and just as many nights had he not slept here, having fallen asleep by his computer.

He got up, headed for his closet, and opened its doors. His clothes hung inside, never to be worn again. Neo pushed them aside and got into the closet, huddling into a sitting position on the closet floor.

The doors swung shut.

There was a click.

Neo swore.

Right, he thought, gritting his teeth in annoyance, all feelings of nostalgia temporarily washed away.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the doors. *There is no lock... There is no lock.... Use the Force, Neo... There is no lock...*

There was a satisfactory click, and Neo gratefully pushed the now unlocked doors open, trying to ignore the unwanted thoughts of how Yoda would be so proud of him. Neo climbed out of the closet and stood up, running a hand through his black hair. He gazed at his kitchen area – welcome sanctuary to many little homeless ants – and went to stand in the doorway of the bathroom in which he had suffered many a stomach-ache. His toothbrush and toothpaste still lay by the sink, along with various other bathroom accessories.

Neo entered and gave the toilet one last flush for old times' sake. Then he went out, shutting the bathroom door behind him. He shouldn't linger any longer, he thought, checking his watch. Time was precious.

Neo gave his apartment one last glance, bidding it a silent goodbye; then he left, never to return again. He walked back to Mrs. Thatch's room and passed her the keys.

"Aren't you taking anything with you?" she asked.

Neo shook his head. "No. I won't need them where I'm going."

"And you can't tell me where that is?"

"I can't."

Mrs. Thatch sighed. "All right, then. Take care of yourself, Thomas."

"I will."

A while later, as she watched his retreating form disappear down the corridor, she suddenly had the feeling that she had to follow him... she had to know...

As quietly as she could, Mrs. Thatch hurried after Neo. She followed him as he left the building and turned the corner to the old telephone box standing there in the dark. He entered, to Mrs. Thatch's puzzlement. Was he going to make a phonecall...

The phone started to ring.

Thomas picked it up and put it to his ear, and for one last second he looked out and saw the old landlady standing there.

Their eyes locked for a moment.

Then he vanished.

Chapter Thirteen

15th December 1985, Sunday
Hill Valley, California

Marty felt slightly better that morning. Nick had called him – from the phone outside the band room – to tell him that the school band’s concert had been postponed due to the band conductor being in hospital after an accident involving a car, a dog, and a fire hydrant, and so Nick would be coming after all. They still stood a chance, at least, and that was something, Marty thought, as he turned into the road leading to Doc’s garage.

Already things were becoming a routine for him. Go to school, leave school, drop by Doc’s garage to use the computer or do whatever else he wanted there, then either go home or go for another one of his many practices with the rest of his band. During the weekends, he just cut school out of that schedule.

His parents didn’t mind the teen’s constant visits to the garage much; Lorraine and his siblings were usually out of the house too, and George found it easier to write when there was no one else in the house to distract him. Speaking of George, Marty’s father had been acting a little... strange lately, especially towards the teen. It was almost as if he suspected something not quite normal was going on, Marty thought uneasily, then waved it aside. He couldn’t have... could he?

Marty tried to go through his memories of the new timeline and see if he could recall anything that might have happened that could have given George some clue that quite a few abnormal things were going on in Hill Valley, but those memories weren’t clear enough yet. His ones of the original timeline were already gradually fading at the same rate too, such that he was currently at that point where his past from both timelines seemed one big blur.

Marty’s parents might not have cared much about where he spent his time after school as long as he got home safely and in time for dinner, but Jennifer, on the other hand, was starting to mind a little. She knew that Marty was very concerned over the upcoming competition and didn’t mind that – it was only until the competition was over, after all – but she didn’t see why he had to spend so much time in the garage by himself. These few days, they only saw each other at school and sometimes for a little while after.

Jennifer was beginning to miss his company, but she still clung on to the hope that once the competition was over, they could continue on in their relationship and see each other as often as they did before. At least, she hoped that that was what would happen.

**

15th December 1985, Sunday
Three years before *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*
San Dimas, California

The twang of a seriously out-of-tune electric guitar string resonated around the Preston garage. As the sound died down, Bill Preston looked up from the instrument to his best friend. “What d’you think?”

Ted Logan tried to remember what the note had sounded like. “I think it’s a bit off, dude,” he concluded.

“Yeah. Me too.” Bill randomly chose a direction and turned the tuning key for the required string, then plucked it again.

The E-string was now perfectly pitched in D, and the teens grinned at each other. This sounded better. Sort of.

Aged fourteen as of December 1985, both were currently unofficial members of the Disaster Area band, but had long dreamed of starting up one of their own. There were just two main problems standing in their way. Firstly, they couldn’t play any instrument yet. Not that they hadn’t tried, and the battered condition of two of Lewis’ old guitars was evidence enough of that – the band leader had given the instruments to them as a return for their help backstage during the D.A.’s performances.

It was one of the two guitars that they were now trying to tune. Unfortunately, they didn’t have any idea what an in-tune guitar sounded like. Before this, they had always just strummed randomly on the strings and tried to make it sound good. It was only today that they had decided to actually learn how to play properly, but progress was slow.

The second reason that prevented them from starting up their own band was simply that they had yet to think up a most excellent band name.

Bill had found out that the six strings on the guitar were pitched in E, A, D, G, B and the second octave E respectively. They figured that this information would probably come in handy some time, though they didn't quite know how.

"Okay," Bill said. "The next string's supposed to be 'A'..."

Ted grabbed a sandwich off a plate on a nearby table and took a bite. Bill plucked the string. A perfectly-pitched 'A' sounded out. He frowned slightly.

"That does *not* sound good," Ted agreed.

"I agree, Ted. I have never heard our guitars sound like that before."

Bill fiddled with the tuning key, then tried again. A rather flat note came out.

Ted shrugged. "It's getting closer."

Bill twisted the key further, then plucked the string again. A very flat note came out, noticeable even to the two tone-deaf teens. They winced.

Bill sighed and put down the guitar. "Let's face it, dude. We're never going to be become a band."

Ted nodded sadly. "Yeah. We don't even have a good band name."

"We don't even have a *bad* band name either," Bill added.

They gazed miserably into space.

"What about... untrained male equines?" Ted suggested suddenly.⁶

"Shut up, Ted."

Bill got himself a sandwich and munched on it.

Ted sighed and chucked the last bit of his sandwich into his mouth.

**

15th December 1985, Sunday
Hill Valley, California

Marty entered the garage and turned on the computer as usual, then logged onto the Internet. Checking his e-mail to see if Doc had replied – he had – he found one other message sitting in his inbox. It was a mass e-mail notice that had been sent out to everyone on the Hill Valley Online website:

From - hvps@hillvalley-online.com
To - everyone@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: SAVE THE CLOCKTOWER!

As all of you should know by now, the Clocktower which overlooks the Hill Valley Courthouse Square is an invaluable piece of our cultural history.

49 years ago, however, on the night of November 12, 1955, this masterpiece of a building that had kept perfect time until then was struck by a bolt of lightning at precisely 10:04 p.m., during one of the greatest lightning storms ever to occur in our town.

As a result, the clock stopped, and the building is now in grave danger of being pulled down. We at the Hill Valley Preservation Society hope to raise enough money to help persuade the government to leave the Clocktower alone, thus preserving an important piece of our history.

YOU can play a part too! Donate today and save the Clocktower!

Thank you.

⁶ Name by my brother.

- President of the Hill Valley Preservation Society 2004

They never give up, do they? Marty wondered with a faint smile, before deleting it and going on to his other new message.

From - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: RE: Help

Marty, I'm glad you asked me before going to check out the results yourself. I would very much like to help you but unfortunately I can't, and you know that. No one should know too much about his or her own future, no matter what the reason. And there's no point in creating unnecessary paradoxes. Not all of them can be prevented easily, and some not at all.

I fear you know the possible consequences all too well. I hope you believe me when I say that I'm sorry. Just continue to practise hard and you might still stand a chance of winning. If not, you can always learn from it and try harder the next time. Good luck.

No, I haven't heard of the website before. I'll go and look at it when I have the time.

- Doc

Doc's reply was disappointing, at most, but Marty knew that it was highly doubtful that he would have replied in any other way. And he supposed that most of what his friend said was true, too. It wasn't worth risking the existence of life-as-they-knew-it over some minor band competition.

Had this all been happening more than a month ago, Marty would have probably just proceeded to look up the results anyway. But times had changed – literally or otherwise – and he knew better than to do so. Besides, he didn't ever want to run the risk of stumbling again upon that particular website known as BTTF.com.

From – futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: nil

Hi Doc,

I guess it doesn't matter anymore. It probably won't help much by knowing anyway. If we're doomed, we're doomed.

Sorry for bothering you.

- Marty

Marty shut down the computer, then left for J.J.'s house to practise for the competition. It had become the band's most common meeting place, considering that the amplifier at Doc's garage was not exactly in very good shape at the moment.

Nick was the last to arrive at J.J.'s house, due to having been held up by the school band's practice. He passed his guitar over to Steve with explicit instructions to treat it carefully even though it was already falling apart, and then they spent the rest of the day in J.J.'s basement practising away, breaking only for lunchtime.

"Maybe we can distribute earmuffs during the performance," Steve suggested when they had returned from lunch and were getting ready to play again. "You know, so we won't sound so loud."

"Yeah, and they can be fluffy and pink," J.J. said. "Come on, the judges won't fall for that. But fifty decibels..." The teen buried his head in his hands. "Marty, what's our current volume?"

Marty looked at the small instrument Doc had invented for them the previous year. It had recorded the volume of their previous run through. "Uh, 70 dB," he replied sheepishly. And that's our softest, I think. We're usually way over a hundred."

"See? What'd I tell you? We're doomed."

Nick shrugged. "Maybe they typed the rules wrongly and it was 150 dB instead of 50."

Marty sighed. "Nope. I checked with the music department. It's 50. Apparently they wanted to 'try something new'. Let's just try to drop down to 60 today, okay? 70's already an improvement. J.J., softer on the drums."

The band took up their instruments and went back to their practice. It was past five in the evening when Marty finally left for home, and the skies were already darkening.

Passing by Doc's garage, it was then that he saw it.

A ripple in the air, ever so slight... though it was not so much one as a sudden rippling burst of coloured light in the dark that disappeared as quickly and unexpectedly as it had come. It had been by the side of the building where the computer was located.

Marty didn't know what to think of it, and in fact was not even sure if he hadn't just imagined it. Shaking his head, he continued on home.

Chapter Fourteen

16th December 1985, Monday
Hill Valley, California

Marty had already got it down to an art. Flip up his skateboard, reach under the doormat, pull out the garage key, unlock the door and go in: all under five seconds. He shut the door, then went over to turn on the computer and go online. A new e-mail awaited him:

From - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: Are you free?

Marty,

Clara and I will be going out to dinner tomorrow night, and we were wondering if you would like to come over and look after the boys while we are away. I dare not run the risk of letting anyone else do so, what with the two time machines in the house, but if you can't make it, we'll try to come up with alternatives.

Reply soon.

- Doc

Marty read the e-mail with mixed emotions. He'd been longing to see his friend again, even if it was just for a while, and the last time he'd seen Jules and Verne seemed so long ago – though it would have been longer for them than for him, he realised. On the other hand, almost every single time he stepped into a time machine, bad things happened. Like last month, when Doc took him on what was supposed to be a simple trip to the future to save his son from a car accident and both of them ended up temporarily stranded in some alternate universe.⁷

In fact, had there ever been a time when he had managed to accomplish what he intended to do by getting into one of Doc's time machines? Marty mentally checked off his previous time travel trips in his head.

The first time, he had got into the DeLorean with the intention of using it as a normal car to drive away from the Libyan terrorists. Instead, he had accidentally knocked the time circuits on and got sent back in time to 1955, whereupon he managed to effectively erase himself from existence in the space of just a few hours. He had succeeded in rectifying the problem in the end, but it had taken him a whole week.

The second trip was when he was trying to get back to the future from 1955 – fine, so that one turned out okay. Third time: Doc popped up the morning after he'd got back, and chucked him into 2015 to save his ever errant future kids (he has to get them out of jail, he has to save them from car accidents,

⁷ From my as-yet-incomplete *Back to the Future* fan fiction novella, 'When Worlds Collide and Go Kaboom', which at this rate will probably never get completed; if it does, I'll probably change the title because it currently sounds, with a very good reason, like something a thirteen-year-old came up with.

etc etc etc). They managed that, but of all things, Biff had to see them and take the DeLorean back to make himself rich and mutilate the timeline. But they didn't know, of course, so they'd got into the returned time machine and attempted to return home. Didn't work. They'd managed to get to 1985, fine, but in some nightmarish alternate timeline. Went back to 1955 again to stop Biff, succeeded, so that was two successes against three failures.

Next, they'd tried to get back home again, but the DeLorean with Doc in it got struck by lightning, and was zapped back into the Old West. Two against four. Marty went after him but in the end, Doc never followed him back; so much for his rescue mission. Two against five. And that most recent episode last month, which alone probably had examples of at least ten incidents in which they never ended up where they intended to be.

Marty grimaced. Times like this, he felt as though his life were some Steven Spielberg movie.

Maybe it is, he thought with a sudden chill of realisation, remembering BTTF.com. But there was no way he was going back to that site just to check if Mr. Spielberg had had any part in the movie. Things were creepy enough as it were...

Marty read through the e-mail again. He needed a break, that much was sure, what with the upcoming competition and the usual stresses of life; and what better way to get away from it all than a night spent babysitting Doc's children?

Doubts about the safety of the short time trip he would have to make to Doc's house rose again in his mind, but Marty pushed them back down. He was just going there for a few hours and then getting back home. It wasn't as if Doc was asking him to go save the universe again... it'd just be a nice, quiet, uneventful night with the Brown kids...

From - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: RE: Are you free?

Sure, I'll come. When are you picking me up? I'll be waiting outside the garage.

Just to check: the machines are safe, right? You haven't been adding on any new gadgets or anything?

- Marty

Doc must have been online waiting for a reply, because his own came quickly.

From - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: Are you free?

Yes, they're perfectly safe. I'll come get you with the DeLorean at 6pm tomorrow your time.

- Doc

Marty smiled at the thought of being able to see his friend again so soon, but then his smile faded a little as he remembered the ripple thing he'd seen two days before. Things weren't normal, that much he had an idea of. What exactly was going on, or if anything outside the normal time travel stuff was going on in the first place, he didn't know. Perhaps the ripple was a side effect of the Internet travelling from 2004 to 1985 whenever he switched on the computer. Maybe. Maybe not.

The website BTTF.com kept nagging at him. It scared him, but at the same time invoked in him a curiosity to find out just what it was all about. His first visit hadn't revealed much... but he didn't dare return, didn't dare to...

Did that mean that other people were right, and he was chicken after all?

Nobody called him chicken. Nobody.

Trying to push his growing fear aside, Marty firmly typed the site address into the address bar and hit the 'enter' key. The page opened to a black background with the words 'www.btff.com' scrolling across it in bright letters. Marty moved the cursor over to 'skip intro' and clicked.

The main page loaded. With it came the words, the pictures, several way too familiar for Marty's liking. They knew. They knew everything... His eyes moved unsteadily over the page. His name was there. The names of his family were there. And others, people he didn't know...

There were certain things he was never meant to see. This website from goodness-knows-where fell under that category. But Marty held on, somehow, his heart beating faster and faster by the moment until he thought his chest would burst.

Two small voices were yelling in his head.

Get out. Get out.

It's nothing. It's fine. It's just another website... just another...

Get out. Get out!

Marty's cursor hovered over the link that said 'Cast and Crew', and a list of names appeared. He recognised none of them, and moved the cursor to click on the first one.

Get out!

The page loaded. Marty glanced at the picture and read a few lines, cold sweat dripping from his already wet forehead.

Get out. GET OUT!

It's nothing... just a normal website...

GET OUT!

Who on earth is Michael-

GET OUT!

WHAT THE...

He got out.

Marty closed the window with one panicked click and just stared at the empty screen hyperventilating away, heart hammering so loudly he was sure the whole town could hear it. He hadn't realised his left hand had been gripping the table, and released it, letting it slip limply off the table onto his lap.

Marty shut his eyes and took a shaky breath, trying to shut out from his mind all that he had seen. He was never going back there again. Never...

Calm down, McFly, just calm down...

Never going back...

Just a website...

Never...

Never.

Marty just sat there in silence for about five minutes with his eyes closed, drawing comfort from the stillness of the garage and the faint sounds of everyday life going on outside it. His breathing slowed to almost normal, and after a while he opened his eyes again.

Fine. Everything was fine. No strange ripples, nothing.

But it didn't make a difference; he was leaving this place and going home, where he could at least pretend that everything was still normal and nothing had changed since the day Doc had installed the computer in the garage for his use.

Yeah, Marty thought. I should go home.

**

That evening after dinner, Marty sat on his bed plucking aimlessly at his guitar strings and thinking once more about the competition. His band still had to drop their volume by quite a bit if they didn't want to be disqualified...

The random notes he was playing slowly formed into the opening of 'Johnny B. Goode'. He hadn't played that song for a while – the last time had been in 1955 at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance.

Turning up the volume of his small amplifier a little without thinking of the consequences, Marty got off his bed, replayed the opening notes, then launched energetically into the song without singing as he tried to make the music drown out everything else that had been worrying him so far.

Marty didn't notice when his bedroom door opened a crack.

He didn't notice when his father peeped in, a very strange expression on his face.

And he couldn't have noticed how George McFly rushed back to his room, yanked out his 1955 Yearbook, and studied several photographs more closely than he had ever done before.

Marty just played on.

Chapter Fifteen

Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

Until this day, Neo had never really bothered to find out what was in all those little boxes on the shelf in his room. Most looked rusty and grimy, much like the rest of the ship, and he'd never given much thought to them, simply pushing them aside whenever he needed the space for his few belongings.

But he decided that now was as good a time as any to find out what those boxes contained. Going over to the rusting metal shelf, he reached out and took down some of the boxes, then carried them over to his bed.

Neo sat down, placed the boxes on the floor, and picked up the topmost one. A layer of grime coated its once-white plastic surface, and he tried not to touch it any more than was necessary. Lifting its metal latch, Neo opened the box.

The first thing he noticed was the horrible stench that wafted out.

Then he saw the small skeleton inside, still with bits of rotting flesh hanging off the bones. Neo gave a small yell and dropped it in shock. The box met the floor with a dull clang, and a small piece of paper fluttered out. It was covered in miniscule writing, with a stain on its side which looked uncannily like blood.

Not yet recovered from the sudden unexpected sight of the skeleton, Neo just stared at the note. Then he realised that staring at it was not going to get him anywhere useful anytime soon, and his curiosity about what was written there finally overcame his unwillingness to have any more to do with that box or its contents. Reluctantly, Neo picked up the note, holding it gingerly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand as he read the words scrawled on it:

Trevor, you were the best pet rat I could have ever wished for. I'm sorry for feeding you the leftovers of my meals, but I didn't know that they would end up poisoning you. I guess that says something about the quality of the food here, though. If a rat can't take it, there's no knowing what it might do to a person in the long run.

I'll miss you, Trevor.

Rest in peace.

- Lyman

What kind of idiot calls his rat 'Trevor'? Neo wondered, gazing at the note. He turned back to the box with the rat's halfway-decomposed carcass in it, used his shoe to nudge it closer, and dropped the note back in. Kicking the box shut, Neo placed it in a far corner of the shelf before going over to the small sink by the cabin's door to give his hands a good wash.

He then regarded the remaining pile of boxes with considerably less enthusiasm than before, not that he had had much to begin with. The second box looked the same as the first from the outside – as did the other two beneath it – and Neo opened it with some trepidation, holding it as far away from himself as his hands would reach.

The box's interior was green and fuzzy in a Yoda sort of way. It also stank, but it was a different kind of stink from the first box. While the latter had been the stench of death, this was the stench of life: the stench of undesirable little organisms growing in areas they ought not to.

Neo decided that it was no business of his if his room's previous inhabitant had decided to try his hand at gardening, but then he saw the note in the box, taped to the inside of the cover and filled with the same tiny handwriting.

DAY ONE: Dumped the remains of my dinner in here. I was going to throw it down the toilet, but I thought that I might as well keep it and see what happens after a few days.

DAY TWO: Still looks the same.

DAY THREE: It's kind of starting to stink a little now.

DAY FOUR: It's turning yellowish brown, and several green spots have appeared here and there. And we eat this stuff. I'm going to show it to Morpheus if it gets any worse.

DAY FIVE: Bigger green spots. I showed it to Morpheus. He said that all food goes bad if you leave it in a box for several days. Git.

DAY SIX: I thought I saw something move, but maybe it was just my imagination.

Neo looked at the green fuzz that covered most of the inside of the box, and decided that any further reading of Lyman's experimental report would only serve to put him off dinner. He shut the box with a grimace and placed it on top of Trevor's remains.

Two more boxes remained on the floor from the few he'd taken off the shelf. Might as well get it over with...

The third box also had a strange smell, but one that had a familiar quality to it. The inside was smoothly coated with some reddish-brown substance, and Neo reached out a finger to touch it. It felt plastic-y. He prodded it, and it depressed under his touch.

Then the words on the note taped inside caught his eye:

'Trevor, you have not died in vain. Your blood will remain here forever to remind me of you. -Lyman'

Neo hurriedly pulled his finger away and slammed the box shut. *Rat blood.* He supposed it could be worse, though... but whoever this Lyman fellow was, he sure had some serious issues, Neo thought, as he washed his finger in the sink, realising that if he kept on like this, sooner or later someone was going to complain about him using up the water supplies on the *Neb*.

One last box lay on the floor now. Neo had more than half a mind to put it back on the shelf without opening it, but his curiosity wouldn't let him.

Why not? he asked it.

Because, his curiosity replied. *OPEN IT. OPEN IT NOW.*

Neo wasn't one to argue with the voices in his head. Besides, he had gone through three boxes already... what was one more? Hesitantly, Neo picked up the box and opened it, expecting some other weird odour or other to emanate from its depths.

But all he found was something roughly rectangular-shaped wrapped in paper. And the box smelt completely fine.

Neo lifted out the object and unwrapped it. To his surprise, beneath the paper was an unexpectedly clean and sleek-looking matte black case inside. It seemed so out of place here, more like something that belonged inside the Matrix, not out of it...

Curious now, he pressed the silver button at the side and there was a soft click as the catch came undone.

Neo opened the case, and he stared.

Inside it lay the coolest pair of sunglasses he had ever laid his eyes upon.

It sat there, on top of what looked like a really cool piece of cloth, surrounded by the soft velvet interior of the case. It looked somewhat like the kind of sunglasses he and the others wore when jacked into the Matrix, but with two main differences: Firstly, it looked much, much cooler. And secondly... it was real.

Neo hadn't the faintest idea how the sunglasses had got onto the ship. It took a good minute of gazing in awe at the really cool sunglasses before he thought of looking for a note, and he found one at the bottom of the box.

Hí, whoever you are.

Last week when me and some others were on the surface, I found the remains of a sunglasses shop. Most of it had fallen in, but in the stockroom at the back were several boxes filled with cases of perfectly intact expensive sunglasses. So I took this one. I didn't tell anybody because they might think it was stealing, but then I realised that maybe I shouldn't have taken it after all, because what's the point of owning a really cool pair of sunglasses if you can't show it off to everybody? So I'm just leaving it in this box to look at now and then.

If you're reading this, it probably means that I'm dead or something. So I guess the sunglasses are yours now, then, whoever you are.

I feel stupid. I bet no one's going to read this and I feel like I'm just talking to myself.

- Lyman

P.S. If you're Morpheus, I discovered that a mixture of saliva, urine, rust, seven-day-old food and salt makes a pretty good hair tonic. I tried it on myself, and it worked wonders. So if you ever decide that you don't want to be bald any more, just tell me.

P.P.S. Though maybe that won't be possible, because if you're reading this, I'm probably dead.

P.P.P.S. Then again, you could always try it on your own.

Neo had no idea how to respond to the note, so he ignored it for the moment and went back to gaping at the really cool sunglasses. Carefully, he took it out, marvelling at the smoothly cut dark lenses, running a finger down the polished black handles... and then regretting it, because it left finger marks on its glossy surface.

Neo took out the really cool sunglasses cloth from the case, wiped away the marks his finger had made, then put the cloth back into the case before gently replacing the really cool sunglasses on top of it. He stared at it for a moment longer before shutting the lid.

Neo wrapped the case up again with the paper, and hesitated. He didn't quite like the idea of putting the sunglasses back into the dirty box... Making up his mind, Neo turned around and placed the case sans

paper into the wire rack above his bed instead, next to his clothes where he could take it out to look at whenever he wanted.

Neo then picked up the box on the floor, now empty save for Lyman's note. He crushed the paper and dropped it into the box, then closed the lid and returned it to the shelf before sitting back down on his bed to think about his latest find.

Somehow, the sunglasses were a sign of hope for him. It was comforting to know that despite the seemingly dilapidated state of the world he lived in, there still remained remnants of a better life, somewhere out there. They might come in forms as minor as a pair of really cool sunglasses... but if those existed, what more was there out there, hidden beneath the ruins of the human cities? Fragments of life in the past... happier times, perhaps; souvenirs of the days when humankind was still in control.

Just a pair of sunglasses... It seemed an anachronism, here on the ship. It belonged to a different time: a time he used to know, or thought he knew. The sunglasses were the only real reminder of the life he'd known for so many years. They were something real that he could see and hold and touch and know was not just some artificial digital construction that would vanish the moment he jacked out...

Just a pair of sunglasses. A really cool pair, but just sunglasses all the same.

Neo shifted his gaze back to the shelf, where more boxes lay, unopened. He wondered what they might hold.

Maybe another time he'd go and see.

Chapter Sixteen
15^h November 1895, Friday
Hill Valley, California

Emmett Brown paid a visit to BTTF.com as Marty had told him to, surfed around a little, and decided after a while that the website was possibly the most fascinating site that he had ever seen. Furthermore, according to the readout on the computer-like device that monitored the abnormal access to the Internet, the site wasn't just coming from the future but also another reality or dimension altogether.

That was very fascinating.

Emmett was also especially intrigued by the fact that in that other world, he and Marty appeared to be part of a fictional movie along with practically everyone and everything else they knew personally.

That too was very fascinating.

The only problem was that if he could manage to access a website he shouldn't have normally been able to, it could mean only one thing – something was going wrong.

And that wasn't exactly a very fascinating thought.

Emmett would have thought it safer to just abandon the entire project before things got any worse, but he knew how much it meant to Marty... and him too, he supposed. The best thing he could do about the problem was to try and see what he could do to eliminate it without placing the entire system at risk.

**

Verne ran up to his brother that afternoon when school finished. "I changed my e-mail address," he said.

Jules glared at him, then took a quick look around to make sure no one was listening. "Don't talk about that here!" he hissed furiously under his breath. "You know what Dad says about this!"

Verne scowled and rolled his eyes, angry at being corrected. "It's not like anyone here would know what e-mail is."

"Precisely, you dolt! What if they wonder what we're talking about? What if they suspect we're doing something we're not supposed to?"

The younger boy gave a theatrical sigh. "Come on, Jules, it's just e-mail. I wasn't even talking about time travel or anything..."

"*Shut up!*" Jules interrupted, before he could say anything more. "Do you talk about all this in class too? If anyone ever learns anything about our family they're not supposed to, it'll be your fault!"

"Whatever," Verne muttered under his breath. The two boys walked the rest of the way home in silence, with Verne occasionally kicking at the ground in annoyance. The number of passers-by dwindled as they got further from the town centre, and he decided it was okay to talk. "I changed my e-mail address to `jules_is_a_stupid_idiot@hillvalley-online.com`, in case you want to know. It's longer than yours and it's nicer too."

Jules remained unfazed and shook his head slowly. "Verne, you cytoplasmic organelle. Thanks for the compliment. A double negative equals a positive, don't you know that?" He appeared to think for a moment. "No, wait, you probably don't. Anyway, I'll have to return that favour one day." Jules smirked at his brother, and made Verne very much want to hit him.

"You still haven't returned my Game Boy," he said instead.

"You still haven't paid me two million dollars," Jules replied matter-of-factly. "I told you I'd give your Game Boy back when I get your money. The deal still stands. No money, no Game Boy."

"I saw the book," Verne said desperately, in a last attempt to sway his brother.

It seemed to work, and Jules stopped in his tracks, turning slowly to face the younger boy. "What book?" His voice was cautious.

Verne stopped walking too. "The one you took from the future. The one 'bout the history of Hill Valley from 1850 to 2000. I saw it in your room, so don't think you can pretend you don't know about it."

Jules stared at him in indignation. "Who gave you permission to look through my things?"

"So you *did* take the book," Verne stated triumphantly. "Wait till I tell Dad... you're in for it now. You know what's he's like about stuff from the future."

"For your information, Verne, I didn't *take* it. It was in a dustbin, which meant that it was going to be thrown away, in case you don't know. And I think I deserve the right to know what's going to happen to this town, to this planet. Dad never tells us anything." Jules scowled. "I'm old enough," he added with an almost childish whine.

"You know he doesn't tell us 'cause he's scared that we might accidentally let someone else learn things they're not supposed to. Like if they're supposed to die in war or something but because of something we tell them they do things different and don't die."

"You mean he's scared that *you* will leak out something. You couldn't even keep your big mouth shut about e-mail just now. People could have *heard*." Jules kicked the ground in frustration, sending up dust clouds of sand around his feet. "It's all your fault," he muttered.

"Don't change the subject. I'm still telling about the book. You're not supposed to read things like that."

"Look, I'll let you read it too, okay?"

Verne shook his head. "I bet it's all long and boring. I don't want to read it."

Jules' heart sank. If Verne told their father about the book, he didn't know if he would be able to bear the shame. His father had trusted him, especially, the older of the two, to follow all his strict rules whenever the family took one of their little trips through time... But he'd really wanted that book; he hadn't been able to resist it when he saw it lying there abandoned in the trashcan, and besides he'd told himself to read no further than 1985, for if his family had only moved back to the future a few years ago instead of staying put in the nineteenth century, all that would have been common knowledge to him...

Verne was looking at him in an expectant sort of way.

"I'll return your Game Boy," Jules finally said with reluctance.

Verne grinned. "That's more like it. Okay, I won't tell."

Jules hesitated. "They're out of batteries, though. I played it a while that day, and it ran out, so you'll just have to change them later."

He continued walking on, but the grin had vanished from Verne's face as the boy ran to catch up with him. "You used up the batteries?"

Jules nodded. "Sorry. But you've got more, right?"

Verne stared at him in disbelief.

Jules looked at him. "Right?"

The blonde boy shook his head slowly. "Those were the last two. I was saving them. I WAS SAVING THEM, JULES!" he suddenly yelled. "They were supposed to last me till my birthday!"

"I'm sorry, I..."

"I was only going to play it for five minutes a week, but now you've used them all up, and they're not even yours!"

"Listen..."

"Dad said I could only get new batteries on my birthday, so I was saving them up, and you used them, and..."

"VERNE!" Jules grabbed his brother violently by his shoulders. "I'll get you new ones, okay? I'll get you new ones, so just shut up!"

Verne scowled. "You can't get new ones. They're only available in the future."

Jules released his grip, suddenly regretting his wild promise. "Yes, I know. I'll get you some when we go there next. On my own money."

"I can't wait so long. I want them now. I could be playing my Game Boy now, but I can't and it's all your fault... I'm telling Dad about the book."

"*What do you want, Verne?*" Jules asked through gritted teeth. "I *told* you, I'm sorry, I really didn't know those were the last batteries, and there's nothing I can do about it, okay?"

Verne's eyes lit up. "You could take one of the time machines. Mum and Dad are going out for dinner tonight, and Marty's supposed to be looking after us, remember? We could go then, and get the batteries, and I won't mention the book again. You said you knew how to operate the machines, so prove it."

"I don't think..."

"What's the matter, Jules? *Chicken?*"

A reluctant grin appeared on the older boy's face, then vanished as abruptly as it had come. "Sorry, that only works on Marty."

"It's only going to be a short trip, Jules! How long can it take to get batteries...?"

That was true, Jules supposed, but it wasn't so much the trip that worried him as what his parents would do to them if they found out. And yet, it would be a lie to say that he had never before considered the possibility of taking one of the time machines on a joyride through time without his parents' knowledge... tonight would be the perfect opportunity... Furthermore, if he were to do this, the incident might serve as very useful leverage in future whenever he needed Verne to do something he wanted.

"We'll see," Jules said, and closed the topic for the moment. They had arrived home, and the nine-year-old left for his room to study for school, but he couldn't concentrate.

15th November 1895, Friday
Hill Valley, California

Unlike what Marty had feared, the trip was a short and uneventful one. Doc had come to get him in the DeLorean, and the rest of the Brown family were waiting to welcome him as the car landed. Jules and Verne hadn't changed much since the last time he'd seen them – they were about three years older now, but other than that they looked mostly the same from what he remembered.

The two boys were instructed to show him around, so Marty followed them as Emmett and Clara left for their dinner.

He liked the house. It had a nice, cosy feel to it, and was way less cluttered than Doc's garage used to be. Marty suspected that Clara had had a big part in that.

Verne was having fun being a tour guide, whereas Jules just walked silently behind, as if preoccupied with something.

"...and that's Dad's lab, you can't go in there... and this is the secret room," Verne concluded with a grin.

They were standing in front of a bookcase, with the door to the laboratory on their far left. Verne pushed aside the books, reached in and yanked a lever, and then pushed the books back as the bookcase slid smoothly aside to reveal a door behind. Verne opened it, and the three entered the L-shaped room as the place filled with a warm glow upon sensing their presence.

"This is where we keep all the stuff we don't want people to see," Verne explained. "And all the walls are soundproofed, too, so people can't hear us when we're watching TV."

Marty gave a low whistle as he surveyed the room. To his left was a wooden table with a computer, scanner and printer on it; above were shelves filled with computer games, diskettes, CDs, and other computer equipment; wires left the monitor and went under the door next to it, which Marty supposed led to Doc's lab. A large television set was located opposite and to the right of them, at the end of the longer arm of the 'L'. In front of it were two video game controllers and a sofa set. The shelf on its right was stacked with movies: videotapes, VCDs, LDs, DVDs – Marty didn't recognise most of the formats – as well as several videogames for the PlayStation 4 attached to the television.

"So... ah, what do you want to do tonight?" Marty asked, walking over to marvel at the state-of-the-art hi-fi set next to the movie shelf. He thought he saw the two boys exchange a significant look out of the corner of his eye, but it might have just been his imagination. He also thought he heard Jules mutter, "Something loud," but that might have just been his imagination too.

"We could watch a movie," Verne suggested, going over to the shelf as Marty followed him. The teen hadn't heard of more than half the titles there, and he stared blankly, looking for something familiar... and his eyes fell on a set of six DVDs.

The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones, Revenge of the Sith, A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi...

"Hey... there are six *Star Wars* movies?" he asked in surprise. "I thought George Lucas stopped at three. I didn't know there were going to be sequels." Marty grinned. "Wait till my father finds out about this... he loves the trilogy."

"They're prequels, actually," Verne replied. "Not sequels."

"Oh. Are they good?"

"Yeah, though some people don't think so 'cause they say the prequels ruined *Star Wars*. But I like 'em. Actually, I think they're more good movies than good *Star Wars* movies... d'you wanna watch one?"

"Sure, I don't mind," Marty started, but then he caught sight of another movie – a videotape labelled with Verne's childish scrawl.

The Matrix. Next to it were two VCDs labelled *The Matrix: Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions* respectively.

Marty stared. There was something about the trilogy that seemed strange... for some reason, he had the feeling that he should watch it, as though it would be important...

"Wait... what's *The Matrix*?" Marty asked, pointing.

Verne grinned. "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is," he quoted. "You have to see it for yourself. Wanna watch it? I taped it off the TV. It was on one of those weird extra channels... I got the sequels from the Internet yesterday and watched both in one go. Don't tell Dad I've seen 'em though. I think the sequels were rated R or something. There were naked people." Verne grinned again.

Marty needed answers. He hadn't thought that coming to 1895 to baby-sit Doc's sons could have given him any of those answers, but he guessed that it was as good a place to start as any.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I want to watch it."

"*What is real?*" Morpheus asked onscreen a while later.

That's a good question, Marty found himself feverishly thinking. *That's a very good question*.

Jules and Verne slipped out about halfway through the show to feed the toilet or use Einie or something; Marty hadn't quite caught it, too engrossed in the film. About a minute later, Neo and Trinity were using a whole lot of guns to shoot up a whole lot of security guards on the screen. The sound was deafening.

When Marty heard what sounded a bit like three loud gunshots that seemingly came from outside, he marvelled at the excellent quality of Doc's speaker system and dreamt of owning one that good in future.

**

They had taken the DeLorean. The reason was a simple logistics one: the last time departed for the DeLorean was in 1985, while that of the train was 1841 – not exactly a good place to get batteries. Neither Jules nor Verne wished to make two trips to ensure that the last time departed remained at the same date and didn't arouse their parents suspicions, so they decided to set the destination time one hour earlier than that currently displayed on the DeLorean's time circuits, which would take them to around five in the afternoon on a day in December 1985. That should give them plenty of time to get batteries, and perhaps even hang around a while.

It therefore came to pass that while Marty was watching *The Matrix* in their house, the two boys he was supposed to be looking after were hovering several metres above their home in a time travelling DeLorean bound for the year 1985.

What Jules had told Verne had been true: he *could* fly the DeLorean, only not so well. He had been watching his father closely each time he flew the vehicle, and knew fairly enough... just not enough to give them a smooth ride.

Verne yelped as the car bucked violently to the right.

"Sorry," Jules said with a grimace of concentration, yanking the controls left, whereupon Verne grabbed hold of the door handle to prevent himself from landing on his brother. He was beginning to feel the first signs of major motion sickness, and was more than grateful when Jules finally got the car flying relatively straight and the familiar burst of electricity surrounded the car as they hit eighty-eight.

Arriving in the future, Jules inexpertly set the time vehicle down with a bump in the most abandoned-looking alley they could see in the area. The two boys got out shakily to their feet, Verne looking as though he were going to throw up at any moment.

"I don't think we should just leave the DeLorean here," Jules said, looking at the car.

"The store's just across the road. You could stay here while I go get the batteries. I won't take long."

"Okay." Jules took out some late 20th century money from his pocket and passed it to his brother. "Hurry up," he said, leaning against the car to wait.

He didn't have to wait long before Verne came rushing back, breathless. "The store's closed! The owners are on vacation!"

"What? You mean we came all this way for nothing?"

Verne gave him an apologetic look. "Yeah. Sorry. I didn't know it would be closed."

Jules sighed. "So what now?"

"We could just go to next month or something when the store is open, then come back here so the last time departed stays the same when we get home."

The elder boy mentally added up the times he would have to go through time. "That's four trips." He shook his head and got into the car. "You owe me big for this. Get in."

Narrowly avoiding the alley wall, the DeLorean shot up like a bullet into the sky as Jules pushed the lever a bit too hard. Feeling nauseated, Verne gripped tightly onto his seat. Who needed a roller coaster when you had a brother who couldn't fly a car properly?

"Sorry," Jules panted, adjusting the hover controls to bring them lower down. Verne muttered something about how they had nearly burst through the stratosphere, but his brother ignored him and floored the accelerator.

Verne watched the speedometer for fear that he might throw up if he were to look out the window instead.

67, 69, 72, 76, 81, 87, 88...

There was a loud crackle of electricity as the DeLorean broke through the time barrier... and then, time seemed to stop.

Verne was suddenly aware of the silence, an utter, complete silence that you could almost hear. The bright blue electricity still enveloped the vehicle, but it made absolutely no sound as it jumped about the windscreen, completely obscuring the view of the two boys.

"Jules..." Verne began in a small voice, but he didn't know what to say.

His brother was gripping onto the wheel as though his life depended on it, his breaths coming in short, fast bursts as the DeLorean hung frozen in space and time. Jules stepped several times on the accelerator to no effect at all. Panic started appearing in his blue eyes as he swung the steering wheel in all directions to no avail, and he checked the time circuits – they hadn't changed – and checked the flux capacitor, still fluxing merrily away as if nothing had happened.

"Jules..." Verne began again. "What happened?"

No reply came.

"Jules... I'm scared."

Jules swallowed. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, and he wiped them away with his sleeve. Getting into a half-sitting, half-standing position, he peered intently at the windscreen until the brightness of the electricity hurt his eyes and he had to close them.

It's all my fault, he thought, sitting back down on his seat. I shouldn't have let Verne talk me into this... why couldn't he just wait for his stupid batteries...

"Jules..."

Jules hadn't the heart to shut his brother up. Where were they? When were they? Where they even anywhere or anywhen at all? Maybe they were just trapped, trapped forever in the midst of the space-time continuum, where there would be no escape...

The first feelings of claustrophobia started creeping up on Jules. He glanced wildly at the car's gull-wing door on his side, and wondered what would happen if he were to open it... would the car suddenly explode? Or would there just be a big black void out there that stretched out to infinity?

He'd have to find out sooner or later, Jules knew, but he didn't dare to, at least not yet.

Before he had time to think any further on the subject, there was a violent jerk, as though they had been pushed, and the next thing they knew the DeLorean suddenly broke free of whatever had been holding it back. Coloured pinpoints of light rushed past the car, and before they knew it they found themselves hurtling out of a rainy night sky at eighty-eight miles per hour onto the ground below.

A bolt of lightning flashed dangerously close to them as Jules snapped out of his fears and struggled to maintain control of the vehicle. Somehow or other, they landed on a street, the DeLorean's hastily put out tyres splashing into a puddle of water.

They seemed to be the only people out in the rain. The road was deserted save for the time machine, and on both sides, ominous looking four- or five-storied buildings loomed up before them. Another lightning bolt streaked across the heavens, followed shortly by a loud clap of thunder.

"Where are we?" Verne asked quietly.

Jules shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

Something was coming towards them out of the darkness. Something big, big enough that they could hear its footsteps against the sound of the rain drumming out its constant rhythm on the ground.

A sudden cry pierced the air – not a human sound, or that of anything on this planet. It had a definite alien quality to it... and Verne shrank further back into his seat, his face pale. Beside him, Jules trembled, hands still on the wheel.

The something was getting closer. And then they saw the creature, illuminated for a moment by a brief flash of lightning.

Twice as tall as an ordinary human being, its thin, scaly body led up to two clawed hands and a serpentine neck topped with a crested head. Its eyes were staring straight at them... eyes that were sharp and intelligent, not that of your average dumb monster.

"Jules..." Verne whimpered, calling his brother's name for the fourth time in five minutes. "Look..." He pointed at the time circuits. The display had changed, and the current time now read:

February 31, 1985

Jules just stared, uncomprehending, when something else on the car caught his eye and a sickening feeling filled him. The plutonium chamber read zero.

The creature was walking towards them, each careful but deliberate step echoing down the deserted street.

"Jules... let's go..."

"We can't," Jules replied hoarsely.

"What?"

It was Jules' turn now to point, and Verne's eyes followed his brother's finger to the meter which announced that the car wasn't going anywhere soon, time-or-dimensional-travel-wise, until someone got out and filled up Mr. Fusion.

The creature was looking straight at them. Jules pressed his face against the car window, hastily sweeping his gaze around for anything they could use...

There was an open trashcan, barely four metres away from them. Jules made up his mind, and turned to his younger brother.

"Verne... I'm going out there, okay? I'll fill up Mr. Fusion, then we can..."

Verne was still trembling. "What... what if that thing gets you?"

"I'll be quick," Jules replied. "It shouldn't take more than a few seconds. There's no other way..."

Verne nodded reluctantly. "kay. Hurry."

Jules closed his eyes for two seconds, mentally preparing himself for what he was going to do. He laid out his plan of action quickly in his mind and visualised himself carrying it out... go out, dash straight to the trashcan, grab as much trash as he could carry, run back, dump it into Mr. Fusion, then get back in the car and get out of there.

Jules opened the DeLorean's gull wing doors and rushed out into the rain, Verne watching him nervously.

The creature halted. Its gaze centred on the running boy... then suddenly it hurtled down the street towards him with a speed that nothing with its body should have been able to manage.

"JULES!" Verne yelled.

The older Brown child barely had time to register his brother's voice, when he felt himself swept off the ground by clawed hands. He screamed.

Seconds later, the sound of bullets ripped through the air towards the creature. It bellowed in pain, dropping the boy, and then it crashed down onto the wet road, dead. Jules landed on the trashcan, overturning it, and fell to the ground, dazed but still conscious.

Verne watched speechless through the open door as Jules' rescuer walked towards the older boy and helped him up, then led him back towards the DeLorean.

"He your brother?" the stranger asked Verne.

The seven-year-old nodded numbly.

"You got to be more careful next time." He paused. "My name's Akner Jansilan. A cross-worlder." The man smiled grimly. He looked around his late twenties, wearing plain earth-toned clothes of a sort that Verne couldn't quite pinpoint the origin of. They could have been from any time, any world... The rifle that had saved Jules was of some unidentifiable make, and it lay slung around his neck. "Thing that nearly got your brother was a Gaminoran," he said, using his head to indicate the fallen creature. "They get into the Otherlands now and then... So what brings you to the Nexus? You're foreigners, I can tell."

"The Nexus?" Jules asked.

Akner looked faintly surprised. "You've never heard of it? ...Well, I suppose that since you're not from around here... The Nexus. Gate to the Otherlands, portals to different worlds... It's all woods out there. They go on forever. No one's ever seen the end of it. People end up here when they try to enter a place outside of the space-time continuum: a date that doesn't exist, coordinates that contradict each other... By right they shouldn't play around with such things in the first place, but they never learn. So why did you come here?"

"It was an accident," Verne said. "There was some kind of malfunction... I don't know what happened."

"Our father said something about rips in the space-time continuum," Jules said. "Maybe we... slipped through one of those rips or something..."

Akner's voice suddenly grew sterner. "Rips in the space-time continuum?" he echoed. "What caused them?"

The brothers looked at each other. "We... we're not sure," Jules said. "Our father thinks that he might have had some part to do with it when he invented this thing that could allow people to communicate over different time periods, but apparently the damage was more than he could have done on his own."

Akner sighed and shook his head. "That's always the problem," he said in a somewhat weary tone. "Otherlanders messing around with things they do not understand... it'll all come to no good. Well, that explains something at least. Rips in the space-time continuum... no wonder there's been so many newcomers these past few years. It's been getting worse. Some of us thought that perhaps it was just the thirteen o' clock wind getting stronger, but it's never happened before."

"The thirteen o' clock wind?" Verne asked.

Several years ago, an inhabitant of the Nexus had entered a variant of our universe and discovered a book series known as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Inspired by it, he then went on to start a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Nexus*, to help explain things to newcomers who kept asking the same questions about the place. One of those questions usually concerned the thirteen o' clock wind, and this is what the *Guide* has to say about it:

There are some very interesting things to be said about the thirteen o' clock wind.

It is not to be confused with the one o' clock wind, which is a very normal thing indeed. Instead, this phenomenon is created when the wind from the Nexus blows in. For those who do not know, there is a wind in the Nexus, fuelled by the vast amounts of untapped energy here. Those who are cross-worlders – people whose parent's were from different dimensions – are able to partially manipulate this energy through sheer strength of mind.

When a person from a parallel universe feels the thirteen o' clock wind, it means a portal to the Nexus has opened in that world, and it is through that portal that the wind blows. By some strange force, the person will immediately be drawn to the portal and get sucked in.

The portal will immediately close and the person will find himself or herself outside the space-time continuum.

In the Nexus.⁸

"Some places get it more than others," Akner added, after his explanation of what the thirteen o' clock wind was. "The Kalibri plains, the Bermuda Triangle, the Ron Woodward High School's janitor closet... but mostly there's no known pattern to the TOC wind's behaviour. You'll be going now, I suppose?"

Jules and Verne looked at each other again.

"Yeah," Jules said. "How... how do we get out of here?"

"Just set your destination for some place that does exist in the space-time continuum, and you should be fine. I can't say for certain that it would work, but at worst, you'll just end up back here. Good luck... where're you going?"

"We need fuel," Jules replied, digging into the trashcan and emerging with an armful of junk. He dumped them on the ground near the DeLorean, then began putting pieces of it into Mr. Fusion until there was enough. Done, he got into the time machine.

Akner watched Jules set the destination time and shut the door. Then he waved goodbye and walked off as the DeLorean's hover circuits were activated, and the vehicle rose up into the air.

"Here goes nothing," Jules muttered shakily under his breath. He hit the accelerator, they broke eighty-eight, and they left the Nexus.

The same coloured lights flashed by them. A huge jolt shook through the DeLorean, and then suddenly they saw their house down below, just as they had left it.

Hands still trembling slightly, Jules parked the time vehicle back in its original position; and then he just sat there, still.

From inside the house came the faint sounds of movie gunfire through the soundproofed walls.

"Are we back?" Verne asked.

Jules nodded slowly. "We're back."

Seconds of silence passed between the two boys.

"Sorry. About the batteries," Verne said.

"It's all right. We'd better get back in before Marty suspects something is up."

"Okay."

The brothers left the DeLorean and went back into the house and into the secret room, where Marty gave them no more than a quick glance before returning his attention to the movie again.

When Emmett and Clara came back that night, the two boys were already in bed and Marty was up, reading one of Verne's comics and waiting for them.

"Did they give you any trouble?" Doc asked, shutting the door.

⁸ This entry about the thirteen o'clock wind was written by my brother.

"No. We watched a movie, then they went to bed."

"Really? That's unusual," Clara said, an amused look on her face. "They usually aren't so well behaved."

Marty shrugged. "Well, they were this time. Ah... I guess I'll be going back now, huh? Thanks for letting me come over."

Doc smiled. "Thanks for looking after the boys. I thought you could use the break."

"Yeah," the teen admitted. "I could."

What is real? Morpheus had asked, and it was this that Marty wondered about as Doc took him home in the DeLorean.

Jules and Verne were wide-awake when their father came in.

"Did you take Marty home yet?" Verne asked in a strangely anxious voice.

"Yes."

"In the train?"

"No, I used the DeLorean."

The two boys exchanged a glance. "Oh."

Their father looked at them suspiciously. "Why?"

"Nothing. I was just wonderin'."

The look on Emmett's face said that he didn't believe that, but he didn't know what else there was to believe.

"Maybe it was just a one-time accident," Jules said in a whisper when Doc had left the room.

"Yeah. Maybe."

**

17th December 1985, Tuesday

"This is the Construct," Morpheus was saying. "It's our loading program. We can load anything from clothing, to equipment, weapons, training simulations, anything we need."

Marty blinked. "Right now we're inside a computer program?"

"Is it really so hard to believe? Your clothes are gone. Your arms and head have changed. Your hair is gone. Your appearance is now what we call residual self-image. It is the mental projection of your digital self."

Marty looked at himself.

He was a chicken.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" he tried to yell, but all that came out were frantic squawks.

Morpheus smiled evilly. "We're very glad to have you with us, Marty," he continued. "The rest of my crew agree, too. We haven't had a good meal in a long time, and we genuinely appreciate your presence at dinner tonight."

Marty panicked. He was a chicken. Pathetically, he flapped his wings. The rest of the *Nebuchadnezza's* crew were suddenly surrounding him in a closing circle, all armed with large chopping knives and hungry looks on their faces.

Marty darted around in a frenzy as he dodged the knives suddenly coming down on him. He was going to die! He was going to be caught, and roasted, and chopped up to bits, and eaten...

“AAAAAAHHHH!”

Marty hit his bedroom floor with a loud thump, and the images of the Construct dissolved into the reality of his darkened room.

Hyperventilating, he looked wildly around as though Neo or Trinity might suddenly pop up with a chopping knife and have him for dinner; but nothing happened. Just another nightmare... *I should be grateful*, Marty thought. These days it wasn't often that his nightmares turned out to be real nightmares.

The teen ran a quick check over himself. He was human. Human. Marty suddenly felt stupid for actually seeing the need to make sure.

Climbing back into his bed, Marty lay down and sighed.

That was the last time he was watching *The Matrix* before bedtime.

Chapter Eighteen
18th December 1985, Wednesday
San Dimas, California

Bill and Ted sat on the steps of Bill's house and gazed out at the road as they waited for Lewis to drive them to Hill Valley for the band competition.

"Hill Valley," Bill mused. "That's a strange name, dude. How can it be a hill and a valley at the same time?"

"Maybe it changes," Ted said. "At night, when everyone's asleep."

"Dude, someone would notice if that happened."

"Yeah, so that's why they called it Hill Valley!" Ted concluded triumphantly. He grinned.

"It must be a most heinous town to live in, if the ground keeps changing," Bill said thoughtfully.

"Yeah."

They sat in silence for a while.

"I had a totally bodacious dream last night, dude," Ted said. "I was riding up a mountain on a motorcycle with the headlights off, and then I crashed into the mountain."

"No way!"

"Yes way."

"Bogus."

"Yeah. It was totally heinous."

A van pulled up and Lewis hopped out. "Are you two ready?" he shouted. "We're running late!"

Bill and Ted looked up.

"Come on!" Lewis yelled. "Move it."

Bill and Ted grabbed their bags and ran over to the van, where they piled in at the back.

Lewis got into the driver's seat. "All right," he said, rubbing his palms together. "Hill Valley, here we come. We'll be there in six hours; five hours if we go fast, four hours if we go *really* fast." He floored the accelerator, and the van speeded off.

**

"One bottle of beer on the wall, one bottle of beer... you take one down, you pass it around, no more bottles of beer on the wall."

In the driver's seat, Lewis let out a small sigh of relief, which was shared with most of the other Disaster Area members. After long last, the song was finally over.

But Bill and Ted weren't done yet. After sitting in silence for a grand total of ten seconds, Bill remembered something.

"Do you know that the British version has green bottles instead?" he asked.

Ted perked up. "Really?"

A sudden sense of great foreboding washed over Lewis.

"Yeah, and the bottles don't get passed around, they just fall off the wall."

Ted grinned. "Excellent!"

Sitting next to them, the thought '*I bet those British people hear our version and think Americans are always getting drunk*' floated aimlessly around Eric the keyboardist's head. Next to him, Ashley and Ivan were engaged in their 111th tic-tac-toe game.

"...So it's just 'a hundred green bottles, hanging on the wall'," Bill started singing. Upfront, Lewis grimaced. "A hundred green bottles, hanging on the wall, and if one green bottle were to accidentally fall, there'll be ninety-nine green bottles, hanging on the wall."

Ted joined in at the next verse, and the duo's not-completely-in-tune voices filled the van once again. Eric groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"Are we there yet?" Ivan called out.

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"I don't see any hills," Ted observed some time after the van turned into Hill Valley. "Or valleys," he added, and then sighed. "Bill, I think that we have been most egregiously deceived."

Upfront, Lewis shook his head. He pulled into the driveway of the rented house, then yelled at the others to get out and unload. He hopped out of the van, dropped the keys, swore, picked them up, dropped them again, swore again, and picked them up again. Having spent several hours cooped up in the driver's seat of the van listening to badly-sung songs about bottles had had adverse effects on his temper and motor skills.

The two culprits in question now gazed thoughtfully at the house before them.

"It looks inhabitable," Bill decided.

"Yeah," Ted agreed, and then Ivan shoved a snare drum at him and told him to get moving.

Not long after, Bill and Ted found themselves shut out of the garage, wherein Disaster Area had just started their first practice in Hill Valley.

"What do they expect us to do out here?" Bill asked.

Ted shrugged and nudged a rock about with his shoe. Then an idea struck him, and his face lit up.

"A hundred green bottles, hanging on the wall," he started. "A hundred green bottles, hanging on the—"

The garage back door flew open and an irate Lewis stuck his head out. "Haven't you two had enough of that song?" he yelled. "Shut up, okay? Go far away, and shut up, and stop being an insult to music!"

The door slammed shut.

Ted blinked. "But I wasn't insulting—"

Bill pulled at his friend's sleeve. "Let's get out of here, dude. I don't think we're wanted."

They wandered around the house, then went down the driveway and wandered around the street. Eventually, their wanders took them to the Hill Valley town square, where they looked up in appreciation at the clock tower above the court house.

"That is one outstanding clock," Bill said.

"Yeah," Ted said. "I wonder why it's not moving."

His question was answered a second later when a middle-aged woman eagerly shoved a donation can into their faces and nearly took Ted's eye out.

"Save the Clocktower!" she exclaimed with a little too much enthusiasm, rattling the can with vigour and possibly murderous intent. "Thirty years ago, lightning struck that clock tower, and it hasn't run since!" she recited for the umpteenth time, excited at finally getting to see two newcomers who didn't avoid her like everyone else did. "We at the Hill Valley Preservation Society..."

"How would giving money help to save that clock, dude?" Ted asked Bill in a whisper. "It's been wrecked for thirty years."

"Perhaps they intend to purchase a new one," Bill said, somewhat doubtfully.

"But that won't be saving it," Ted replied. "If they were going to get a new one, she would have said, 'Replace the Clocktower'."

"Good observation, Ted."

They looked thoughtfully at the donation can.

The clock tower woman was not used to this. Most of the time, people just threw in a coin or two into the donation can to get her to leave.

"Oh, forget it," she muttered, and left to terrorise some other poor unsuspecting individuals.

The two teens stared after her, confused. They soon gave up trying to figure her out, and settled for trudging despondently around the Hill Valley pond and musing about their lack of future as was represented by their inability to play guitar.

**

19th December 1985, Thursday
Hill Valley, California

"Okay," Marty said, the tension evident in his voice as he paced around the other three members of his band. "This is it. We've practised hard, so let's just try not to lose too badly today."

"What happened to 'If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything'?" J.J. asked. "Oh, and the earmuff thing didn't work. I tried distributing some to the judges just now but they didn't fall for it."

Steve snorted. "That's because they were fluffy and pink."

"Yeah, well, that's all the store had," J.J. retorted. "All the other colours had been sold out. And sit down, Marty. You're making me dizzy."

Marty continued feeling stressed and walking in circles around them when two young teenagers entered into the area, eyes searching the floor for something. J.J. nudged Nick. "The Disaster Area lackeys are here," he muttered.

Marty looked up at the newcomers. "Yeah? What d'you want?"

"Ivan said he dropped one of his drumsticks back here somewhere, and that he'd most appreciate it if we went to look for it," Bill said.

Ted squatted down and picked up the wooden stick lying on the floor. "It's here, dude," he called out to his friend.

"Oh." Bill smiled at Marty, then left with Ted.

Marty stared after them. There was something strangely familiar about Ted Logan, and not just because they had met before...

"Marty!" Nick yelled.

The seventeen-year-old blinked. "Huh?"

The newly-arrived stage crewmember rolled his eyes and repeated his message. "Get moving. It's your turn."

The last thing Marty heard before he stepped out onto the stage was Nick suggesting that they play so loud that the judges would go deaf and therefore not be able to hear them; and then they were up on stage, playing their hearts out and hoping to win.

**

They lost.

The Pinheads left the competition hall for the car park in considerably lower spirits than they had entered it with.

"We at least managed to drop our volume to 40 decibels," Marty said as they walked. "Just thought I'd let you guys know."

Disaster Area had made it into the semi-finals, along with several other bands – including one which had delivered a rendition of a slow alien love ballad entitled 'Don't Make Me Zap You With My Ray Gun':

*Don't make me zap you with my ray gun
Because it's really gonna hurt
This gun killed me a dozen humans
Although it may sound quite absurd
So why'd you leave me, little green one
With your antenna sleek and sure
And your eyes so square and purple
You broke my hearts right here and here.*

"Marty!"

Marty turned to see Bill and Ted hanging around between the parked vehicles and waving at him.

"What're you doing out here?" he asked them, walking over as the rest of his band went their separate ways.

"Lewis made us stay here," Bill said.

"Yeah," Ted agreed. "He told us to guard the van." The teen brightened. "Did they make it to the next round?"

Marty nodded despondently.

"Excellent!"

"What's it to you if they win?" Marty asked.

"When they win the new instruments, we get to keep their old ones," Ted said happily.

"And then we can start our own band," Bill continued for him. "Only we haven't thought of a name yet."

"And we can't really play either," Ted admitted. "Hey... can you teach us, dude?"

Marty sighed. "Not today, okay?"

The younger teens looked disappointed.

"Maybe another time," Marty said.

"Did you lose?" Bill asked.

"Yeah," Marty said.

"No way!"

"We offer our most sincere condolences, dude," Ted said.

Marty gave a wan smile. "Thanks. Look, I gotta go now, okay? See you guys around."

"Sure. Catcha later, Marty."

Chapter Nineteen

20th November 1895, Wednesday
Hill Valley, California

Emmett Brown was busy reading the *Back to the Future* fan fiction novel by Mary Jean Holmes⁹ he had started on the day before. He knew that he shouldn't be doing that, by right, but the stories were remarkably interesting, and he tried to lessen his guilt by trying to convince himself that the stories might prove useful in future. For all he knew, he and Marty might end up in a similar situation as in one of them, and it would be a great help if they had some idea of what might happen...

Emmett also couldn't help noticing that in the fan fiction, he and his family had returned to the future; he wondered if perhaps that was some kind of sign to tell him what he should be doing. He knew the risks involved in doing so, but he was also just as fully aware of the risks involved in just staying where they were. The inventor sighed. Either way, a decision had to be made soon. He had already stayed ten years in the past, and with every day the danger of changing some important part of history increased.

He'd have to think about it.

Emmett logged on to his e-mail to find a rather disturbing – albeit interesting – e-mail that had apparently come from another dimension.

From - fangflux@hotmail.com
To - julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: nil

Dear Doc, you sexy thing, leave Clara and I'll make you the happiest man alive!

- Flaming Trails¹⁰

'*Sexy thing*', huh? Staring at the message with a slight grin on his face as mixed emotions churned up inside him, Emmett was wondering how to reply to it... when Clara saved him the trouble by coming into the room, looking at the screen, looking at him, and yanking out the computer plug.

Emmett blinked as the e-mail message suddenly vanished from view. Turning, he noticed for the first time that his wife was there.

"Who was that?" Clara asked.

Grinning sheepishly, Emmett looked at her. "Ah... um. I'm not too sure, actually. I've never heard of her before. According to the signal of her e-mail, she seems to be from the future in another dimension..."

Clara raised an eyebrow. "I see."

"Yes... Uh, would you mind passing me the computer plug so I can put it back in the socket?"

**

⁹ Her stories are really good and can be found at www.mj-holmes.com

¹⁰ Contributed by Flaming Trails of FanFiction.Net

Verne Brown stared open-mouthed at the space where, just seconds ago, the time train had been standing. Now, none of it was visible, unless you stared hard enough – whereupon you could make out the faint outline of the train.

“Wow!” the boy exclaimed in awe. His father emerged out of seeming thin air as he got out of the time train’s cabin and stood back to see the full effect of the futuristic cloaking device.

Emmett gave a tired grin. “Sure is something, isn’t it?”

“Yeah!”

The inventor paused, and looked down at his son before continuing in a softer tone. “Verne...”

“Yeah?”

Emmett hesitated, not sure how to say what he wanted to. “You’re not very happy here, are you?” he started. “You’ve always liked the future better.”

The boy went uneasily silent, taken aback at the sudden change of subject.

Emmett sighed, and looked out the window from where he was standing. “I know I didn’t have the right to make you stay here, and I must admit that every day I still worry that ... us merely being here could have serious consequences on the timeline. More than two years ago, I had an excuse to remain here, but after the completion of the time train... Maybe it might be better if...”

Verne couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You mean we’re going to move to the future?”

Emmett turned back to face him. “I know Marty wants me to, but he wouldn’t like me arriving ten years late either. The best time would probably be around late 1985 or early 1986, but it won’t be easy, coming up with a story that can sufficiently explain how I’ve managed to get married and have two kids aged seven and nine respectively in the space of just a few months...”

Doc smiled and tousled his son’s hair. “But I’ll think about it.”

Verne’s face broke into a grin. Things were suddenly looking a lot brighter.

Chapter Twenty

12th November 1998, Thursday
Christchurch, New Zealand

Whistling, Frank Bannister backed his newly acquired BMW car into the driveway of his house, parked it, then got out feeling rather pleased with himself. He walked over to its back, admiring the shiny new paintwork, and opened the trunk.

Frank poked the ghost sleeping inside, and it awoke with a start. “W... who are you?” the apparition asked.

“Hi, my name’s Frank Bannister. And... ah, I own this car now, so I just thought I should thank you for it. I’d never have made such a great bargain if Mr. Rainer hadn’t been convinced this car was haunted. So... good job on the ‘mysterious honing in the middle of the night’ and all that...”

The ghost climbed out and stood facing Frank. “You bought the car? Really? I’ll never have to see that old geezer again?”

“Yeah.”

The ghost broke into a grin. “Name’s Phil,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

Frank shut the trunk. “What were you doing in the car all along, anyway?”

“I used to stare at that car every day when I went by,” Phil said dreamily. “It was my dream to drive it one day, but I never had the cash... Then I died, and Mr. Rainer bought it.” A pained look appeared on Phil’s face. “You should have seen the way he treated this car! He slams the doors really hard, and likes to drive on muddy roads... I’ve been living in it ever since, trying to scare him into selling it...”

"You can still stay in there if you want," Frank offered. "I won't mind. Or you could stay in the house; there're quite a lot of spare rooms..."

Phil cast a fond look at the vehicle. "I'll stay in the car," he said.

Frank nodded and started to walk up the gravel driveway back to his house.

"And can you let me drive it?" the ghost called out eagerly. "Now and then?"

Frank turned, walking backwards. "Yeah... just, uh, try not to scare too many people. I might get in trouble if someone sees my car driving itself around the place. And try to keep it in good shape," he added as an afterthought, then stumbled as he nearly tripped over a rock. Frank winced, and turned back around.

"Oh, thank you!" Phil gushed. "Mr. Rainer always kept the car locked in his garage... I never got a chance to even give it a little drive..."

"Go ahead," Frank said over his shoulder. "Have fun. I wouldn't have gotten it if it weren't for you."

Ecstatic, Phil phased through the BMW's front door and hopped into the driver's seat. He drove off, whooping with joy, as Frank unlocked the door to his house.

Bob Alkies was on the computer, and looked up as he entered. "Hi, Frank."

"Hi. Where's Eddie?" Frank locked the door, then dumped the keys on the kitchen counter and went over to the sink to wash his hands.

"Upstairs, cleaning his sofa."

"Again?" Frank opened the refrigerator and took out a ham sandwich.

"Yeah." Bob hesitated. "Uh... and I think you might want to see this..."

Frank shut the door of the refrigerator. "Eddie cleaning his sofa?"

"No." Bob pointed at the computer, and then started typing away on the keyboard. "This. It's... strange."

Frank took a bite out of his sandwich and walked over to the ghost. "Stranger than Eddie's obsession with that Chesterfield sofa of his?" He glanced at the computer. "What?"

"I typed your name into a search engine just now, for fun, and it gave me some pretty strange results..."

Frank swallowed his mouthful of sandwich. "What d'you mean?"

Bob hit the 'Enter' key, and a list of results displayed on the screen. "See?"

"Yeah... but it's not like my name's that unusual or anyth..."

Bob clicked on one of the links, and Frank broke off in mid-sentence as he took in the first few words on the page. His blood suddenly ran cold. "What the h..."

"And that's not the only one," Bob interrupted. "The Internet is full of it. But they weren't there when I did the same thing last month."

"Is this some kind of joke...?"

"I don't think so. If it is, it's a mighty big one. Look at this." Bob typed 'imdb.com' into the search bar and several identical links appeared... only that not all of them were completely identical. Some were slightly different shades of blue, differently indented, different word and line spacing...

Bob clicked on the fourth one. The main page of The Internet Movie Database loaded, and he typed 'the frighteners' into the search bar located at the top left hand corner of the page.

"What..." Frank started, but Bob stopped him.

"Wait." He clicked on the link that appeared, and Frank's mouth dropped open when the page loaded. Bob went over to 'plot outline' and clicked 'more', then let Frank read the contents of that page. "Want a seat?" Bob asked, getting off the chair.

Numbly, eyes still glued to the words of the screen, Frank sat down, ashen-faced. He put his sandwich down on the desk, then moved his hand over to the mouse and scrolled down a little.

How did they know...

"Welcome to the Twilight Zone, huh?" Bob said. "I thought you'd be interested. And if you feel you can take it, watch the trailer."

Frank's mind was spinning. He hit the 'Backspace' key, then scrolled down the main page for *The Frighteners*, feeling as though he were in some sort of trance.

'Cast overview, first billed only:'

None of the actor's names rang a bell. His cursor settled over the first name on the list, and he hesitated, looking over at Bob.

The ghost took the hint and left. "I'll go see how Eddie's progressing," he said, heading up the staircase.

Taking a deep breath, Frank clicked on Michael J. Fox's name.

The page loaded, and Frank felt his stomach do a lazy roll as he glanced at the actor's photograph. Face paling, he quickly scrolled down, his breaths coming in short quick bursts.

Welcome to the Twilight Zone, huh? Okay then, Rod Serling, where are you?

Frank swallowed uneasily. *Calm down*, he told himself. *I'm sure there's a rational explanation for all of this...*

Yeah, what?

He scanned through the actor's filmography. Some movies sounded vaguely familiar, but...

Back to the Future. Wait a sec... hadn't Marty McFly been played by Eric Stoltz?

Frank clicked on the link. The page loaded, he scrolled down...

Cast overview, first billed only
Marty McFly --- Michael J. Fox
Dr. Emmett Brown --- Christopher Lloyd
Lorraine McFly --- Lea Thompson
George McFly --- Crispin Glover
Biff Tannen --- Thomas F. Wilson
,
,
,

I guess not. Now what?

Several seconds passed while Frank tried to collect his somewhat confused thoughts. He picked up his sandwich and took a bite, then brought up Yahoo.com and typed "marty mcfly" into the search bar.

Too many results. He tried again.

+ "marty mcfly" - "back to the future"

Fewer results this time... Frank scrolled down when one link caught his eye.

Hill Valley Online

...Valley Online Directory User ID=13561 Name: **Marty McFly** E-mail Address:
futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com Age ...
<http://www.hillvalley-online.com/mail/directory/~013561>

Hill Valley? That town was supposed to be fictional...

He clicked on the link.

Name: MARTY McFLY
E-mail Address: futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Age: DISCLOSED
Sex: M
Address: DISCLOSED
Interests: -

Okay... Frank thought, when the date on the top right-hand corner of the page caught his eye. 'March 30, 2004.'

2004? Whatever Frank had expected, it wasn't that. So this was a website from the future? Or at least one *claiming* to be from the future. The future... and another universe, it seemed, unless this entire site was just the creation of some die-hard *Back to the Future* fan with too much free time for his or her own good.

If that was the case, why set it in 2004, of all years? And why the secrecy – the only personal details were Marty's name, gender and e-mail address. A fan would surely have filled in all the fields.

Frank had come looking for answers, but it seemed that all he was getting were more questions. He decided that there was only one way to solve it all; or at least part of it.

Pulling up a new Internet window, Frank accessed his own e-mail account and started a new message. His fingers rested on the keyboard as he wondered how to begin. What could he say? 'Hi, are you really the guy from *Back to the Future*? Because you're not supposed to exist, see, and I was just wondering who you were...'

Somehow, he didn't think that would work. Frank clicked back to the Hill Valley Online window and read through Marty McFly's short biography again, hoping for ideas...

The little smiley face icon next to the e-mail address suddenly lit up.

Marty McFly, whoever he was, had just come online.

Frank moved his cursor over the smiley face icon. The arrow cursor turned into a hand, and a message box rolled out: '*Instant message futureboy85*'. He clicked, and a new window opened and loaded. Now was his chance to find out just what was going on... Clicking on the chat bar, he typed.

Guest says: is this marty mcfly?

Several seconds passed with no activity. Then...

futureboy85 says: Yes. Who are you?

Guest says: frank bannister. i dont think you know me

Guest says: so youre a back to the future fan, huh?

Guest says: did your parents really name you marty mcfly, or is that just a nick?

Another long pause.

futureboy85 says: You've seen Back to the Future?

Guest says: yeah. i thought a lot of people have.

Guest says: it's a classic. made eric stoltz famous.

There was a long pause again, and Frank drummed his fingers impatiently on the table. Either this Marty McFly was a really slow typist, or he was busy, or...

futureboy85 says: Eric Stoltz?

Okay, Frank thought. *He seems surprised at the mention of Eric Stoltz's name. So either he's: 1) a fan of the version of the movie not starring Stoltz, or some strange parallel universe portal thing has somehow opened and 2) he's the character played by Stoltz, or 3) he's the character not played by Stoltz, or 4) some guy just having fun putting me on, or 5) someone else...*

futureboy85 says: Eric Stoltz was in Back to the Future?

...Rule out '2'.

Guest says: yep. lead actor. played marty mcfly, but i thought you should know that.

Guest says: at least, he was the lead actor in the version i watched.

futureboy85 says: Version?

Guest says: thats the strange thing, see. until today, i thought there was only one version. but apparently i was wrong.

Frank took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now for the question...

Guest says: have you heard of anyone named michael j fox by any chance?

This time, the reply seemed to take forever.

futureboy85: Who are you, really?

Guest says: just as i said. my names frank bannister, and i'm typing this from my house in new zealand.

Guest says: you didnt answer my question.

About a quarter of a minute passed

futureboy85: I may have heard of him.

Guest says: whos he?

futureboy85: An actor.

Guest says: whats he look like?

Another eternity went by.

futureboy85 says: LEAVE ME ALONE, OKAY? I don't know who you are, and I don't know what you think you're doing, so JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!

[futureboy85 has left the conversation.]

...Rule out '1', Frank thought.

**

20th December 1985, Friday
Hill Valley, California

Marty set up the microphone next to the computer and turned it on, before selecting Doc's e-mail address and clicking on 'Make Phone Call'. He hoped this worked; and for the moment, it looked like it did. He'd never tried this before.

A few seconds passed before the connection was made, and Marty spoke tentatively into the microphone. "Hello?"

There was a pause, before a child's voice replied. "Marty? Is that you?"

Probably one of the kids, the teen thought. "Uh, yeah. That you, Verne?"

"Yeah."

"Oh... Hi. Uh, what are you doing on your father's e-mail?"

There was a short pause. "He's in the toilet and the computer was still on, so..."

Marty doubted that he was telling the truth but it didn't matter at the moment. "Anyway, when he comes out just ask him if he knows of anything strange going on that's not supposed to be going on, because this guy named Frank Bannister was just chatting with me online and he's really freaking me out."

"Frank Bannister?" Verne asked.

"You know him?"

"No... wait, wasn't he the main guy from that Peter Jackson movie? *The Frighteners*?"

Marty blinked. "What? I've never heard of it."

"It's one of those shows I got from some other universe. I've got lots of 'em. You saw them that day."

"Uh..."

"Yeah. I think it's that one starring Michael J. Fox..."

Verne heard a click. "Marty? MARTY?"

The teen had disconnected. Verne shrugged and went back to reading through his father's e-mails. He went to the next one and grinned. '*Sexy thing*'? His father?

**

From - EternalDensity@notoneofthem.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: nil

Hi Marty.

Troubled, confused, scared?

Don't be: this is only a story.

A tip: send threats or bribes to flautist_wannabe@hotmail.com.

Yep, that's the author's addy.

It might just work.

P.S. In my universe, you and Doc are just a movie, a cool one.

- Eternal Density *this is heavy*¹¹

Marty buried his head in his hands as he sat in front of the computer reading his latest e-mail. Troubled? Yeah. Confused? Definitely. Scared? Very. And if the sender of the e-mail thought it would make things better by saying it was all only a story, whatever that meant, it was only making things worse. His life was complicated enough as it was. The author's addy? What author? The sender's e-mail address. At notoneofthem.com. But he WAS one of them... he said he and Doc were just a movie...

Marty couldn't bear it any longer. He couldn't bear all those people trying to convince him that he was fictional. He wasn't... he wasn't... he was real, wasn't he? Marty stared desperately at the computer screen, as if begging it to reply. Wasn't he?

Outside, the sun was setting. Marty miserably shut down the computer, took his skateboard and skated off.

He spotted Jennifer outside Burger King with some of her friends. She turned, saw him, and came over, waving goodbye to her friends.

"Going home?" she asked.

"Yeah," Marty answered softly, flipping his skateboard up into his hand.

Jennifer looked at him for a while, biting her lip. "Marty, what's wrong?" she asked after some time.

"What d'you mean?" he asked in return. "Nothing's wrong..."

¹¹ Contributed by Eternal Density of FanFiction.Net

She shook her head. "I don't think so, Marty. I know there's something bothering you. I can tell. Ever since Doc Brown gave you that computer, you've been acting weird. That day Nick asked me if I knew where you were, because apparently you just ran off..."

"It's nothing, Jen."

They paused at a traffic light and waited for the lights to turn. A thought suddenly occurred to Jennifer, and she looked her boyfriend squarely in the eye.

"Is it about the future, Marty? Did you find out something?"

"It's nothing to do with that," he replied.

"So there *is* something."

"It's just..." Marty hesitated. It would be so much of a relief to tell her everything, to share the burden of what he'd discovered with someone other than Doc... but somehow he couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth: that in some other universe, at least, they were fictional and all the events of two months before were just part of a movie. He couldn't tell her all that; already he himself was feeling the effects of knowing what he did.

Marty knew he was getting paranoid. Everywhere he went nowadays, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. He thought a lot more before doing or saying anything, in case They were watching, somewhere out there, and he didn't want Them to see things he wouldn't want Them to see.

And it wasn't just the physical things. Even his thoughts were more wary than before. It freaked him out to realise that he had the thoughts he did because someone in another universe had written them out for him, controlling his mind, in that effect, and everything he thought or said or did. He was the person he was because someone had written him that way. Just the night before had seen him staring intently at his hand, wondering if it was really his, or just a copy of some actors'.

The same queasy feeling crept up at him even regarding things such as the arrangement of furniture in his bedroom: were they arranged that way because he had made it so, or had it been the work of the prop people in another reality? The location of his desk, his guitar, his bed, his underwear...

He didn't want to burden Jennifer with all that too, and yet she apparently already suspected something was up. Sooner or later, he supposed he'd have to tell her. He only hoped it would be later, but he didn't seem to have much of a choice...

"Marty?" Jennifer asked, concern in her voice.

Marty took a deep breath. "Are you free tomorrow morning?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure... why?"

"Just... uh, meet me at Doc's garage tomorrow," he said resignedly. "Eight o'clock. I've got to show you something."

"What've you got to show me?"

"I... I can't explain it. Just... meet me there tomorrow."

Chapter Twenty-One

Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

Once again he was here: lying in his bed, unable to fall asleep. Only this time it wasn't the coffee's fault; Neo had, in a sudden unexplainable British mood, spent most of the evening drinking tea. Nice, hot, cups of true British Earl Grey tea, made with fresh tea leaves and boiling – not boiled – water, with the milk added before the tea such that it wouldn't be scalded, and unfortunately also filled with caffeine. Not as much as coffee, but still enough to keep him uncomfortably awake.

He had thought he would be able to control it this time, what with the experience he had gained since then. The truth, however, was a totally different thing altogether.

Neo silently cursed the inventor of caffeinated drinks.

Here he was, future saviour of the human race – the one who would one day end the war, the one who might one day even convince Morpheus to grow hair and quit the bald look – kept awake for the second time running because of three virtual cups of tea. Nice, hot, cups of Earl Grey tea, each with a spot of milk in it.

Neo tried to turn his thoughts to other things. For one, the conversation he'd had with Trinity earlier that day....

"Do you ever wonder... what if this isn't the real world?" Neo asked.

Trinity looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe there's another real world, beyond this, only we don't know about it. Like the people still in the Matrix don't know about this world."

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't know, Trin. I was just wondering."

And he was still wondering. It wasn't as though such a thing was impossible – if his previous world had turned out to be fake without him knowing for almost forty years, what made everyone so sure that this world was the real one? Was there any real way of telling?

He rolled over in bed and stared at the sink. It wasn't exactly a very fascinating sink, so he went to stare at the wall instead, which was even more boring. He hoped that the boredom would eventually drive him to sleep, the way his teacher's lectures back in high school had never failed to drive his class to sleep.

Minutes passed, and he still couldn't get to sleep. Sighing, Neo got out of bed. He sat there for a moment, then reached into his clothes rack for the sunglasses case. Opening it, he gazed wistfully down at its shiny black contents.

He closed the case and was about to put it back into the rack when his bed suddenly gave way to nothingness and he plunged, rather surprised, into the dark void.

**

Frank munched on a slice of pizza and stared out the window at the beautiful New Zealand scenery outside. Summer was coming. If he were still back in his old home in the town of Fairwater, California, it would be about winter now.

The pizza was nice. It had lots of cheese and pepperoni. Freddy had delivered a whole box to him the day before, as he now did once every two days. There would be another box coming later. Free.

Finishing the pizza, Frank wiped his hands clean and got up from his chair... when all of a sudden, his world spun. Startled, he grabbed hold of the table, only to see and feel it dissolve beneath his grasp, and suddenly the floor too was gone, and he was falling through darkness.

**

Past midnight, Marty was lying in bed and staring up at the ceiling.

What is real?

The thought revolved several times around in his head without him coming to a satisfactory answer

...If you're talking about what you feel, taste, smell or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.

In that case, how did he know if he were real? Was his house real? Was his bedroom real? Doc's garage, his guitar over there, his table, his clock, his homework, that sheep standing by his bed...

That sheep?!

Eyes widening in shock, Marty bolted out of bed and flicked on the bedside lamp, only to see that there was, indeed, a sheep standing next to his bed.

The sheep blinked at him. "Baaaaaa."

Marty fell out of his bed, dragging the covers with him to the ground.

"Don't panic," Marty told himself, quoting wise advice from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He edged slowly away from the sheep. He had no idea what it was doing in his bedroom, and neither did he have any idea as to why there were suddenly sheep in Hill Valley, but all that wasn't exactly very important at the moment.

"Baaaaaaaaaaaa."

"Uh... nice sheep, good sheep..."

"Baaaaaaaaaaaa?"

"That's a nice sheep now... NO DON'T TOUCH THA... that's it... move away, sheep... good sheep... nice shee... AAAAAAH!"

Marty felt something pull him... and the next thing he knew, he was falling through blackness. Iridescent lights started blinking about him, adding only to his disorientation. And still Marty kept on falling, and falling, until a glowing round circle of bright light appeared in the distance and he fell through it, landing with a rolling thump on the floor below.

"Ow."

Dazed, the teen tried to lift his head to get some idea of his bearings. He was in a small square room that had some sort of strange black equipment humming quietly on one side of the whitewashed walls. A protrusion of sorts jutted out one end of the ceiling, and at the opposite wall was a wooden door. It was near this door that another person lay, looking just as confused if not more so than him. Neo. He recognised him from the movie.

Turning his head slightly, Marty then noticed the third person in the room: a slightly older version of himself who'd been staring at him all the while, a mixture of shock and disbelief on his face.

Something clicked into place... and somehow, Marty *knew*...

"Frank?"

The guy just stared back, got slowly to his feet, and then made a panicked dash for the door. It opened suddenly... and Frank skidded aside, colliding with the wall to avoid a collision with the door.

Eurasian, and aged perhaps in his mid-thirties, the man who stepped in wore an amused smile on his face that was just short of smug. He appeared to be holding something behind his back that none of the three in the room could see.

Frank was almost hyperventilating, though he tried to hide it. "What's going on here?" he croaked, unsuccessfully attempting to sound more controlled than he felt.

The man grinned somewhat condescendingly at him as he shut the door. "You're really scared now, aren't you, Frank?"

Something told Frank that the issue of how the man knew his name wasn't exactly very important at the moment. He swallowed, trying to regain some form of his composure.

"Just tell me what..." – Frank took a breath – "...is going on here."

Leaning casually against the door, the man surveyed the other two occupants of the room and gave another smile. "Frank, Marty, Neo... welcome. To the real world."

CONTINUED IN PART TWO