
REAL WORLD: PART TWO

Welcome to the Real World

*"If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us,
do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"*

- *The Merchant of Venice, Act III Scene I*

Chapter One

Nowhere in particular

Possibly half-way up your large intestine

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy says that space is "big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the drug store, but that's just peanuts to space."¹

And what's more, that's just one universe. There are an infinite number of hypothetical parallel universes, one for every possible and impossible thing that can happen. Two parallel universes may be exactly alike save for the position of an oxygen molecule at 3:45 a.m. on April Fools' Day 2004 on the planet Gutkaffee, a place renowned for its excellent coffee.

Parallel universes are a funny thing. They are virtually infinite, with one universe at least home to any imaginable outcome of a cause. In some parallel universe out there, exactly forty-two seconds after reading this word, you will be turned into a very surprised llama. In that universe, everything else might be completely identical to this one save for the sudden llama-transformation, and that is where the scariness lies.

However, it can be argued that parallel universes are only infinite in one sense of the word, as in the same kind of infinity that applies to numbers. Numbers go on to infinity; there is no largest number in existence. Yet despite them being infinite, they will, nevertheless, always remain numbers, which creates an interesting paradox. Let's say that the number after seventy-three googolplexion is not, in fact, a number, but rather a cupcake. So you get 'seventy-three googolplexion, 🍪, seventy-three googolplexion and one.'

Impossible, right? But numbers go on to infinity, and with infinity there is infinite possibility and therefore also infinite impossibility is possible. Infinite possibility is also equivalent to infinite improbability... which basically means that if you activate the Infinite Improbability Drive, mathematics might very likely start to become edible. It would also mean that the time-honoured excuse of homework-eating dogs might start becoming more believable.

But all this is side-tracking and actually a direct contradiction to the point I'm trying to make, so it might be a good idea to forget what you've just read in the previous paragraph.

Parallel universes are therefore quite similar to numbers in that there is no end to their number of members, but at the same time they cannot, in normal circumstances, include everything. In the same way that a cupcake cannot be a number save under the influence of the Infinite Improbability Drive, some parallel universes just cannot exist.

There cannot be one where parallel lines intersect, for one, or a universe in which God can make a stone He cannot lift. Neither can there be a universe in which someone invents a machine that makes me spontaneously combust right before I write this.

Or can there?

*On a bright and sunny morning, Polly Jane was skipping happily down the transparent street
when all of a sudden she saw two parallel lines intersect before her eyes.*

Which brings me to the point about the reality of fiction.

If parallel universes are really infinite, as they are, it means that there exists a whole, separate world for every work of fiction ever conceived – be it book, movie, television programme, computer game, outright

¹ From *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) by Douglas Adams. Used without permission.

lie, daydream or shampoo advertisement. In that world, that particular fiction is the reality. There is a universe in which Captain James Tiberius Kirk commands the USS Enterprise; there is a universe in which even now a young hobbit named Frodo Baggins is making his arduous journey to the fires of Mount Doom; there is a world where Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father; there is even a world where Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's mother, but let's not go into that.

Fiction is a strange thing. The exact boundaries between fiction and reality are never as clearly defined as many believe them to be. What is fiction for somebody may very well be the reality for somebody else.

Take a typical fictional character, for example. Let's call her Mary T. She eats, sleeps, socialises, works, plays, goes to church, pays her taxes, and uses the toilet just like any other human being. She has feelings, hopes, dreams, personality, aspirations, wants and fears just like any real person and Sim does. She has friends and family whom she loves and cares for, enemies whom she dislikes and avoids, a pet dog named Rufus and a hamster or two. She may be exactly like a hundred people you know, with the only exception being that she is fictional.

Yet she probably doesn't know that she is. To her, her life is reality, not a mere product of someone's imagination, and she would not be able to easily accept the truth.

How do you even know that you yourself are real? For all you know, all your thoughts and actions now are being dictated by some writer in another universe. *I think, therefore I am...* but fictional characters think as well in those little bits of italicised text you see, so how does that make you any different?

What if, five minutes from now, you suddenly find yourself magically transported to another universe, where you are met by some guy who calmly informs you that you are just a character in this story he was writing? Not possible, you think, and '*not possible*', thinks Mary with a cynical smirk.

All of a sudden, Mary found herself magically transported to another universe, where she met a bored teenage writer who calmly informed her that she was just a character thought up for the pitiful purpose of illustrating an example.

Say hi to Mary.

Mary, stop looking so stunned. And get away from the keyboard;ldskjfrpasafeoiruofjalsf

Ldsafkajsdpofapseurewljds

Sfauddenly mary lfedDIE ;falsdk f MARY DIED.

Okay, that's better. Only goes to prove that the keyboard is mightier than the sword, and a whole lot less bloody too.

There is, therefore, by logical extrapolation, a universe in which a girl named Polly Jane *did* see two parallel lines intersect. The multiverse is a strange place indeed.

Once upon a time in one part of the multiverse, there was a spaceship. This was no ordinary spaceship. It was the Heart of Gold, a ship that propelled its way through the vastness of space through the sheer force of improbability. The Improbability Drive, a wholly ingenious invention (powered by a cup of nice, hot, British tea) that you can read more about in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, made this possible.

However, unknown to anybody, it also made a lot of other things possible.

When Emmett's device started impacting negatively on the space-time continuum, it would have been highly improbable that the first universe to be affected as a result would be the *Hitchhiker's* one. But that's where the Improbability Drive comes in, and it was.

It was also highly improbable that the next few universes to come in, out of the zillions and oxzillions and googolplexions of parallel universes out there, would be that of what were movies in a place some call the 'real world' – and not just any movies, but movies that were mostly connected in some way or other – via actors or directors or whatnot – if you sat down and thought about it with a pencil, a piece of paper, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the cast and crew of all the fandoms involved in this story.

The Improbability Drive made that happen too.

In the 'real world' meantime, a guy named Keith Arthur Fong was working on a little machine of his that could create dimensional tears and through this enable him to grab objects or people from other universes into his.

It was extremely improbable that all of these could be happening at the same time. But that's what the Improbability Drive does – it makes improbable things happen. And so, as a result of everything that was going on, the space-time continuum was overcome by stress and went crazy. A similar event can be seen happening to school students before a major examination, and in order to witness this all you have to do is pay a visit to any school during the examination period.

Rips formed in the space-time continuum. Things and people started getting transported from one universe to the next, and insanity ruled the multiverse.

Fun, ain't it?

Now excuse me while I go bury Mary's corpse in a place the police will never think of.

Chapter Two

31st March 2004, Wednesday
The Real World

Real world. The words poked annoyingly at Neo. *Welcome to the real world*, Morpheus had said, after Neo had been plunged out of the reality he'd always known, found himself naked in a pod full of icky pink goo, got flushed out of the system like so much sewage, and got rescued by the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

Welcome to the real world, this new guy in front of him said now, after pulling him out of the *other* real world and dumping him in this weird room, just when Neo had finally managed to get somewhat used to the *other* new reality that Morpheus claimed was the real world.

These people gave him a headache.

Yet he'd known, somehow. He'd suspected something, at least. It was as he'd told Trinity; they had no real way of knowing if their reality was indeed the real one, any more than the people plugged into the Matrix knew their reality was just a computer simulation. All the people who had managed to escape the Matrix were all living oblivious and happily in the 'real' world, assuming with an amazing demonstration of logical fallacy that if the previous real had been fake, then this one had to be real.

The way things were going, Neo bet that *this* new real world probably wasn't the real one either.

He felt something clenched within the fingers of his left hand, and looked down to see that he had brought the really cool sunglasses across as well. He looked at its case, derived a shred of comfort from it, and stuck it into his pocket as he slowly stood up. His head was still spinning from the journey, but he was glad that at least there was no icky pink goo this time, and more importantly he was fully clothed.

"Who are you?" Neo asked guardedly.

"My name is Keith," said the man who had welcomed them. "But that's not important."

"How'd we get here?" Neo questioned softly. He was about to ask where this here was, but then realised that that question had already been answered. The real world. Probably not *the* real world, just a real world. Those things were everywhere.

"I made you come here," Keith replied. He leant casually against the door. "Eight years of research and work and some h- ...and... and I finally managed to do it – transport people and things from other worlds into this one. Specifically, *fictional* worlds." Keith grinned in a way that barely hid his excitement.

Neo hadn't been prepared for that last bit. "Wha'?"

"You're not real, see," Keith continued. "None of you are. Your lives, everything you've ever known... all fictional, mere fragments of someone's imagination that ended up as movies. *Fictional* movies," he added for added, albeit somewhat redundant, effect.

Half-sitting-half-lying on the floor next to Neo, Marty McFly was trembling. Keith gave another grin and walked towards the teen, squatting down so that they were at eye level.

"Hi, Marty," Keith whispered. Marty's mouth moved slightly, but no words came out. "I thought you might want to see this..."

Keith moved his hand from behind his back to in front of him, and placed the *Back to the Future* DVD in front of Marty.

Neo visibly saw the colour drain from the teen's face.

Taking a shaky breath, Marty slowly reached out an unsteady hand to the DVD and closed his fingers around the case. Nervously, he turned it over to read the words on the back, and he silently took them in – the words that were the synopsis of the movie, the synopsis of his life. Part of it, anyway, but it was enough.

The teen swallowed, trying to keep away from Keith the minor reward of seeing how much the sight of the DVD had affected him. What with all that had been going on, Marty had known that somewhere, in some other dimension, he was just part of some movie... but all that had always seemed so distant somehow. Now, however, seeing the *Back to the Future* DVD in his hands hit home the hard truth in a way nothing else could have done...

"Why did you bring us here for?"

Neo's quiet voice took Marty's attention temporarily away from the DVD. He placed it carefully back onto the floor with a kind of gentle reverence, then looked up, ashen-faced, to see what Keith's reply to that was.

Keith shrugged. "It's a new technology, and I was... uh, just trying it out to see if it would work. For some reason, it never did before. But I suppose it was partly because I tried it out too early this month, before Doc created that portal." Keith smirked. "I knew all about that, see."

"How?" Neo asked.

The smirk faded a little and Keith shifted his feet around uncomfortably. "That's none of your business."

Neo remained unperturbed. "If all that was fictional, as you said, then that portal wouldn't even exist in the first place."

"It did," Keith said. "I suppose that fiction could be considered real to some extent. For example, say that someone wrote a story in which there was a machine which caused every single universe to blow up. Such a machine would theoretically exist, if there's a universe for every kind of possible... outcome, every kind of possible reality. So in this story, the guy activates the machine and every single universe blows up. That would include *this* universe, wouldn't it?"

"So basically I was working with the same kind of principle. I, uh, thought that if there was – which there is – a universe in which Dr. Emmett Brown of the *Back to the Future* movies invented a device that created tears in the space-time continuum, connecting other universes such as this to his own, then perhaps there might be a way to actually be affected by the effects of those tears... It's complicated." Keith paused.

"My father and younger brother Andrew have always been *Back to the Future* fans, so that's why I thought it would be fun to use a variant of that universe for my experiment," Keith continued, concealing the fact that he had a much more important reason to use that particular universe. "Actually, I've never understood why they liked the trilogy so much. Personally, I can't see what's so great about the movies."

Marty subconsciously clenched the fingers on his right hand into a loose fist.

"So I made the connection," Keith continued, "and, uh, some other universes got affected as well, even those that I didn't, uh, originally intend to get access to. So I thought it would be nice if I brought two of you over to keep Marty company."

"What're you going to do to us?" Frank asked, speaking for the first time in a while and keeping his gaze pointedly averted from Marty.

Keith thought about this for a while. "I don't know," he said. "I was planning to just let you stay here and see if you survive. There's all that stuff about dimensional incompatibility and all that. You'd probably die, but I want to see how long it takes... If you die, then I'll have to make use of the sub-meson averager in future; but in the rare case that you don't die, then I can save energy on that machine and can continue to bring in... other people and things from the universes currently at my disposal." Keith grinned. "Imagine the kind of money I could get from selling lightsabers... and that's just the tip of the iceberg."

Frank called Keith the less refined form of the phrase 'anal orifice'. "So you're just going to see how long it takes for us to *die*?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah. I suppose so."

"You..." Frank took a sudden step towards the older man, intent on separating his head from his body, when with one swift motion Keith grabbed hold of Marty, whipped out a pistol, and stuck its barrel against Marty's head.

"You were saying?" Keith asked, using one leg to kick Marty as the teen struggled to get free.

"I..." Frank took in the sight of the gun against the head of his struggling teenage doppelganger and faltered, lost for words. He stepped back, and Keith took the gun away from Marty, shoving the teen aside.

"Be glad I'm feeling merciful today," Keith said. "And I never said that you're all going to die for sure." Keith stuck the pistol back into his pocket and looked back at the trio. "Come on. Unless you want to spend the next few days in here, that is."

The three characters followed Keith out of the room into what looked a lot like some hotel corridor, mainly because it was. Marty still felt more than a little queasy, and trailed slightly behind the others as he tried not to think about everything Keith had said.

Keith outside the door to Room 437, which had had bolts installed on the outside. Unbolting the door, he pushed it open. Keith fished out a key card from his pocket and stuck it into the card slot near the door. The lights came on to reveal a relatively well-furnished hotel room.

"You two, go in," Keith said casually, motioning Frank and Marty to enter. They hesitated, glancing uneasily at each other.

"Well?" Keith prompted. "Go on. Be glad I'm so kind to you. There are worse places I could have made you stay in. You even get room service and free Internet access so you don't die of boredom or starvation." He paused. "Alternatively, if you want to spend what might be the last few days of your life lying out here in the corridor, I'm not going to stop you..."

Noticing Keith's hand moving dangerously close to his pocket, the two finally complied and entered. Keith closed the door, then opened it again as he remembered something. "Oh," he added, "and don't even think of trying to escape. Even if you manage to... where would you go?"

Keith grinned, then shut the door and shot the bolts home before leading Neo off to Room 436.

There was a moment's awkward silence as Frank and Marty just stared at each other... and then the teen suddenly realised that he now had the chance to do something he'd wanted to do for a long time.

Dashing over to the adjoining bathroom, Marty bent over the sink and threw up.

Half-heartedly, he washed away the remaining vomit from his mouth before leaning his head against the cool tiles of the bathroom walls, eyes squeezed shut in despair.

Fictional. He was fictional. Created by some movie maker, a figment of someone's imagination... his whole life wasn't real, everything wasn't real, everything...

Marty broke down and cried.

How long he stood there, he didn't know, oblivious of anything and everything until he felt a hand on his shoulder gently guiding him away from the sink.

"It's okay, kid," Frank said quietly. "It's okay."

Slowly, Marty opened his eyes to look into an identical but slightly steadier pair.

"It's okay," Frank repeated, making an effort to hide the shaking in his voice and trying to convince himself as much as Marty. "It's all right."

Hands trembling slightly, he pulled the teen into a tight hug.

It gave them both the weirdest of feelings, but for a long time neither let go.

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The first thing that Neo noticed when Keith shut him into his five-star prison was the glaring absence of a computer. Looking dismally around the room, he realised that Keith had probably known better than to put a computer hacker like him into a room with Internet access.

Just how much does Keith know about me anyway? Neo wondered, discomfited. Keith hadn't told him anything at all apart from the fact that he happened to be some fictional movie character, which Neo still found a little hard to believe. He admitted that his life was strange, but even then...

That was *Marty McFly* next door. The-guy-from-*Back-to-the-Future*. Neo had watched that trilogy, back in his life plugged into the Matrix... Marty McFly wasn't supposed to exist; yet there he was. Neo bet that the teen didn't think he was fictional either. None of the three of them did. Why would they? They had each grown up in their own world, each convinced that he was real, with no reason to suspect otherwise.

How did they even know that this world was the real one? Was there any definitive 'real world' in the first place? Or just a whole series of parallel universes, the inhabitants of each filled with the selfish notion that *their* world was the real one, the only one that mattered...

In some other parallel universe out there, Neo might just as well happen to be a purple-spotted fish with radioactive fins and a penchant for shiny things. The possibilities were endless.

And in this universe he just so happened to be fictional. But in that case, couldn't Keith have at least told him the title of the movie he was supposedly from? Or the name of the person who'd acted as him? With his luck, the latter was probably some weird guy with some foreign name that no one could pronounce. He probably couldn't act either. Not that Neo would be able to see if that was truly the case, for the simple fact that *there was no computer*.

Feeling faintly annoyed, Neo walked towards the windows in the room and pushed aside a curtain. Night had fallen outside. A backwards glance at the digital clock on the bedside table showed the time to be 11:42 pm.

The ground wasn't far down, which was good if Neo somehow managed to overcome his fear of heights and decide to escape that way. Although what Keith had told the other two was true: if he escaped, where would he go? He'd be no better off anywhere out there than in here.

Releasing his hold of the curtain and letting it fall back into place, Neo sat down on one of the two beds and buried his face in his hands.

He thought about the rest of the crew on board the *Nebuchadnezzar*. What would they do when they discovered he had suddenly vanished? Or did they even exist in the first place, outside his memories? And Trinity... did she exist, either?

"Trin..."

Neo lifted his head from his hands to stare dispiritedly at his reflection in the mirror opposite.

And not for the first time, but ever more so now, he wondered who he was.

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While everything else was happening, a certain sheep was having a nice time chewing away on the strings of one of Marty's guitars.

"Baaaaaaaaaa," it baaed. *Munch munch*. "Baaaaaaaaaa."

Chapter Three

1979

The Real World

He hoped that no one would be able to find him here. The usual recess sounds of children laughing and playing reached his ears, but it all seemed so far away, as if it were part of another world. But on this side of the school, he could be by himself, all alone, just the way he liked it.

Sitting down on the grass with his back to the brick wall, the seven-year-old opened his lunchbox and munched on a peanut-butter sandwich as he gazed out past the wire fence at the traffic going past outside.

This is how it should be, he thought. If he could keep coming here each recess, he might never have to see Walter Reynolds ever again, would never again have to...

"Oh, so THERE you are."

No, the boy thought desperately, but he knew it was too late, and so he stood up, trying his best to hide the fear in his eyes. "What do you want, Walter?"

The older boy ignored the question. His two friends stood smirking behind him, ready to assist if the need arose. "What're you doing all the way out here?" the nine-year-old asked. "You weren't trying to *escape*, from me, were you?" He smiled. "Don't think you can run. I'll always know where you are."

Keith remained silent. *Go away*, he thought. *Just go away and leave me alone... just go away... just go away...*

Walter snatched his lunchbox away from him, gave it a disdainful look and emptied its remaining contents on the ground. "Hold him," he ordered his friends, and the two of them pinned the younger boy against the wall as Walter casually stripped Keith of his pocket money for that week. The half-eaten sandwich dropped onto the ground.

Keith glared angrily at Walter, struggling against the grip of the other two boys, but he couldn't do anything and he knew it. There had been no point in thinking he could escape, after all... Walter would always find him, nothing would ever change...

Walter counted the coins and shook his head. "It's less than last week," he said. "Whatever have you been buying?"

"That's none of your business," Keith replied, regretting his words the instance they left his mouth. "It's my money."

Walter leaned in close to him until Keith could feel his hot breath on his face. "Oh yeah?" Walter asked. "Well, it's my money now, so too bad."

"Give it back..."

"What would you do if I don't? Tell the teacher? Tell the principal? Tell your mummy?" Walter paused, malice glinting in his eyes. "Oh wait, I forgot. You don't *have* a mummy any more..."

His friends laughed, and Walter grinned in satisfaction. He knew he'd touched a nerve.

Keith glowered. His hands ached so much to just put themselves around Walter's neck and squeeze it till he choked and cried and begged to be released and...

Somehow, his foot broke loose and flew forward, connecting squarely with Walter's stomach. The latter stumbled back, staring at the younger boy with more surprise than pain in his eyes.

"You *kicked* me?" Walter asked, in a voice that Keith had come to recognise as dangerous. "You KICKED me?"

Walter's friends slowly backed away, leaving Keith on his own to face the other boy.

The next thing Keith felt was a hard punch that sent him keeling over onto the ground, before a volley of violent kicks rained down on his small body. He yelled in pain and tried to get back up, but always

someone would push him down again and he'd be unable to. When the torture finally subsided, it took several seconds before Keith dared to look up again, and he watched with angry tears in his eyes the departing forms of Walter and his gang.

One day they'll pay, he thought furiously. One day he was going to make them pay, he was going to make them hurt so bad that they screamed and begged for mercy but he wasn't going to give it to them, he wouldn't let them go because they wouldn't let him go...

And how did Walter dare to talk that way about his mother?

Ever since the news of his mother's sudden death had reached Keith's ears less than a month ago, Keith had known that life was going to be much, much worse from then on.

Rachel Kenselton-Fong, small-time actress and mother of two, was gone forever.

It had been a car crash. Of all the things that could have happened, it had to be a car crash. Many nights since that fateful day, Keith had lain awake in bed, thinking of what he would have liked to do to that stupid drunk driver that had taken his mother's life.

She had been his only source of comfort. Whenever Walter bullied him at school and took his money, Keith could always just go home and she would be there for him, and everything would be all right... but now, nothing would ever be all right, never again.

There were days after school when he couldn't take it any more and would spend his time in front of the television watching his mother's movies, those few films that she had acted in before she passed away. And he would pretend that those characters on the screen were really her, and wished that one of them would step out of the television set and become real, and hold him in her arms and everything would be all right again...

But they never did. She was gone, and Keith knew it.

Chapter Four

31st March 2004, Wednesday
The Real World

"So you're from New Zealand?" Marty asked, staring up at the ceiling as he lay face up on one of the two beds in the room.

"Yeah... Well actually, I just migrated there a few months ago. Before that I lived in North California in a half-built house with a leaky roof. I designed it myself... I used to be an architect, see. Then one day seventy-percent of the house collapsed after a thunderstorm, and I decided it was better to just move. I didn't exactly have a very good reputation there anyway."

"Okay... So what's it like over there?"

"Full of sheep," Frank answered simply, clicking on the icon for Internet Explorer. Marty winced inwardly, the memory of a certain sheep coming to mind.

"What else?"

"More sheep." Frank accessed IMDB.com and waited for the page to load. It was taking forever, as usual. "So... ah, d'you know the other guy?"

Marty rolled over onto his side to face Frank. "What other guy?"

"The one who arrived with us just now."

"Neo?"

"Yeah." Frank scrolled down the IMDB.com main page to see if there was anything of interest, but nothing caught his eye.

"I don't exactly know him... I know he's from a movie called *The Matrix*, because I watched it some time ago."

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Frank asked, turning back to the computer and typing 'the matrix' into the search bar.

"What is?"

"He's not supposed to exist, and neither are we, yet we're here." Frank clicked on the first search result and waited for the page to load, wondering why IMDB.com couldn't get a faster server.

"Okay, here we go," he said, when the page finally finished downloading. Marty got off the bed and went to look.

"Wonder if Neo knows about this," Frank mused, clicking on 'more' at plot outline.

"Is this legal?" Marty asked instead.

"I think so."

"We're kind of peeking into his private life."

"It's a public website."

"If you say so."

They finished reading and Frank hit backspace. He scrolled down the main page to the cast list and clicked on the first name.

Seconds passed.

"Have you been to this site before?" Frank asked Marty.

"No."

"It's a great place, but the downloading takes forever."

Seconds passed, and Keanu Reeves' biography finally loaded. Frank scrolled down to the filmography.

"Are you sure this is legal?" Marty asked again. "I don't... hey, Ted Logan?"

"What about him?"

Marty blinked. "I know him. He's that kid from Disaster Area..."

"Disaster Area? Isn't that the name of the band from *The Hitchhiker's G...*"

"Yeah, I think they named themselves after that... I *knew* Ted looked like someone else, but I couldn't place it. This is getting... really strange."

Frank shrugged. "It's about to get stranger." He went to the search bar and typed in 'back to the future'.

Marty looked at him.

"What?"

Marty left the computer and went back to lie on the bed. He lay on his back for a few more moments before rolling over to his side and burying his head in the pillows. It was no use trying to think of something other than his current situation. It was just as useless to hope that he might wake up the next day and discover that it had all been a dream. Marty knew that no matter how hard he tried to convince himself otherwise, everything that had happened in the last hour or so had been completely real, probably more so than his whole life. It was his life that was the dream.

Marty just wanted out. He wanted desperately to go home, and yes, he wanted his mummy. But did she even exist in the first place? Did any of them? Doc, Clara, Jules, Verne, Jennifer, Mr. Strickland, J.J., that person who made him donate to the Clocktower, Einie, everybody...

And if they didn't exist, then who was he anyway?

His life as he knew it was gone. What was the point of still living?

Frank turned temporarily away from Michael J. Fox's biography to look at Marty, the latter's back now facing him. "You all right?"

Marty didn't reply, and Frank was going to leave him to himself when the teen got off the bed and walked towards the window. Opening it, he stood there, staring out as the cold night air rushed past his face and into the room.

"Marty?"

The teen's voice, when it came, sounded strangely dead. "What's Keith gonna do if I jump out the window now?" he asked. "I bet he never thought of that, and it's not like it matters if I die, 'cause I'm not real, right? So I'm not even alive in the first place, so if I jump I won't really be hurt, and I won't really die, and it won't matter to my parents 'cause they're not real too..."

Slowly, Frank stood up from his chair and walked towards him, not too sure about what he was supposed to do. "Get away from the window, Marty," he said quietly.

"And when the people out there find me tomorrow, I wonder what they'll think..."

"Get away from the window, Marty."

The teen didn't move. Frank walked over to his side and gazed out the open window at the ground below. He shifted his gaze slightly and counted. "We're only on the fourth floor," he said. "You'll just break a leg or something... the distance isn't long enough to kill you. Maybe you'll break your spinal cord and get paralysed for life, but that's it."

"What life?" came the numb reply.

Frank looked at him. "Your life, Marty. It's still out there... somewhere. Don't listen to what Keith tells you. If you got here, you can get back. The portal is still open. Keith wouldn't close it, because he still wants his lightsabers, remember? You can still go back."

Marty shook his head. "What's the point? It's all not real."

"What is real?" Frank quipped.

Marty shrugged half-heartedly.

"Look, we're all in this together," Frank continued. "The three of us. We'll find a way out of this place somehow." Arms folded and resting on the windowsill, he looked back out the window at the buildings beyond. *Nice scenery*, he thought randomly. "Don't let whatever Keith says get to you, because that's what he wants. He wants to see how long it takes before you crack. So don't give him that."

There was no response from Marty.

"I can see dead people," Frank said randomly.

That got a response. "What?" Marty asked, turning to look at him.

"Dead people. Ghosts. I can see them. I'm never too sure if it's a curse or a blessing, though it's gotten me into more trouble than it's worth."

"You can really see ghosts?" Marty asked.

"Yeah, I can."

"Cool."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"Most people just get weirded out by it," Frank said. "Most of the time they don't believe me. There was this episode a couple of years back that got pretty bad; turns out it's even been made into a movie here." Frank paused. "That's why I moved to New Zealand. I wanted to get away from it all."

The two of them stood there in silence for a few moments more, then Frank peeled his eyes away from the wonderful view outside and shut the window. "C'mon. We can survive this, Marty." He tousled the teen's hair on the way back to the computer, where he sat down and glanced at the digital clock.

It was almost twelve in the morning. Perhaps it had been, too, for Marty and Neo – he couldn't be bothered to find out – but it had been the afternoon for him when he'd been so unceremoniously dragged out of his universe, and he was in no mood to sleep just yet. He had research to do.

Marty went back to his bed and lay down, staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. Hours passed, and he soon fell asleep on top of the covers.

Frank did some searching on the Internet and finally found what he was looking for. Reaching across the table to grab the pen and pad of paper lying there, he then went to work learning how to forge Michael J. Fox's signature; he never knew when it might come in handy. It was almost four in the morning when he switched off the computer and got into the other bed, the signature of a certain actor practiced to perfection.

**

Seated at his desk in the control room, Keith took a drink from his cup of coffee and swivelled his chair around to grant himself a view of the close-circuit television screens lining the wall behind him. Through them, he watched as Frank shut down the computer and went to bed, and after some time, the microphones in the room picked up the sound of his steady breathing

It was already early in the morning, but Keith was used to staying up this long. He liked the night; everything was dark and peaceful and he could be alone, away from the noise and bustle of the daytime. So many were the nights he had spent in this room, perfecting some detail of his experiment, downing cups of coffee or tea or Coke or anything with caffeine in it to chase the sleep away.

And he'd finally done it.

Keith gave a wistful smile as around him, his machinery hummed softly and soothingly into the night. After so many years of research, of experimenting, of repeated failures that never stopped him from carrying on, he'd finally reaped the fruit of his own hard work.

At least... *mostly* the fruit of his own hard work...

The wistful smile faded and was replaced with a look of unease. But now was not the time to think about such things. Now came the easy part of the experiment. The fun part. Whatever had transpired to get him to this stage was irrelevant, for the moment.

The tape in the room's cameras ran on, recording every movement and every sound of the three sleeping travellers.

Setting the alarm on his digital watch for six a.m. the next day, Keith turned off the lights, then rested his head on his arms and went to sleep on the desk.

Chapter Five

Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

The banging on the cabin door grew more insistent with each bang. "Neo?" Trinity shouted. "Wake up, it's morning!"

When there was no reply after some time, she sighed and opened the door.

The cabin was empty.

Frowning slightly, Trinity entered the small cabin and looked around. "Neo?"

No response. Trinity swore under her breath.

"We've searched the ship," she reported later. "It looks like he's gone."

"Why would he have left?" Morpheus asked.

"I don't know. Should we notify Zion?"

"Not yet," Morpheus replied. "Get a search party out. If Neo was on foot, he can't have gone too far."

**

It is a matter of fact that search parties in the depths of old unused sewers are not one of the most pleasant things in life. They are also, by extension, not one of the most pleasant things to write about, or read, especially when one is equipped with the knowledge that the person the search party is searching for has just been zapped into a parallel universe, and so no amount of poking about in sewers would lead to finding him.

Here follows, therefore, a quick clean summary of what will go on in the sewers.

Firstly, for obvious reasons, they will not find Neo.

Secondly, for not so obvious reasons, Trinity will find an old, ragged sock lying in a puddle with the words 'my grandmuvver rulz!' embroidered on it in pink.

Thirdly, along the way a glob of goo will drop off the ceiling and land on Morpheus' perpetually bald head. He will wipe it off and think no more about it, but two weeks from then he would discover a fuzzy purple tuft of hair growing out from that exact same spot. He would panic, and the stress would make it all fall off.

This is how the search party will go, and now we can just get back to the story.

**

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

Jennifer checked her watch again and frowned. Eight thirty. It wasn't as though she hadn't expected Marty to be late – his tardiness was, after all, legendary throughout Hill Valley High – but neither had she expected to be kept waiting for a whole half hour; especially since this meeting had seemed rather important to Marty from what she had gathered.

For the umpteenth time, Jennifer peered down the road, waiting for the sight of Marty McFly skating hurriedly down it, perhaps with one hand grabbing hold of some unfortunate vehicle.

Once again, she was disappointed.

The small sense of foreboding she had sensed that previous evening while talking with him started growing. There was something strange, something wrong, going on here... something that somehow included Marty, but she hadn't the least idea what it was about. What if he was in danger?

Fifteen minutes more, she thought, leaning against the fence to wait.

At eight forty-five, she left for the McFly house.

Lorraine opened the door when Jennifer rang the doorbell.

"Good morning, Mrs. McFly," Jennifer greeted. "Is Marty there?"

"Oh, hi... I think Marty's still asleep." Lorraine looked half-asleep herself. "I'll go wake him; he should have been up long ago. Come on in."

Jennifer stepped into the house and followed Lorraine to the door of Marty's bedroom, which was still shut. Lorraine rapped on the door. "Marty?" she called out. "Jennifer's here."

When several seconds passed with no reply, Lorraine opened the door.

Both she and Jennifer gasped. Marty was gone. What was there was a large, white sheep. It blinked at them.

"Baaaaaaa," the sheep said.

Lorraine slammed the door shut in shock.

**

"Our son has been turned into a *sheep*?" George asked through a mouthful of cereal. He swallowed and looked up at his wife as though she were crazy. "Wha... how's that possible?" he asked, giving a short laugh.

"It's not funny, George," Lorraine retorted. "You know how much he likes hanging around with that Doctor Brown. Who knows what sort of strange experiment he might have involved Marty in?"

"Yeah," Jennifer added. "Marty said so himself that there was something weird going on. He was going to tell me about it this morning, but then..." She shrugged.

"But why a sheep?" Dave McFly asked. "Why not something cooler, like... like..."

"An ice cube," his sister Linda finished for him. She took another spoonful of cereal, ignoring the look her mother gave her.

George wiped his mouth clean and got out of his chair. "All right, all right," he said. "Let's go see this sheep."

The McFly family and Jennifer trooped down the now-rather-crowded hallway to Marty's room, and Lorraine opened the door. The sheep was busy chewing thoughtfully away on Marty's blanket when they arrived, and did not acknowledge the entrance of everyone into the room.

"It doesn't look like Marty," George commented casually.

Lorraine was nearly hysterical. "Of course it doesn't! It's a *sheep!*"

"Baaaaa," said the sheep, deciding that the blanket didn't taste so good after all. It turned slowly around and regarded the newcomers with puzzlement.

"Marty?" Lorraine asked tentatively. The sheep ignored her and continued its exploration of Marty's room.

"How d'you even know that's Marty in the first place?" Linda asked.

"If that's not Marty, then *where is he?*" Lorraine asked in return, not taking her eyes off the sheep. It was in the midst of pulling out one of Marty's towels from his cupboard. This was a sheep that knew where his towel was.

George walked further into the room and bent down to examine the sheep. It gazed at him for a while, then went back to chewing on Marty's towel.

"So what do we do now?" Dave asked. "Call the police and tell them that Marty's been turned into a sheep?"

"Maybe it's not even him," Linda said. "Maybe he just went out the window or something, and let the sheep in as a joke."

"But where'd he get the sheep from?" Dave prodded. "They aren't exactly local inhabitants of Hill Valley."

"Marty?" Lorraine asked again in a weak voice, gazing desperately at the sheep.

George stood back up. "Okay, everybody don't panic, just..."

"Who's panicking?" Dave asked.

George ignored him. "...just stay calm, I'm sure everything will turn out just fine. We can't know for sure that the sheep *is* Marty, so the first thing we have to do is to see if we can find him..."

"And if we can't?" Linda asked.

"Then... then we see if Doc Brown knows anything about this."

"He's not at home," Jennifer said. "The place is locked up." *As it will be for a long time more*, she added silently.

She was pretty certain that the sheep was *not* Marty McFly. She hadn't the faintest idea how it had got there, but somehow her boyfriend turning into a sheep just did not fit in as a logical conclusion to what little she knew so far.

She had the feeling that the answers were inside Doc's garage, possibly on the computer where Marty spent so much time. She volunteered to call up Marty's friends to see if anyone knew where he was. She at least wanted to make sure that Marty was really missing in a not-ordinary way before going off on what might turn out to be a wild goose chase.

Chapter Six

21st December 1985, Saturday
The Preston Residence, San Dimas, California

"Bugs Bunny with a banana in the swimming pool," Bill guessed.

Ted reached out and flipped over the three facedown cards in their modified game of Clue.

"Sorry, dude," the teen said, looking at the cards. "It was Donald Duck with a loaf of bread in the broom cupboard."

Bill sighed. "Bogus."

Returning his card to the deck, he cleared the board and looked at his friend. "Want another game, dude?"

"Sure."

The telephone rang in the hallway.

"I'll get it," Ted offered, hopping off his chair.

"Thanks."

Entering the hallway, Ted suddenly thought he saw a ripple of coloured light zip through the air. He looked again, but it had gone... and he was prevented from wondering about it any longer by the ringing telephone. Picking up the receiver, the teen put it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, Prosser's Pizzeria? Ah, I'd like to order two extra large pepperoni cheese pizzas with extra pepperoni, cheese and crust... um, make that three pizzas. Yeah, and two..."

Ted blinked.

"...with a roll of garlic bread on the side, and..." The voice grew temporarily fainter as the speaker called out to someone else in the room. "Hey, Marge, want any ice cream?"

"Sure!" came the faint reply. "Ask if they have raspberry."

"..." Ted said.

The caller came back to the phone. "Yeah, uh, do you have any raspberry ice cream available today? I'd like two..."

Ted finally found his voice. "Um, I think you have got the wrong number," he said.

There was a pause.

"This isn't Prosser's Pizzeria on 4077 Potato Avenue?"

"No..."

The caller swore. "Then why didn't you say so earlier, kid?"

Muttering obscenities, the man hung up, leaving Ted dumbly holding the receiver at the other end.

He was about to put down the phone when another ripple of light flashed past his eyes. Ted Logan stared... and an instant later, he was yanked out of his world.

Getting off his seat, Bill walked out of the room. "Ted?"

There was no reply.

"Ted? Dude, where are you?"

Bill entered the hallway, but all he saw was the telephone dangling off the hook and his friend nowhere in sight.

**

Ted yelled as he was sent hurtling out of the dimensional portal to land painfully on his side. Stunned and hurting all over, he lay on the floor, gazing uncomprehendingly ahead at the whitewashed walls and trying to figure out just what had happened.

The door opened, and Keith entered. Only half-awake, the man nevertheless managed a tired grin.

"Hi, Ted," he greeted. "Welcome to the real world."

**

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

Several minutes later, Frank Bannister was jolted out of bed by the sound of a bloodcurdling scream from the next room. Heart thumping, he glanced wildly around his unfamiliar surroundings, when he realised where he was and a strange feeling rose in him. It hadn't been a dream... unless it was one of those dream-in-a-dream things...

He pinched himself. It hurt. So it wasn't a dream, unless it was one of those dreams where you pinched yourself and it hurt. He'd had one of those before, but he doubted this was one of them.

Wait. The scream... Sounded like it came from next door. Probably from that other guy – what's-his-name – Neo. Yeah. Maybe he was one of those people who liked to scream at random intervals of the day. He hadn't seemed that sort of person, but you never knew... Either that, or Keith was busy torturing him.

There was a thud from next door that sounded an awful lot like someone falling out of bed. Voices... but too faint for Frank to make out the words.

The sun was up, its early morning rays shining through the gaps in the curtains and filling the room with a greyish light. Yawning, Frank glanced over at the other bed, and saw Marty McFly still fast asleep in some unnatural sleeping position the teen had somehow or other contorted himself into during the night.

Frank remembered watching *Back to the Future* several years ago and seeing the part near the end where they showed Marty sleeping in some awkward position. But that had been different... that Marty didn't look like him, unlike this one. Different universe, different actor...

Swinging his legs over to the side of the bed, Frank stared at the teenager in fascination, marvelling at the remarkable flexibility of the human body.

The digital clock on the table read 8:13, but Frank's internal clock told him that it was about seven in the evening... and to say the least, he was hungry. Frank was about to go check the cupboards for something edible, when Marty stirred and he sat back down on the bed, deciding that his stomach could wait.

Next to him, Marty opened his eyes and groaned softly upon realising where he was.

"Marty, can I ask you a question?"

The teen slowly sat up in bed and looked at him. "Yeah?"

Frank decided to get straight to the point. "How on earth do you breathe when you sleep like that?"

Marty stared. "Sleep like what?"

"Like that. Three-quarters on your side, one arm under you, the other arm behind you and your pillow jammed halfway in your mouth. I tried to do that just now and I think I broke something."

Marty didn't know what to say to that. He got out of bed and went over to the bathroom to wash out his mouth, because it didn't taste too good. He pondered for a wistful moment how a toothbrush and some toothpaste would be nice.

Frank stood in the doorway of the bathroom, hands in pockets and watching the teen. Marty felt a wave of unease wash over him. Frank freaked him out, for some reason other than the obvious. Something about his eyes; they looked... *haunted*, somehow. Then again, Frank *had* said that he could see ghosts, so it probably had something to do with that.

The doorbell rang. "Room service!" a voice called out from behind the door. Frank left Marty to see what was going on, just as the door was unbolted from the outside and kicked open to reveal a twenty-something-year-old guy with a food tray in his hand and a grin on his face.

"Breakfast," he said. "The hotel guests never finish all the food so you can have the extras."

"Who are you?" Frank asked warily.

"You know Keith, right? I'm his brother."

"...Andrew?"

"Nope. Actually Andrew's our half-brother. He's a fourteen-year-old twerp who wants to be an actor someday." The youth briefly rolled his eyes. "I'm Adwin. And that's A-D-W-I-N, not E-D-W-I-N. People keep getting it wrong."

"Right. Thanks for the food. You can go now." Frank took the tray from Adwin and placed it on the nearby table.

"Eat, drink and be merry... for in a few days you shall die," Adwin unnecessarily added with a smirk, before locking the door and leaving.

"Breakfast," Frank explained when Marty came out of the bathroom.

Marty stared suspiciously at the food. "Are you sure that's edible?"

"Probably. Keith wants to test the possibility of dimensional incompatibility killing us, remember? It would kind of ruin the experiment if the food kills us instead."

Marty remained unconvinced, so Frank picked up a sausage and bit off one end. He chewed a while, then swallowed as Marty watched him closely.

"Are you still alive?"

"Yeah, I think so," Frank said, gazing philosophically at the half-eaten sausage. "I've died twice before. I know what it feels like." Frank paused, ignoring the look Marty gave him upon hearing his last two sentences. "The food's fine."

Marty joined him after some hesitation. He wasn't particularly keen on having possibly-poisoned breakfast in a weird room in a weird hotel in a weird universe with some creepy guy who looked like him. His heart ached briefly for the mornings he knew, with the smell of coffee in the air, Dave dressed for work and sitting at the table with Linda, his parents getting ready for the day, and he, Marty, rushing to be on time for school...

Marty mentally scratched the school bit out of his reminiscences and then went back to dwelling on his memories of home.

It was so far away... he didn't even know if he'd ever be able to get back...

"Hey," Frank said gently. "Eat up."

Marty listlessly picked up a spoon and scooped up a spoonful of something that may or may not have been mashed potato.

"Michael J. Fox is a vegetarian," Frank said randomly after some time.

"How'd you know that?"

"The Internet. I was online last night until four in the morning."

They lapsed back into an uncomfortable silence broken only by the sounds of eating. It was too quiet, Marty thought. He shifted slightly in his seat and stuck a lettuce leaf into his mouth.

"He's really rich," Frank mused in a thoughtful sort of way.

**

Meanwhile, down by the side of his bed, his legs tangled in the bedding, Neo yelled again as Ted made to move closer. "Stay away from me!"

"Are you okay, dude?"

"My *name*... is *Neo*," the man said through gritted teeth. "Stop calling me 'dude'."

"Sure, dude. You sure you're okay? That was one heinous fall."

"Yes." One of Neo's legs shook free of the bedding and accidentally whacked the bedside table. He flinched in pain.

"You don't look okay," Ted observed, getting off the bed and moving towards him. Crouching down, he reached out a hand to help Neo off the floor.

"I said I'm... DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Startled, Ted withdrew his hand and watched apprehensively as Neo struggled to his feet and backed against the closets. One hand grasping hold of the closet door's handle as though preparing to yank the door open and bolt inside, Neo tried to calm down.

"Right," he said, his voice shaking. "Who are you?"

A friendly smile flitted across the teen's face. "My name's Ted. Ted 'Theodore' Logan."

"Okay," Neo said, though he looked and sounded far from it. He closed his eyes and tried to block the teen from his vision, imagining Ted wasn't there in the hope that it might make him disappear... He opened his eyes, saw that Ted was still there, and then reality finally hit him with something which people generally wouldn't like to be hit with. "*No*," he moaned. "No. No. No. No. No."

"...Neo?"

"No! No! No! No!"

"Your name's 'No'?"

"NO! No. No. No. No..." Letting go of the door handle, Neo buried his face in his knees and put his arms around them.

Several seconds of silence passed.

"Neo?" Ted asked tentatively.

"Go away," came the muffled response, so the teen obeyed and went off to explore the attached bathroom.

There was a loud knock on the door. "Room service!"

Bolts came undone and Adwin pushed the door open. He stepped halfway through the doorway, holding a tray of food. "Hello?" he called out. "Anyone home? If you don't want breakfast I'll just..."

Neo finally got up, walked over, took the tray and walked back.

"Hey!" Adwin yelled. "Aren't you even going to thank me?"

Neo went back to the door. "Thank you," he said, then pushed the door shut and walked back to the tray of food on the table.

He sat down and stared at it in barely-concealed wonder, Ted forgotten for the moment.

Real food.

He'd never seen any of it before, apart from the gooey white stuff he ate on the *Nebuchadnezzar*, which he didn't consider actual food anyway.

The possibility of food poisoning fledted briefly across his mind, but Neo pushed it aside. If he was going to die, he might as well do so eating. Picking up a fork, he poked at a potato and marvelled silently at it, more fascinated with the fact that it was a *real potato* than the fact that it also happened to bear a curious resemblance to Paul McCartney's face.

The bathroom door opened, and Ted wandered over to the table. "Is that food?"

"No, it's a sofa," Neo replied, in a seriously pathetic attempt at sarcasm.

Ted stared at the tray. "Really?" he asked after some time.

"No."

"Oh."

Neo speared a baked bean and ate it. "I thought I told you to go away," he said quietly.

"I'm hungry, dude."

Neo's only response was to fork up another singular baked bean and stick it into his mouth. Ted pulled up a chair and sat next to him, whereupon Neo edged away several centimetres.

The teen took a spoon and scooped up several baked beans. "How old are you, dude?"

"Thirty-seven." Neo decided that the fork wasn't exactly the most effective of cutlery when it came to baked beans, and he replaced it with a spoon.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Maybe."

"What's her name?"

"Trinity."

"What kind of a name is that?"

Neo went after the scrambled eggs and didn't reply. He liked the eggs. They were nice and yellow with bits of white in them.

"Where do you live?" Ted asked.

"Earth."

"Which part?"

"Underground."

"*Whoa!* What's it like?"

"Dark." Neo took another spoonful of scrambled eggs. *There is no spoon*, he thought suddenly for no reason whatsoever, then dismissed the thought.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

"You don't shut up, do you?" Neo replied in the same tone of voice, then tried unsuccessfully to scoop up a sausage with his spoon. After trying about three times, he put the spoon down and took back his fork.

Ted found all this very amusing.

"Stop staring at me," Neo said testily.

"I'm not..."

Neo slammed down the fork, got up from the table and walked off to sit down by the side of the bed. Head in hands, trembling slightly, he then proceeded to stare unseeingly at the carpeted floor.

"...Neo?"

No reply. Ted stared after him for a while, wondering if he should do something, then decided against it and went back to finishing his share of the food.

One thing was certain, though. He missed Bill.

Chapter Seven

1982

The Real World

Three years had passed since that fateful day, but the incident remained fresh as ever in then nine-year-old Keith's mind. Over time, his mother's films that he used to find such a source of comfort had become loathsome to him. He saw them mocking him as they talked and smiled and laughed: all her characters, fine and healthy and alive, while she, the actor, was dead.

Why couldn't they have died instead? Keith often found himself wondering bitterly. It wouldn't have mattered then, because the characters weren't real and it wouldn't have mattered to anyone, no one cared about *them*, they were nothing, they could afford to die.

Rachel Kenselton's character on the screen giggled merrily at some joke another character had told her, and Keith's cheeks burned with fury.

How dare you laugh? Why couldn't you die instead? If it weren't for my mother, you wouldn't even exist... Why did she have to die, why couldn't you, why couldn't you...

And yet Keith couldn't bring himself to hate them either, for they looked too much like his mother. Each time he saw her films, he remembered her face, her eyes, her smile, her voice, her touch; the characters on the screen were mere copies, but so like the original, so close and yet so far...

Keith missed his mother so much.

His father didn't seem to care. He was always out these days, getting drunk, seeing other women and doing goodness knows what with them. Keith heard him coming back sometimes, late at night when he couldn't sleep.

The next morning, Keith got into a fight in school. It was just a trivial matter; nothing at all, really, but he wasn't able to control himself. His classmate, Thomas, was telling a friend the *Star Wars* storyline and Keith just so happened to be sitting nearby, listening.

There was nothing at all wrong with what Thomas was saying, just that he was substituting all the characters' names with the actors' names to tell the story. Keith endured several minutes of, "Then

Mark Hamill did this, and Harrison Ford did that, and Carrie Fisher did..." before he couldn't take it any longer.

"His name is Luke Skywalker," Keith said quietly and clearly, as Thomas was giving a graphic account of how Mark Hamill's X-Wing starfighter was blowing up the Imperial TIE fighters in the Death Star attack.

Thomas glared at him for interrupting. The two of them weren't exactly on the best of terms. "It's the same thing, moron."

"It's not."

"Yes it is."

"The actor and character are two completely different people," Keith said. "They have different lives, different personalities... Mark Richard Hamill was born on September 25th, 1951 in Oakland, California, to his parents William and Suzanne Hamill, whereas Luke Skywalker was born on Tatooine a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away to Anakin and Padme Skywalker..."

Thomas gave him a look that plainly said that he thought the whole conversation was a pointless waste of time. "Dork," he said, then revelation dawned, and he sneered. "You're thinking about your mother, aren't you? She really was stupid in all those movies of hers, wasn't she?"

Thomas turned to his friend, the one he had been telling about *Star Wars*. "Hey, did you see the one where she was being attacked by the guy in the monster suit, and she was like, "Aaah! Save me! Save..."

The next thing Thomas knew, he was on the ground. Keith was on top of him, screaming and pummeling him for all he was worth. Thomas tried to get up but couldn't; after three years of hard work, Keith was now a blackbelt in karate and was a force to be reckoned with. Keith had first learnt it as a form of self-defence against Walter, but in times like this his training came in useful too.

Five minutes later, Keith found himself once again in the principal's office. His fights in school always ended the same way, and as usual, it was all his fault.

Mr. Martin Hopkins, the principal, sighed as he saw him. "What is it this time, Keith?"

"He started it," the boy muttered, staring at the table and kicking at its legs.

"Really? From what I heard, Thomas and his friends were just having their own conversation when you rudely interrupted him and then beat him up. Is that true?"

Keith scowled. It was useless to try and explain the situation. No one ever believed him, anyway.

"*Is that true*, Keith?" Mr. Hopkins repeated.

Reluctantly, the boy gave a slight nod. There was no point in arguing. He might just as well get the whole thing over and done with.

The principal sighed again. "You're a bright student, Keith. Skipped two grades, and still doing better than most people in your class... But all that doesn't exempt you from the school rules, and as long as you are a student in this school, you have to *follow* those rules. Knowing karate doesn't mean you can just go picking fights with people. Don't abuse your skills, Keith."

The nine-year-old wasn't really paying attention, engrossed in the intricate pattern carved into the woodwork of the table. His eyes followed the design along the side, watching as it curved around and came back the other way...

"Are you listening to me?"

Keith started and looked up.

"I want you to apologise to Thomas," Mr. Hopkins said.

The boy grimaced.

"Don't look at me like that. You were wrong, you admit it, so apologise to him. Go out now and do it. He's outside. I'll be watching you."

Slowly, Keith got up and went out of the room, where Thomas was sitting and smirking at him. "Sorry," he mumbled grudgingly.

Thomas' eyes widened in mock surprise. "What? I can't hear you."

"I SAID I'M SORRY, OKAY?" Keith yelled.

Giving Thomas a last glare, Keith ran all the way to his favourite place at the back of the school, where he threw himself against the brick wall, kicking it until his foot hurt too much to continue; then he slid down onto the grass, his arms curling protectively around himself, the hot tears running from his eyes.

Chapter Eight

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

"What d'you mean, we have to wait twenty-four hours?" Dave McFly demanded of the police officer, Steven Dent. "Look, my little brother might right now be having his limbs chopped off and be about to be shipped off to Timbuktu or..."

"Or he may have decided to spend the night at a friend's house and forgotten to tell you about it," Steven replied with maddening calm and a British accent. "I'm very sorry, sir, but that's our policy. A person has to be missing for at least twenty-four hours before a proper police report can be made. Two hours is just not enough, I'm afraid."

Hey, that rhymes! Steven thought to himself. He gave a small smile and stirred his cup of tea.

Dave was starting to look murderous, his hand gestures getting more vigorous. "What if he's dead, huh? What if Marty's lying in a gutter somewhere on the brink of death, needing urgent medical assistance in a much shorter time than your precious twenty-four hours, and by the time you guys *finally* get there, he's dead? What're you going to do then, huh?"

Steven sighed. "Why don't you take some time to look at things from our point of view. We're all having a nice, quiet morning when all of a sudden you come barging in yelling that your brother has either disappeared or turned into a sheep. Upon further questioning, we learn that this discovery happened less than two hours ago. So who's the one being unreasonable here?"

Dave fumed on the spot.

Steven took a sip of tea and savoured the taste of the sweet hot liquid in his mouth. He liked tea. "Twenty-four hours. See you then."

**

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

No teenager should ever have to deal with the problem of discovering that his best friend has just vanished into thin air. It's one of those strange things in life that should never happen to anyone, but when it does, it has a tendency to get that person into trouble.

Bill S. Preston Esquire was painfully aware of this. He'd spent a good five seconds or so just staring at the dangling telephone before it occurred to him to pick it up and see if there was anyone at the other end who might give him a clue regarding Ted's whereabouts. However, the line was dead and he put the phone back down.

"Ted?" he called out. "Where are you, dude?"

There was no response. Bill walked through the rented house, searching, but all to no avail. Panic started to grow in him. There was nowhere Ted could have gone... and he had no reason to go anywhere. Surely he would have informed him first, or at the very least bothered to put down the phone...

Thoughts of little green men started to enter Bill's mind. It made him uneasy, and so he tried to push them aside and think rationally. Besides, he doubted Yoda and his friends were in the human-abduction line. Yoda at least seemed more than content to spend his days quietly in a little house on the swampy planet Dagobah.

Ted didn't seem to be anywhere in the house as far as he could see, and he had no reason to be hiding... so that probably meant that he had left, somehow, unlikely as it might seem. Maybe the phone call had something to do with it... really bad news, perhaps? But even then, Ted would have told him first... they told each other everything...

There weren't many places the teen could have gone. Maybe he had gone out to the garage where Lewis and the band were practising, but it didn't seem likely; Lewis had made it quite clear that the two of them were to stay out of the way.

But Bill didn't have any other suitable leads to follow, so he left and headed for the garage. Loud music blasted out at him as he opened the side door, and it took a while before the band leader noticed his presence.

"I thought I told you to stay out of here!" Lewis yelled over the sound of the drummer happily whacking away at the drums.

Bill said something that Lewis couldn't quite hear.

"Ivan, shut up!" Lewis shouted, and the drummer finally took the hint. Lewis looked back at Bill. "What did you say?"

"Ted's missing."

Lewis gave him an incredulous look. "You interrupted us for *that*? He probably just went out for a walk or something."

"But..."

The phone chose that moment to ring. Lewis sighed and went over to the corner to pick it up. "Hello?" He grimaced. "No, I don't know where he is. I haven't *seen* Marty McFly at all today, and... *what?* ...Look, talk to this kid, okay? His friend just went missing too." Lewis held out the phone to Bill. "Jennifer Parker says her boyfriend 'either disappeared or turned into a sheep'. Speak to her."

"What?" Bill took up the phone. "Hello?"

"Take the phone outside," Lewis advised, so Bill carried it out of the garage and then had a hard time trying to close the door on the phone cord. Inside, the music started up again.

Chapter Nine

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

Sitting behind his desk in his office at the hotel and munching on chocolate chip cookies, Keith was feeling particularly pleased with himself. This was fun. He'd watch them crack, one by one... Marty would probably be the first, then Neo. This all could make a rather interesting study on human psychology, he thought. But that was far from the main reason why Keith had got them here in the first place.

Another one of the other reasons was that it gave him pleasure to hear them scream, to see the frightened, helpless expressions on their faces... Keith finally had a chance to get back for all those years when *he* had been the victim, those years in school where he was constantly being picked on by school bullies, those years where he'd been unable to do anything as they beat him up, took his things and laughed at his feeble attempts at self defence.

It may have been a long time ago; but he remembered. Walter H. Reynolds and his gang – the bane of Keith's schooldays. It wasn't his fault that the teachers liked him. He couldn't even stand them, but it wasn't as if anyone cared about that particular fact. They just enjoyed having someone to torture, and Keith, the small nerdy Eurasian kid, just so happened to be their favourite target. After going for karate

classes, he managed to survive the rest of high school and college much better... but the memories still remained.

But now, now things had changed, he thought with a grim sense of satisfaction. Now he was the one with the power, and he was going to make people suffer as he had suffered all those years ago...

Keith was jolted out of his thoughts by the sound of the door opening. Adwin entered and slumped into a nearby armchair. "I fed them," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Thanks."

Adwin raised his head to look up at his brother. "Why'd you bring the four of them here, of all people?"

"Why not?"

"I was just wondering. I mean, there are so many more interesting characters out there. Why them?"

Keith picked up a pen and twirled it absent-mindedly between his fingers as he tried to fudge an answer to Adwin's question. He couldn't tell him the truth. Adwin wouldn't believe it. No one would. "I don't know..." he said, to stall for time. "Marty because... uh, it was his universe that helped mess up the space-time continuum so much – it was the easiest pa... easiest universe to access. Neo, because... uh, his universe was also affected by the space-time rips... Frank was just so I could traumatise Marty. Ted was living in Marty's universe too, so it was a two-in-one deal, plus he could freak Neo out and kind of... control him, keep him too traumatised to do anything too dangerous..."

Keith put down the pen and sat back in his chair. "You have to admit that there are a lot of people out there who would die to know what would happen if the two of them got together. There are actually fan fiction stories about that online, written by bored teenagers with no life. One person theorised that they would spend several hours taking turns to say 'Whoa'.² And besides, I can't stand Keanu Reeves. He spends half his time on screen trying to look cool and the other half trying to look hot. As for his acting... I just thought it might be fun to torment two of his characters."

"Why don't you get Han Solo and Indiana Jones together too?"

"I thought of that, but, uh... I don't deny that it'd be interesting, but it's too dangerous. I don't want to risk it. Maybe... maybe another time."

Adwin swung himself aimlessly around in the swivel chair and nearly hit himself against the wall. Eventually he decided that he should get down to doing something more productive, and left the room.

**

Adwin glanced furtively around as he stepped out of the lift onto the floor of the fourth floor lobby, then wondered why he bothered. Keith was probably still downstairs, and no guests were living on this floor – apart from the four inter-dimensional travellers, of course. Rooms 436 and 437, he thought as he walked past the doors, then stopped and went back to them.

Both doors were still bolted from the outside. *What was the fun in that?* Adwin mused. *Why bother bringing a bunch of movie characters into the real world if you were just going to lock them up?*

Grinning, Adwin silently unbolted both doors. He wondered what would happen when the rooms' occupants found out. If they decided to leave and go outside... he'd like to see how the real world would react to them. The tabloid newspapers would have a field day.

That job done, Adwin turned right and entered the first door in the corridor there; the control room of Keith's set up. He sat down in front of one of the computers in the room and shook the mouse to get it out of screensaver mode. The screen was full of weird diagrams with weird scratchy lines and scanned-in spidery handwriting that he couldn't make any sense of, so he got up and tried the next computer instead.

This one seemed to display some sort of database – that of the forty-two and counting identified universes Keith had managed to break into, as well as locks on several inhabitants from each. Adwin clicked around and found records of the four characters Keith had brought in.

² I can't remember who this person was, but whoever you are, if you're reading this, thanks for the idea.

Adwin scrolled through the universe database again. Cool. *Star Wars* was one of them? And Keith hadn't done anything about it? *Sheesh*. Keith had decided to go play around with two same-actor-different-character pairs when he could have got Luke Skywalker here instead? Adwin couldn't understand his brother at times.

Shaking his head, Adwin clicked around and activated the machine. It was simple. Keith had everything organized so well on the computer with helpful labels that it didn't take a rocket scientist with a PhD in rocketing to figure out how to work the machine.

Hitting the 'Enter' button, Adwin smiled as the machine hummed to life... and a thump was heard in the next room as Luke Skywalker circa post-*A New Hope* made his entry into the real world.

**

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

The first thing Luke noticed was the pain, searing through his body as he hit the ground with a roll. It took him a while longer to realise that he could no longer feel the presence of the Force.

A slow panic started to grow in Luke as he tried to sit up and get his bearings. The Force had been a constant he could depend on; it was everywhere in the universe, an energy field surrounding all things... But here, all he felt was a huge void where the Force should be. Though he rarely used it, he had always been subconsciously aware of its being there, always in reach should he need to use it.

Gradually, the pain subsided, but Luke still felt weird. It was as though something had taken him apart and then put him back again not quite properly. Struggling into a better position on the floor, Luke blinked to try and clear the disorientation from his mind.

What happened? How'd I get here? Was it some new teleportation device?

The last thing he remembered was preparing for bed, exhausted after a day's flying with the rest of Rogue Squadron. Yet somehow, all that seemed a faraway blur: surreal almost. What was real was the present, the feel of the hard white floor beneath him, and the sound of one of the room's two doors opening as a young man stepped in, gazing with a poorly concealed wonder at the young Jedi-in-training.

"Luke Skywalker?" the man asked.

Luke stared fuzzily back. He still felt dizzy. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered why this person needed to confirm his identity. If he wasn't sure who he was, why had he taken him in the first place?

"Are you Luke Skywalker?" Adwin asked again.

Luke gave a wary nod. Adwin smiled, seemingly content.

I have a bad feeling about this...

"Your parents were Padme and Anakin Skywalker?" It was more of a statement than a question. "But you never knew them, did you? Because from young the only family you knew were your uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, whom you stayed with on the moisture farm at the Lars homestead. Your uncle wanted you to be a moisture farmer like him when you grew up, but you didn't agree, right? Because you wanted to join the Imperial Academy like your friends did..."

Luke's mind was starting to clear a little. "How'd you know all that?" he asked, interrupting Adwin's delighted recitation of all his *Star Wars* knowledge. "Who are you? Where is this place?"

Adwin grinned. "You want to know where you are? This is the real world, Luke. Over here, you don't exist. Over here, you're not real. You're just a fictional character from a movie trilogy known as *Star Wars*. A highly successful movie trilogy that spawned one of the largest film franchises ever, but just a movie trilogy nonetheless."

Most of the words didn't quite register with Luke, and he dismissed them as unimportant. "Who put you up to this?" he asked instead. "Are you working for the Empire?"

"I... No."

"Then what do you want with me?"

Adwin was at a loss for words. Things weren't turning out the way he had expected. "Uh..." he said, the look on his face turning to one of unease as Luke's hand moved to his lightsaber.

Chapter Ten
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

It didn't take long for Frank to start to see several good points about the whole situation. They had free food and free shelter, in what seemed to be a four or five star hotel. Of course, the downside was that there was some guy out there who thought it might be fun to see if they died... but then again, everything in life has a price to it.

Frank finished eating and went to switch on the computer as Marty went on with his breakfast. The computer finished booting up, and Frank double-clicked on some icon. "I thought you might like to hear this..."

"What's that?"

"The *Back to the Future* theme song," Frank replied with a meaningful look at the teen, as the first few bars of the Alan Silvestri music began to play, performed in all its glory by the Outatime Orchestra.

Pushing his chair back, Marty slowly walked over to the computer. He sat down on the bed next to it and stared at the Windows Media Player window on the screen as the music played its way through to the final majestic quaver.

For a moment, there was silence in the room.

"Nice, huh?" Frank asked after a while.

Marty nodded slowly, staring down at the carpet. Somewhere outside, a bird fluttered past the window. "I want to go home," he said quietly. "I don't belong here."

"It's not your fault that you're here. Keith made you come, and it's not like you can do anything about it."

The teen didn't reply, overcome with a sudden desperate homesickness for a home he wasn't even sure existed.

Frank, on the other hand, had no real reason to feel homesick. His parents were dead, his wife had been murdered, he was an only child and his girlfriend had been killed when his house collapsed on her. There wasn't anyone he cared about enough to miss, and it wasn't as if anyone cared about him either.

Furthermore, he had not much intention to leave the real world until he had learnt exactly how much cash Michael J. Fox had in his bank account and how much of it he could manage to steal with just a signature, a thumbprint, and – if the bank people still weren't convinced – a DNA scan. (Though maybe he shouldn't try the latter. His DNA might be different from the actor's; they had different parents, for one.)

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Then ask for more lemons.

The only problem was that Keith intended him to die, and Frank couldn't exactly do all that if he were dead.

**

Just a few days before, if someone had told Adwin that he was going to find himself cornered by Luke Skywalker holding a lightsaber blade dangerously close to Adwin's neck, he would have laughed it off as impossible.

However, that was just what was happening now. The conversation between Luke and Adwin had gone swiftly downhill to the point when Adwin had reached for the tranquilliser gun he had brought along 'just in case' and pulled the trigger. The next thing he knew, Luke's lightsaber had activated, sliced deftly

through the tranquilliser dart, swiped against the wall, and ended up mere centimetres from Adwin's jugular.

It was not exactly the scene that he had envisioned when he'd thought of bringing Luke over.

The tranquilliser gun had been a bad idea, Adwin reflected a little too late. Now Luke probably thought he wanted to kill him, and that was never a good thing; especially considering that the aforementioned Jedi-in-training had a lightsaber with him.

Adwin realised what a pathetic situation he was in.

"Ah..." he said, looking uneasily at the humming blade below his chin.

"What do you want with me?" Luke asked.

"Um..." Adwin's brain seemed to have gone temporarily on vacation to Singapore.

"You were trying to kill me, weren't you?"

Adwin wished Keith was there. "I wasn't," he croaked out. "That was just a tranquilliser..." – the look on Luke's face suggested that he had no idea what that was – "you know... like... just to, uh, stun..."

"Why would you want to do that?"

Adwin couldn't think clearly, knowing that at any moment he could have his head sliced off. "Look, I don't want to hurt you, okay?" he pleaded. "Let me go."

Luke wasn't too sure if he could trust him. For some reason, he was having trouble sensing anything through the Force. Several seconds passed, then he finally deactivated his lightsaber and the blade withdrew into the hilt with a *fwoop*. Adwin breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed a little.

"Can you send me back?" Luke asked.

"No... I... I don't know how to..."

"Then I suppose I'll have to find my own way back," Luke concluded, sticking his lightsaber back into his utility belt and heading towards the door.

Adwin felt understandably jittery as he watched Luke enter the lift and make his way to the ground floor of the hotel, where Luke presumably meant to go walk the streets of Los Angeles looking for the nearest spaceport. The thought made Adwin feel faintly dizzy.

Keith was so going to kill him.

The tabloid newspapers would indeed have a field day.

Adwin let himself into his brother's room – number 439, which had served as Keith's home for several years – and headed to the fridge, looking for anything with alcohol in it.

He then proceeded to get himself very drunk.

**

Bill Preston ran up the gravel driveway to the garage, where Jennifer was waiting.

"Are you Jennifer Parker?" he asked, pausing to catch his breath.

Jennifer nodded. "You're Bill, right?"

"Yeah."

"Come on," she said. Jennifer pushed open the metal gate to let them both in, then hunted under the doormat for the keys the way she had seen Marty do. Finding them, she unlocked the garage door and the two of them stepped in.

Bill's gaze alighted on the anachronistic computer sitting on the desk, which Jennifer walked over to and turned on.

"What do you think happened?" he asked.

Jennifer shook her head slowly, an expression of worry crossing her face. "I don't know. I've got a feeling that it's got something to do with something on this computer, but apart from that I don't know anything." She paused. "But... I guess that before you can fully understand anything, I've got to tell you about how this all started..." Jennifer looked up from the computer screen to the fourteen-year-old. "Can you swear to keep this all a secret?"

Bill nodded. "Sure."

Jennifer gave a short laugh. "I'm actually not supposed to tell anyone these things, but given the circumstances..." She took a deep breath. "All right. Everything started two months ago, around the end of October when Marty's best friend, Doctor Brown, invented a time machine..."

**

One thing Luke decided was that he'd never seen any planet like this before. Admittedly, though, there were a lot of planets in a galaxy, and lots of galaxies, and so just about anything could be possible. Luke wasn't sure what it was about this place that felt different, and then he realised that *all* the people he had seen so far were human. To add to that, most of them were giving him strange looks as he passed, and one couple was just outright gaping at him.

The level of technology here was also strange; on one hand this planet seemed amazingly primitive, but on the other hand it seemed *newer*, somehow.

Luke realised with a sudden jolt that all this probably meant one thing: the planet did not yet have any form of communication with other planets.

There was only one way to find out. Luke went over to a random guy. "Excuse me," he asked. "Do you know where the nearest spaceport is?"

The man looked Luke up and down and glared. "Get lost, Trekkie," he snarled, in a veritable display of movie ignorance which would have angered any self-respecting *Star Wars* fan.

Luke didn't know this, but he took it to either mean 'no' or that the person he'd asked was in a particularly bad mood. He was right on both counts.

Chapter Eleven

April 1989
The Real World

The hands on the clock read three minutes to four in the afternoon, but the sky overhead was already grey with the oncoming storm. Lightning flashed in the slow-moving clouds. Rumbles of thunder filled the air. A brief pause, then the rain poured out of the heavens to drum out their constant rhythm on the ground below.

Inside, the sixteen-year-old stirred slightly. Eyes still closed, he adjusted the position of his arms and murmured to himself. Then he went back to sleep, his head rested on his arms on the table next to an open book on quantum physics.

A doorbell rang in the distance. Shut off from the conscious world, Keith didn't hear.

Seconds passed. The doorbell sounded again, more impatiently this time. There was a thud as something fell. Muffled swearing, then the jangle of keys extracted from an inconveniently-placed pocket, and the door was unlocked. The sound of the downpour outside crescendo-ed as water rained through the open doorway; then the door slammed shut and it was quiet again.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway.

"Keith!"

The teen half-opened his eyes and peered at the clock. It was almost four... had someone just called him? Keith lifted his head from the table and yawned. He ran his fingers through his dark brown hair and stared blearily at his closed bedroom door, waiting to see if there was anyone there.

The door burst open and Nathan Fong entered, half-drenched from the rain.

"Dad..." Keith started.

"Didn't you get my call?" Nathan asked irritably. "It's *pouring* out there, and I had to walk all the way back without an umbrella. I borrowed the store's phone to ask you to bring one over for me, but you didn't pick up..."

"I'm sorry... I guess I fell asleep..."

Nathan muttered something under his breath. His eyes scanned the room, looking for something he could yell about, but Keith's room was neat as usual. Nathan picked up the quantum physics book. "What's this?" he asked.

"Uh... a library book. Just... some extra studying..."

"On parallel universes again, huh?" Nathan asked, glancing through the synopsis on the book jacket.

"I..."

"We've been through this already, Keith. It's not going to work, okay? You can't just... zap people over from parallel universes. That's science-fiction. She's *dead*, Keith, can't you just accept that? It's been eleven years, for crying out loud! Why can't you just move on?"

"Because there's still a chance," Keith said earnestly. "It's not impossible, it's been proven by science, other universes *do* exist, it's just a matter of... of bridging the... crossing over... other worlds..."

Nathan sighed and put down the book. "Look, even... Let's say it *does* work. So what? It won't be her, just some parallel universe incarnation..."

"It doesn't matter!" Keith half-yelled. "I just want to see her again, don't you understand that?"

"So you're going to waste the rest of your life on this?" Nathan questioned. "Because you think that *maybe* you can bring some version of her back? Get a grip, Keith. You can't just throw reality out the window like that. This is the real world. This is reality, and the reality is all this, here, now. You can't just get rid of it like that. Your mother's dead. Get over it. You can't change the past. This isn't some science-fiction story, like... like *Back to the Future* or something. You can't go flying off to 1979 with Doc Brown in a time machine to stop that accident from happening. What's happened has *happened*. That's just life. Accept it. Move on."

"Yeah, so maybe I can't change the past," Keith said. "But I can change the future."

There was a moment's silence.

"What if it works, Dad?" Keith implored quietly. "What if?"

Nathan shook his head and tossed the car keys to his son. The teen caught them and looked at them.

"Go pick up Adwin. He's at Jeff's house."

"He can get home on his own," Keith said.

"It's not about him, Keith. It's about you. Get out into the real world. You're losing touch with reality, spending all day cooped up here on your own wrapped up in all your fantasies. Go out there, see the people, see the streets, the buildings, how *normal* everything is, and maybe the world will talk some sense into you."

**

It was ironic, Keith thought as he drove through the streets. Everything looked even less real out here. The vague shapes of people rushing through the rain, the sheets of water cascading down the car windows, the grey thundering sky... It felt surreal. As if *things* could happen. As if there was more to

this world than the normality people always assumed it had. As if anything was possible, as long as you didn't assume it wasn't...

Other worlds... what if?

What if.

Chapter Twelve

1st April 2004, Thursday
Room 437, Kenselton Hotel

Frank surfed around the Internet as Marty paced the room, coming over now and then to peek at what Frank was doing.

Through the walls they shared with the next-door room suddenly came the sound of yelling and what sounded suspiciously like the second censored F-word that day. Frank figured that Neo was probably pretty mad at something or someone.

"What're we supposed to do now?" Marty asked, sinking down onto a bed.

"Just sit around, wait for lunch, have lunch, sit around a little more, wait for dinner, have dinner, go to bed, then wake up tomorrow and do it all over again." Frank sat down on the bed next to Marty. "I bet some people would be really glad to have that kind of life."

More yells from the next room, and loud banging sounds.

"I wonder what's going on there," Marty thought aloud, glancing at the wall behind him.

"You could ask."

"How?"

"Just go over to that wall and bang on it and demand to know what's going on," Frank suggested. "Or you could use the phone. Next door should be Room 436, I think. You could just try dialling that... or you could call up the police just for fun and let Keith deal with 'em." Frank gave a sly grin. "In fact, why don't you call up the fire department as well? And the hospital. And room service," he added as an afterthought, as Marty went over to the phone.

"I'll just ring up next door."

**

Seven minutes earlier
Room 436, Kenselton Hotel

Having eaten his fill, Ted wiped his mouth clean and glanced over at Neo. The man still hadn't budged, staring at the same patch of carpet he had been staring at for the past fifteen minutes or so.

Ted got up from his chair and walked over to the bed. "Neo?"

No reply.

"There's still some food left, so if you're hungry you can..."

"Which part of 'go away' don't you understand?" Neo cut in forcefully, not looking up.

Ted blinked. "I..."

"Go away," Neo asked, voice rising. He lifted up his head and glared straight at the teen. "Is that too hard for you to comprehend? I don't want to see you, I don't want to *hear* you, SO JUST **** OFF!"

Silence filled the room.

An ant crawled along the windowsill.

“Okay,” Ted finally said in a small voice. He trudged over to the other side of the room and sat down, back against the door. A great feeling of loneliness started to wash over him.

He wanted to go home.

Ted dug a hand into his jacket pockets and emptied their contents before him. There was nothing very interesting there: his wallet, house keys, tissue paper, torch, a pen, some strange thing his aunt gave him and a piece of string that he just kept around in case it might come in handy one day. Taking the string, he dumped everything else back into the pockets from whence they came and then started tying the string into knots, wondering how long it would take before it got too short to tie any more.

The fourteen-year-old checked his watch. 9:17. He glanced at the digital clock a little way off – it read 8:43, and Ted ditched the string for the moment as he adjusted the time on his watch.

Neo was still staring at the floor. He evidently didn’t know the meaning of boredom, Ted thought. The teen gazed longingly at the television set in the room, wondering whether or not Neo would yell at him if he turned it on to see what was showing.

Neo probably would.

Ted brushed his hair out of his eyes and turned back to the string. The thing was getting more knotted up by the moment, and he decided to just go turn on the television in a minute’s time regardless of what Neo might think, because if he waited any longer, he was going to die of boredom.

At the other side of the room, Neo continued to stare at the floor. He wasn’t really looking at the carpet; he just found it easier on his mind to have a uniform, one-coloured thing filling his area of vision. It made thinking easier, and it also made not thinking easier. And that was what he was trying to do now – not think. Because if he did, he didn’t think it would have a very good effect on his sanity, and his sanity was something he was currently clinging on to for dear life. His world as he knew it was falling apart, and he felt as though he was losing control of himself with each passing moment.

Neo’s left hand found his right and held it tightly. It made him feel a little more secure.

For some reason, he felt horribly exposed. He wanted to get off the bed and find a nice, safe corner where he could curl up and forget about everything, but he was too scared to move. He had no idea why; it was one of those irrational fears of the sort you get when you wake up suddenly from a nightmare, and don’t dare to move a muscle for fear that whatever horror in your nightmare might come after you if you did. Your rational mind is perfectly aware that that would not happen, but yet you remain paralysed in fear.

Neo didn’t dare to think. He didn’t feel ready to think the whole situation through and try to sort it out neatly in his head, because he had the nagging feeling that it might be too much for his mind to handle. The night before had been bad enough, but now that Ted was here as well...

Neo took another ragged breath and let it out.

Get a grip on yourself.

I can’t, I can’t...

The sound of the television suddenly cut violently into his mind, rudely disintegrating what little control he had left.

Something snapped inside Neo.

“SWITCH OFF THE F***** TV!”

Ted jumped, startled. Hurriedly, he jabbed the ‘off’ button on the remote control, then dropped it as Neo grabbed him and pinned him against the wall.

The teen gasped for breath, trying to pry Neo’s hand off his throat. “*Let me go!*”

“What’s your problem, Ted, huh?” Neo yelled, a slightly crazed look on his face. “Is it too much for me to ask that you just... just go *away* for a while and leave me *alone*, and... and stop... disturbing me... because... I... I...”

A funny feeling came over Neo as he looked into the teen's eyes: the feeling that Ted wasn't really there, but just him, him and no one else, and that he was just talking to himself...

He stared blankly at the struggling teenager, and then he was filled with the overwhelming compulsion to look away. His grasp fell limply off the teen. Neo staggered back, sank to the floor and buried his head between his knees.

Wincing, Ted massaged his neck, suitably relieved to find that his windpipe appeared to be still intact. He inched carefully away from Neo, making his way back to his earlier position by the door. The TV had been a bad idea, he reflected, sitting back down. So much for that.

He looked at Neo, huddled by the foot of the bed. *That sure is one strange dude*, he thought.

The phone rang.

"You get it," came Neo's muffled voice.

Ted wasn't going to argue. Going over to the table, he picked up the phone and answered it. "Hello?"

"Ah, hi, this is Marty McFly from, uh, next door, and me and Frank were wond..."

"*Marty McFly?* Hey, aren't you that dude from The Pinheads?"

There was a pause at the other end, and then Marty's hesitant voice came through. "Ted? Is that you?"

Ted grinned. "Yeah! What're you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I don't know, dude. This guy named Keith just sort of zapped me here this morning..."

"What happened just now?" Marty interrupted.

"What?"

"All that noise."

Ted cast a wary look at his roommate, who had his head up and seemed to be listening intently to this side of the conversation. "Neo was trying to kill me because I switched on the TV," he said into the phone. "But it's okay now, I think."

"Oh, okay then. Bye."

"Catch you later, dude!" Ted hung up.

"You know Marty?" Neo asked from the floor.

Ted hopped onto the bed and sat down. "Yeah. He plays lead guitar for The Pinheads – that's his band. We've met before, during band competitions and things like that."

"You're in a band?"

"Nah, not really. Me and my friend Bill just help out in this band called Disaster Area. We're trying to learn guitar so we can start our own band one day, but it's been most difficult. Do you know how to play, dude?"

"No."

Several seconds flashed by on the digital clock.

"How old are you?" Neo asked.

"Fourteen."

More seconds went by.

"Any idea who the idiot actor who played us is?" Neo asked.

Ted tried to recall what Keith had said to him earlier that day. "Keith told me, but I can't remember, dude. He had this totally weird name, though."

I knew it, Neo thought darkly.

**

Room 437, Kenselton Hotel
One minute earlier

"That was weird," Marty said, putting down the phone and sitting back down next to Frank.

"Who was that?"

"Ted Logan."

Frank blinked. "Isn't that the guy you told me about..."

"Yeah."

A wry grin appeared on Frank's face. "Does Keith have some kind of same-actor-different-character fetish going on or something?" A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Hey... I wonder if Han and Indy are around here somewhere."

"Don't count on it. That'd be kinda cool, though," Marty added as an afterthought.

"Yeah." Frank got up and went over to the television set. He picked up the remote control and the TV guide, then returned to the bed and hit the 'on' button on the remote.

Frank flicked through the channels. Some reporter talking... Cartoon Network... a movie... some animal documentary... HBO... AXN... more news... Discovery Channel... Disney...

Marty yelped, and Frank quickly went back to Discovery Channel, just as the screen changed to something else.

"Was that Mike-...?" Marty asked, eyes wide.

"I think so. Want to wait and see if he comes on again?"

The teen shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

Chapter Thirteen
21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

"...but when I came here this morning, Marty wasn't here," Jennifer finished.

"So what's the sheep got to do with it?" Bill asked.

"Oh, that. When I went over to the McFlays' house, there was a sheep in Marty's room. His parents... thought that *he* was the sheep, but I... don't think so. You believe everything I've said so far?"

"Yeah," came the sincere reply.

"Don't you even think it's all a bit too weird?"

Bill shrugged. "Life is always weird."

"Yeah, I guess so." Jennifer turned back to face the computer, and moved the cursor to click on the Internet Explorer icon. Nothing happened, so she clicked it repeatedly and it opened. The HillValley-Online homepage loaded on the screen.

"Whoa," Bill said, coming over to her side to join her. He gazed with unrestrained wonder at the webpage, the likes of which had never before been seen in his life. "So you think the disappearances had something to do with what happened here?"

Jennifer frowned slightly in concentration, her eyes still on the screen. "Maybe. I wonder if there's any way to find out where exactly on the Internet Marty went..."

Bill pointed to the colourful icons at the top of the screen. "What about those things there?"

Jennifer moved the cursor over them and read the text that scrolled down. "Back, forward, stop, refresh, home, search, favourites, history..."

Pausing the cursor, she looked at Bill. He shrugged. "Try that."

Jennifer clicked, and a sidebar opened up.

"Okay," she said, reading the newly-appeared links. "Let's try to start from the beginning..." She clicked on the link that read '2 Weeks Ago' and a list of websites scrolled down the sidebar in alphabetical order.

"We've got to go through *all* of them?"

"Yeah," Jennifer replied.

"That looks like a most bodacious lot of work."

"There's not much else we can do, is there?" Jennifer asked in return, scanning through the first page on the list. Bill pulled the spare chair over and sat down next to her. "What're we looking for?"

Jennifer shrugged. "I don't know... anything strange or unusual, I suppose."

"You don't know for sure?"

"I don't," Jennifer admitted.

Bill sighed. "Bogus."

They got through the 'A's fairly quickly, and it wasn't long before Jennifer clicked on the link for BTTF.com. The page opened, she caught the name 'McFly', and Jennifer took a sharp intake of breath that made Bill look up.

"You found it?" he asked.

"I *think* this might be it, but..." Jennifer's eyes narrowed as she scrutinised the page. "I'm not sure what this means. It's like... they're writing as though it's..."

"Like it's a movie," Bill finished quietly. "Go to that thing that says 'Cast and Crew'."

Jennifer clicked on the link, and it opened into a list of names.

"Try one of them," Bill suggested.

Jennifer clicked on a random female name.

The page loaded.

She stared.

She freaked out.

She used God's name in vain.

Loudly.

**

1st April 2004, Thursday

The Real World

About an hour later, several things were going on at the same time.

Frank was suffering from jet lag and was zonked out on the bed fast asleep.

Ted was watching *Rocko's Modern Life* on TV as he munched on barbeque flavoured potato chips that he had found in the room larder.

Neo was lying on a bed and staring intently at the ceiling.

Adwin was passed out on Keith's bed, blissfully drunk.

Keith was having lunch.

The sheep in Marty's room was curled up next to his bed, the teen's towel draped over its head as it counted sheep in an attempt to fall asleep.

Marty was sitting in the closet of Room 437. The only light he got was that which came through the slats in the closet's doors, and he thought that the less he could see, the better. Some time ago he had come to the conclusion that if there was someone out there dictating his every move and making a movie out of his life, there was no reason for him to make that person's job any easier by doing something interesting.

It seemed unlikely that any movie producer in his right mind would spend several hours of film on some guy huddled in the darkness of a closet, so that was just what Marty was going to do. Something told him that if this were indeed the real world, all he did here would not be recorded, but he had spent the last few hours with the uncanny feeling that he was being watched, and he therefore wasn't going to take any chances. In the closet, he felt safer.

About fifteen minutes passed, during the better part of which Marty stared into the shadows suffering from his existential dilemma and contemplating the meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything. He didn't consider 'Forty-two' a satisfactory answer, no matter what Douglas Noel Adams might have thought.

Marty sighed.

Another five minutes elapsed and Marty started feeling a little cramped. The closet wasn't exactly a very spacious one.

So this is what it has come to, he thought. Sitting in a tiny closet in the dark. Frank was probably more comfortable on the bed, because beds in general tended to be more comfortable than poky little hotel closets.

Frank. Marty realised not for the first time how much of a stranger his roommate actually was. Apart from that little online conversation, the two of them had never met until the previous night. He knew next to nothing about Frank Bannister. For all Marty knew, he could be a murderer, or a terrorist, or a conman, or a vampire, or...

Being played by the same actor wasn't exactly grounds enough for trusting someone.

But Marty tucked that particular consideration away into a corner of his mind and tried not to think about it. It wouldn't do to think about substantial things now, he thought, because they might provide material for whatever filmmaker or author was controlling his life. This time was for him to concentrate on nothing but something boring and box-office-worthless like sitting in the closet in the dark.

Dark, he thought.

Marty scratched his hand.

Closet, he thought.

Time slowly ticked several seconds into the future.

Dark closet, he thought.

Marty sneezed. Dust.

Sitting, he thought.

Three minutes vanished into the past.

Marty wondered what was happening now to the sheep he'd seen in his room. He wasn't too sure now that it had really been there. Then he wondered if his room even existed in the first place, and his house, and Hill Valley.

This made him sink back into depression.

Another five minutes later, Marty figured that at least an hour must have gone by and perhaps it was enough unless he wanted to start aching all over. Nudging open the closet with his left knee and toppling out onto the carpeted floor outside, he gingerly got back to his feet only to discover that one of them had gone to sleep.

The teen hobbled around a while to wake his foot, looked at the clock and discovered to his dismay that it had only been half an hour, then walked over to the door, turned the handle just for the sake of doing so, and discovered to his surprise that the door was unlocked.

Marty just stood stupidly in the doorway for a few seconds, staring dumbly out at the corridor and feeling too stunned to believe that the door was actually open. Not knowing what else to do, he went back in and shook his roommate awake.

"Hey, Frank! Wake up!"

The man half-opened his eyes, and closed them again. "Go 'way," Frank murmured sleepily.

"The door's open!"

"Go 'way." Frank clamped his pillow over his ear and ignored the teen, leaving Marty standing there helplessly. He had no idea if the door had been unlocked on purpose or whether it had been an accident. For all he knew, it could be a trap and Keith could be waiting outside to do him in if he left the room.

There was only one way to find out, but Marty didn't dare go out alone.

What's the matter, McFly? Chicken? he wondered angrily to himself, made up his mind, opened the door and went out. It was only as he heard the door click shut that Marty realised he had just locked himself out.

Marty gave himself a mental smack on the forehead. He turned back around, meaning to bang on the door and yell until Frank woke up and let him in, but then he thought about the pointlessness of doing that. He had wanted to get out of the locked room, and now he was out. Might as well have a better look at the place. He turned right and started walking.

Chapter Fourteen

1st April 2004, Thursday
Room 436, Kenselton Hotel
Meanwhile.

Neo pushed open a window and stuck his head out as wind blew past him into the room. From here, he could just make out the window that led to the lift lobby... and it was open. Neo looked downwards, mentally charting a path to that window via the ledge that ran along the side of the building. It was kind of narrow, but he supposed it could hold...

Neo unstuck his head out the window. "Do you think you can reach that?" he asked Ted.

The teen looked up. "What?"

i

"Get over here."

Ted scrambled over. "Yeah?"

"Do you think you can reach that?" Neo repeated, pointing at the distant window. "Climb along there... then you can go through that window, get to this room from outside, and unbolt the door."

Ted gazed doubtfully at the not-quite-sturdy-looking ledge hanging four floors off the ground. A fall from there would be more than enough to break his spinal cord, rack up a huge hospital bill, and paralyse him for life.

"Why don't *you* do it?" he asked instead.

Neo hesitated. "I'm afraid of heights," he muttered some time later.

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Are you?"

"Not really," Ted admitted.

Neo looked at him. "Then what are you waiting for??"

"Are you sure it's safe, dude?"

"There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

**

It was one thing, Ted decided, to be unafraid of heights when you had both feet planted firmly on the ground. But it was another thing altogether when you were hanging four floors from the ground, with nothing to support you but a crumbling ledge that, width-wise, had barely enough space to accommodate both your feet.

Four floors. It might not sound like much, but in reality a fall from that height can be much worse than a fall from a greater distance. If you were to fall from, say, the top of a hundred-storey building, you would black out seconds from taking off, be unconscious when your body reaches its terminal velocity of over a hundred kilometres an hour, and remain unconscious when you magically transform from 'free-falling human being' to 'what-the-*insert expletive here*-is-that-bloody-mess-on-the-floor?'

If you were to fall from a height of only four floors, however, there's a much higher possibility that the meeting with the ground would not kill you, but rather render you a vegetable for the rest of your miserable little life. And not even the kind of vegetable that can be made into vegetable soup or consumed for its high vitamin and fibre content, but the kind of vegetable that sits in a wheelchair all day long.

It was therefore perfectly understandable that Ted Logan felt a little freaked out.

He turned his head to look at the ground below.

Bogus, he thought.

Gripping tightly onto the windowsill, he moved sideways to the right, one foot at a time, and kept on for about a metre before reaching a protruding brick column that ran all the way down the building. The ledge continued on the other side, before hitting another column. The window after that led to the lift lobby.

Holding on to the windowsill with his left hand, Ted released his right and reached out, keeping both feet still on the ledge. His fingers barely reached halfway round the column.

Ted glanced at Neo, hoping for some advice. All he got was an unreadable stare, so he returned his attention to getting to the other side of the column. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He'd have to jump for it...

Ted reached out his right hand again as he released his right foot from the ledge, swinging himself over. His left foot slipped off the narrow edge on the other side, and he braced himself against the column to prevent himself from falling any further, right hand gripping onto the windowsill for dear life.

Gritting his teeth, the teen regained his footing on the ledge and just stood there for several seconds to regain his composure. A brief grin flashed across his face in light of his minor victory – he'd done it. One more column to go...

Slightly more confident now, he moved along the ledge a little faster than before. He reached the column, steeled himself, and swung over. Right hand grasped hold of the windowsill, right leg found the ledge...

Then the ledge broke, and Ted yelled as gravity slammed him against the column. His right leg kicked around in mid air and found the ledge again, but the moment he shifted his weight over, that portion of the ledge broke off as well and fell four floors down to fatally crush three very pretty petunias.

Ted pressed his left hand against the column, fingers digging painfully into the cement that held the bricks together, and pressing the sides of his right shoe against the wall beneath his right hand, still gripping the windowsill. The teen was now dangling a considerable distance off the ground, held up only by his right hand and the phenomenon known as friction – not that he knew what it was, because he never really paid attention in science class, but it was what had ensured his survival so far. To make matters worse, he just so happened to be left handed, which meant that the right hand his life depended on wasn't particularly strong.

He tried the ledge again, but succeeded only in kicking off more bits of cement that went on to commit several grisly acts of botanical murders.

Bogus, Ted thought again for the second time in five minutes, only this time it was a much larger understatement. If the windowsill he was holding onto crumbled now, it would mean saying hello to a life either as a quadriplegic or a dead person.

This was turning out to be a most egregious day.

There was no movement he could make without running a fairly high risk of falling... and just as Ted thought things couldn't get any worse, a mosquito landed on his left arm, gave it a welcome bite, and flew off. The spot it had stolen blood from started to itch, and Ted couldn't even scratch it. Well, technically he could, just that if he released his right hand to do so, there would very soon be a whole lot more things to worry about than a mosquito bite.

It was about then that Ted decided it was time to call for help.

"NEEEEEOOO!"

**

Several minutes ago...

Thomas 'Neo' Anderson stared out the open window of Room 436, the fingers on his left hand rapping out some obscure rhythm on the windowsill, and generally spacing out.

He vaguely wondered what would happen if Ted lost his footing and fell – he guessed there was about a fifty-fifty chance of that happening. What would the police think when they found the teen on the ground, smashed to a pulp by the force of gravity? More importantly, who would they think he was?

It could get interesting.

Although Neo realised that if Ted did indeed get smashed to a pulp, he wouldn't be so easy to recognise. But Neo decided not to let his thoughts go any further down that path, because his conscience was already chastising him for sending some half-witted teenager on a dangerous task like that, let alone hoping that he fell.

So he went back to thinking about nothing. And he continued to think about nothing for about half a minute or so, pausing only to wonder when he noticed the inhuman slaughter of a trio of helpless petunias by a chunk of crumbly cement.

Then the doorbell rang, and Neo jumped.

For quite some time he just stared blankly at the door, wondering who that could be. Then the doorbell rang again, and he decided that he should at least see who it was. He went over to the door, looked through the peephole, and saw Marty McFly standing there.

Wait a sec... if Marty's outside, that means...

Something clicked unpleasantly into place, and Neo pulled at the door handle. It gave way, the door opened, and he stared out the open doorway, suddenly feeling very stupid.

"Hi..." Marty said, but Neo didn't really hear him.

"The door's open?" he mumbled in a daze.

"Yeah, I just found out they were unbolted... Where's Ted?"

A wave of guilt suddenly washed over Neo. "Uh..." he said, glancing in the direction of the open window.

Marty followed his gaze, and understanding finally dawned on him. His mouth fell open. "You mean he..."

That was when Ted yelled.

**

Mr. and Mrs. Freeman of Room 537 in Kenselton Hotel were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were from England, and like any self-respecting Briton, they enjoyed a nice cup of tea from time to time.

Their little holiday in America had been perfectly normal and uneventful, just the way they liked it. Early this morning, they had had a nice, normal breakfast (with tea, of course), and gone out to do some sightseeing before returning to their room, because there was a programme on television that Mr. Freeman wanted to catch.

Half-past ten that day thus saw him sitting on his bed in front of the television set, watching whatever programme it was that he had wanted to see. His wife joined him for a while, then went over to open the window and let in some fresh air.

She stood by the open window for some time, watching birds fly around in most delightful manners and enjoying the breeze. Then her gaze wandered downwards and her eyes opened in horror.

"Blimey, Julian!" she gasped. "Look at that!"

"What is it, Anne?" her husband asked, eyes still on the screen.

"There's someone climbing around outside the building!"

Thankfully, the commercial break chose that time to come on, and Julian Freeman went over to see what his wife was making such a fuss about. He looked out at where she was pointing, and his face paled as well.

"What on earth does that young fellow think he's doing out there?"

"Do you think he's going to fall?" Anne asked, face ashen.

"No doubt, if he carries on like that."

"Should we..." Anne broke off in mid-sentence with a sharp intake of air as she saw the ledge break away under Ted's foot, and she gaped as she watched him struggle to regain his footing.

"I'm going after him," Julian muttered with a last glance at the teen one floor down.

"Shouldn't we call for help?" his wife asked.

Julian was already out the door. "There's no time!"

**

The ache in Ted's right arm grew more intense with each passing millisecond. He had considered moving his left hand over to the windowsill as well to see if he could hoist himself up from there, but that would mean transferring all his weight to the windowsill, which didn't look like it could take much more. He didn't dare risk it. Besides, the window wasn't open wide enough for him to enter. He needed his hands free to push it open further...

Ted yelled for Neo again, though he knew it was pointless. Neo was locked in; what good could he do? Climb out the window as well? Then they'd both be stuck out there...

For the umpteenth time, Ted gazed downwards and wondered if he'd be able to survive the fall. Maybe if he aimed for the bushes... but even those looked so far away. Though it wasn't as if he had a choice – he doubted he could hold on much longer.

Another wild urge to let go and let gravity take over came upon him again, but he resisted it. He was going to hang on to the very last moment when he absolutely could not take it any longer, when every joule of energy had been sapped from his body, when...

Then the most beautiful sound he had ever heard reached his ears. The window was pushed open from the inside, and a voice came through.

"Give me your hand, son. Looks like you need some help."

Ted turned his head up to look at his rescuer, a middle-aged British man with a kindly face who reached out towards the teen. Pulling his left hand free, Ted grasped hold of the newcomer's wrist. His feet slipped a little from their awkward position against the brick column, and he tightened his grip in panic.

"Take it easy now... I've got you."

Gradually, Julian helped Ted through the window and into the lift lobby on the other side, where the teen collapsed into a sitting position on the floor and gasped out a thanks.

Julian crouched down next to him. "Are you all right?"

Ted nodded breathlessly. "Yeah."

"I saw you from my window upstairs, and you looked like you were in a bit of trouble there," Julian continued. "I'm not going to ask what you were doing, climbing around like that, because I doubt you'll tell me the truth... but whatever it was, it was still highly dangerous, and I advise you not to do it again."

"Yes sir."

Julian smiled and stood up, and Ted got to his feet as well, albeit a little unsteadily. The man gave the corridor a quick look-over, pausing when he thought he saw a door move, then attributed it to his imagination and ignored it.

"You shouldn't stay here so long," he said, gesturing to the line of red tape that blocked off the lifts. "This floor's supposed to be closed off for refurbishment or something... but since you're here, I guess there's no harm in you looking around a little." He pressed the lift call button, and the little red numbers above one of the lift doors started to move. "Well, I'll be off then," he said. "Do you want to come along, or do you want to stay here and explore?"

Ted had a sudden impulse to follow Julian off the floor, away from everything that had happened since that morning, and be considered a part of the normal world out there... but the feeling passed.

"I really appreciate your offer, sir, but I think I'll... uh, just hang around a while more," the teen said with a smile.

"All right then," Julian said, as the lift arrived. "Take care."

Ted watched the lift doors closed, then turned left into the corridor. Now to do what he had come all the way to do...

He headed for Room 436, then stopped, staring in stupefaction at the unbolted door. Suddenly wondering just what he was there for, he was about to try the door handle, when the door opened from the inside and Marty peeked out.

"Is he gone?" Marty asked.

Ted just stared blankly at him. "The door's open?"

Not answering his question, Marty glanced both ways down the corridor, decided that the path was clear, and opened the door a little wider. "Yeah, someone unbolted the doors, but we just found out about it."

"I did all that for *nothing*?" Ted asked, more to himself than anyone else.

Neo ignored him. He pulled the room's key card out of the socket by the door and stuck it into his pocket. "Come on. Let's go next door."

Chapter Fifteen

May 1990

The Real World

Keith knew that he was probably going to receive the biggest scolding ever for this, but he didn't want to be inside watching his father get married to some woman Keith knew next to nothing about. Hazel Chiew was apparently one of Nathan's old classmates from the National University of Singapore; by a remarkable twist of events the two of them had met again in L.A. several months ago. They'd hit it off, and now they were getting married – partly because she was over a month pregnant, and partly because they'd intended to get married eventually anyway.

Keith stood by the side of the church, hands in pockets as he watched the traffic go by, blinking away angry tears. He didn't want a stepmother, evil or otherwise. He'd had one mother, and she was all he needed for life. He didn't want some stranger trying to take her place.

He found some comfort in the fact that in five months he would be eighteen and could legally leave his family. But, well, he doubted he'd be able to survive on his own so soon. And he'd need money for university fees...

"Hello there."

Keith jumped in fright at the sudden voice. He turned and saw a strange-looking old man standing not far from him.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" the old man asked.

Keith blinked. "I... who are you?"

The stranger chuckled. "Just a mysterious old man. That's what they call me, anyway. Others know me as Dem, but some prefer not to call me that because it sounds as if they're swearing."

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," Keith said warily.

Dem smiled. "You're 6431 days, seven hours and sixteen minutes old. Surely that's old enough to talk to strangers?"

Keith gave a start, then realised that it wouldn't have been that hard for the old guy to just rattle off a string of numbers to freak him out. "You know my age, but you don't know my name?" he asked instead.

"Age is easy," Dem replied.

"Okay, so what's my birth date?"

Dem shrugged. "I'm not good at maths."

"What do you want with me?" Keith asked.

"Oh, nothing much. I just thought you were looking a little lonely and depressed. Is that your father getting married in there?"

"Yeah."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She died," Keith said with forced casualness. "Dad doesn't care about her any more."

"What makes you think so?"

Keith hesitated, thoughts of parallel universes and movies and the eleventh dimension floating through his mind. He shrugged.

Dem smiled. He opened his coat and extracted a notebook from the inside coat pocket, then handed it to Keith, who regarded it quizzically.

"Here you go," Dem said.

Uncertainly, Keith received the notebook and flipped through its pages. They were filled with strange diagrams and numbers and symbols... "What's this?" he asked.

"A present," came the answer. "You may not understand the things in there now, but I believe you'll find them very useful in future. So keep it safe. There is information this world will not allow to be known."

Keith was about to ask just what that meant, but when he looked up from the papers, the mysterious old man was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

"Maybe the aliens got him," Dave suggested as the McFlys scoured Hill Valley in their car, looking for Marty. "Hill Valley's such a small place. Where else could he have gone?"

"So you're saying it's the little green men's fault?" Linda asked.

"No way!" Dave exclaimed. "Yoda wouldn't do something like that. I was thinking more of the *big* green men... like Jabba the Hutt or someone."

In the front of the car, George and Lorraine McFly were becoming increasingly annoyed by the conversation between their two older children in the backseat.

"There're no such thing as aliens," Lorraine said with a somewhat pointed look at her husband, which succeeded in stopping him from saying that, yes, aliens *did* exist, and for a matter of fact he'd actually been visited by one once back in good ol' 1955.

Dave slumped back in his seat. "We're never going to find him this way," he said. "If Marty left on his own accord, he'd be in hiding, not exposed out in the streets. If someone *took* him, they'd put him in hiding, not out on the streets."

"So what do you expect us to do?" Lorraine asked with a touch of hysteria. "Just sit at home and wait for Marty to show up?"

"This isn't much better," Linda commented. "At least if we wait at home we'll save on the gas."

"Yeah, and what if Marty goes home and there's no one there?" Dave added.

They turned the car and went back home.

When they opened the door, the sheep trotted out, baaing. Lorraine was about to make it go back in, when Dave put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

"Mom, that's not Marty," he said. "It's just a sheep."

**

1st April 2004, Thursday
Room 437, Kenselton Hotel

Baaaa, said the sheep as it hopped over the fence and landed gently back down on the lush green grass. It had a towel draped over its back and secured at its neck like a cape, and Frank watched interestedly as it flapped in the breeze – the towel, that is, not the sheep.

This was a sheep who knew where its towel was.

Now, it came over to them, and Lucy Lynskey reached out a hand to stroke it. She smiled, and Frank put an arm around her. Behind them stood their home: he had designed it himself, and it was much more sturdy than before. It was complete, for one, two storeys high and overlooking the beautiful New Zealand countryside...

“Frank, open up!”

Had someone called? Frank looked vaguely around for the source of the voice, but he couldn't see one. Must have been his imagination...

Lucy took his hand, and they ran together through the grass, happy and carefree with all the time in the world... There seemed to be loud banging sounds coming from somewhere, but maybe it was just that sheep – the silly little thing was sailing through the air, the wind in its towel-cape as it baaed in blissful contentment...

“O! FRANK!”

“I think he’s still asleep, dude.”

“Oh, for crying out loud...”

There were clouds in the sky. White fluffy things in the blueness of the... um, sky. One was shaped like a sheep, too... And mountains, huge purplish mountains in the distance, rising out of the Earth's crust because of tectonic plate action and all that... plates collided and stuff, you learnt about it in Geography, only Frank never took Geography, but if he did, that would be the sort of thing he learnt about...

“BANNISTER, IF YOU DON'T WAKE UP RIGHT NOW AND OPEN THIS F** DOOR, I'M GOING TO BASH IT IN!”***

Frank jolted up in bed, eyes flicking wildly around and feeling very disoriented. “Wha’?” he asked the air.

“...” the air said back.

His conscious memory suddenly came rushing back to him, and Frank remembered where he was. He sighed. That had been a nice dream he was having... didn't make much sense, in retrospect, but a nice dream all the same...

Voices were coming through the door.

“Did you really have to swear, dude?”

“Shut up.”

“Think he heard you?”

Frank stumbled out of bed towards the door. “I’m comin’,” he mumbled sleepily, not really loud enough for anyone to hear. “Leav’ the door ‘lone, it ne’er did an’thing to you...”

Bleary-eyed and still half-asleep, Frank fumbled with the door handle and let them in.

“Hi!” Ted greeted cheerfully. Frank stared hazily back at the teen, trying to register his presence in his still far-from-awake mind.

“Yeah... hi to you too,” he finally said, before trudging back to the bed and lying down once more. Frank shut his eyes, sinking slowly back into Dreamland... until Marty poked him to check if he was still alive.

Frank grimaced and duly responded by grabbing a nearby pillow and throwing it at Marty, all without opening his eyes. The main consequence of this was that the pillow completely missed its intended target and hit Neo instead.

Neo was a person who did not take too kindly to having pillows thrown at him. Annoyed, he dumped the pillow back onto the bed and glared at Frank. "Are you going to wake up, or are you planning to sleep through everything?" he asked.

"Prob'ly the latter," Frank mumbled after some consideration. "Got a prob'em with that?"

"Yeah," Neo said. "I do. You can't just fall asleep on us. We've got to do something about what's going on here before..."

Frank had just about had all he could take. Sitting suddenly up in bed with what must have been a considerable effort, he glared back at Neo. "Look, pal. It's TWO IN THE MORNING where I come from, and I'm TIRED, and..."

"It's three in the morning where I come from," Neo stated matter-of-factly, not taking his eyes off Frank.

Frank opened his mouth to say something, closed it when nothing came to mind, then opened it again when something did. "Yeah... well, you were probably fast asleep last night, so that doesn't mean anyt..."

Neo folded his arms. "I say it's your own fault if you decided to spend the night surfing online, as Marty told me you were."

"I was... researching," Frank said in a strained voice. "Well, *fine*. So while I was busy checking out stuff about this place we've been dumped in, you had the wonderful self-control to stay away from the computer and go to bed, even though it was probably only around late afternoon where you came from..."

"There's no computer in our room," Ted cut in.

Neo turned on him. "Ted, SHUT UP!"

The teen winced and obeyed. Frank smirked.

"I see," he said. "Well, I bet that if there *had* been a computer in your room, you would have been on it all night. Great computer hacker, aren't you?"

Neo's left hand tightened into a fist. He swallowed. "Peeking into my private life, were you?"

"Didn't seem too private to me," Frank commented. "It's splashed all over the Internet. Blockbuster movie of 1999, one of the greatest science-fiction franchises ever... d'you know that they even have *action figures*?" Frank grinned at the look on Neo's face. "'Private life', huh?"

Neo lunged out furiously at him, his fist about to contact with Frank's head when Marty and Ted simultaneously grabbed Neo and held him off.

"WILL YOU TWO CUT IT OUT?" Marty yelled.

"Let go of me," Neo hissed.

Ted shook his head. "And let you kill him? No way, dude."

"So now you're on his side, huh?" Neo asked him through gritted teeth.

"I..."

Neo yanked his left arm free of Marty's grip and shoved Ted to the ground. The teen yelled as his head hit the bed frame, then he raised his hands to protect his head as Neo's fists came down on him.

Frank swore and leapt out of bed. "Neo, get off him!"

Neo grabbed Ted and slammed him against the side of the bed.

Don't look at his eyes, Neo thought furiously to himself, shaking away the attempts of Marty and Frank to pull him away. *Don't look at his eyes...*

"Neo..."

Don't listen to his voice, Neo thought, dodging Ted's leg as the teen tried to kick out, and delivering a punch in return.

"Don't hit me..."

Don't listen to his voice...

Then Frank's fist contacted squarely with Neo's jaw, and Neo fell back, dazed and his head spinning as he stumbled to his feet, breathing heavily.

Frank stepped between Neo and Ted, his arms folded. For a moment, he and Neo just stood there, staring at each other.

"You're the closest thing he has to family in this place," Frank said softly.

Neo looked away, shook his head, then stalked out the open door.

Out in the corridor, Neo pounded furiously at the wall.

It's this place, he thought savagely, angry tears forming in his eyes. *It's this whole universe, this whole 'real world'...*

Action figures, Frank had said, and the words made his stomach turn. They even have *action figures...* His life... his whole life, his trials and successes and everything, all just a movie here... people watched it for *entertainment... action figures...* And Ted. *Why?* Neo demanded silently of the wall. *Why?*

Then a name came to him: *Keith*.

He was behind all this. It was all his fault.

Back inside the room, Frank helped Ted to his feet. "Anything broken?" he asked.

Ted shook his head. "I don't think so," he replied in a somewhat subdued voice. He looked towards the door where Neo had left. "Do you think I should go after him?" he asked.

Frank and Marty looked at him but didn't reply. Frank went over to the door and closed it.

Marty glanced at Frank. "What did you start all that for?"

"I'm tired, okay?" Frank retaliated, though in a softer tone than previous. "I didn't even mean to throw that pillow at him. I was aiming for you, but I guess I missed." Frank went back to the bed, snuggled back under the covers and didn't say any more.

Ted slumped down into a chair. "I wanna go home," he said softly.

"Yeah," Marty replied some time later, sitting down on another chair. "Me too."

Chapter Seventeen

1st April 2004, Thursday

The Real World

Returning to the control room after lunch, Keith did a double-take when he glanced at the closed-circuit television screens and found one of the rooms empty with all four experimental subjects in the other.

He suddenly realised without a doubt that it had to be his brother's doing. Grimacing, Keith sat himself down on his swivel chair and turned the volume up. The voices came through clearly.

Fighting now, are they? Keith thought, shaking his head. He'd split them up for a reason, but it looked as though Adwin hadn't appreciated it.

Keith was about to go find his brother and give him a piece of his mind, when the television screens showed Neo leaving the room. Might as well wait to see if he was coming. Keith pushed himself in the chair over to the door, unlocked it and opened it slightly, then went back to watch the screens.

**

The door to the control room was ajar. Neo pushed it open and entered, turning right around the L-bend in the small room to see Keith seated at his desk. The television screens on the wall opposite showed the goings on in Room 437 and 436.

"Hi Neo," Keith greeted without looking up. "I saw you coming."

"What do you want with us?"

Keith smiled. "Want to change the subject, huh? What do I want with you? Nothing much. Just to watch you, mostly. You don't know how fascinating it's been – bring a few movie characters into the real world, then watch their reactions..."

"And waiting to see if we die?"

"Look, you have to admit that I've been kind to you. You're getting free lodging in a hotel that would otherwise cost you over a hundred a night. And it's not as though I've been bothering you..."

"Doesn't anyone know what you're doing?"

Keith shrugged. "Don't think so."

"Send us back, Keith," Neo said.

The scientist turned in his swivel chair to face him. "I can't," he said simply.

"What?"

"The machine was designed to bring you here. It can't send you back. Technically, 'back' doesn't even exist. And besides, if you *could* go back, would you really want to? Think about it."

Neo didn't reply.

"Have you ever seen the sky, Neo?" Keith asked. "Before this, I mean. In your world, the skies were blackened, weren't they? It's always dark. So you've never seen the sun either, have you? Except as a fake construct of the Matrix, which you know doesn't count. I gave you the chance to see all that, Neo. I gave you a chance to experience the world you used to know, only this time it's real. Do you really want to go back? Do you know what's going to happen to you if you go back?"

"You're going to die, Neo. That's what's going to happen, just because the writers thought it would make a good ending. You defeat Smith, the war ends, but you still die in the end. Trinity too. She gets pierced right thr—"

"No..."

"Sorry for spoiling the plot, Mr. Anderson, but that's what's going to happen. Are you sure that's how you want to end your life? For the sake of some movie? I mean, your life is kind of pathetic, isn't it? You spent your first thirty-seven years of life trapped in the Matrix, get freed, and from then you only have six months to the end. I gave you a break from that. I gave you a taste of freedom, of what your life could be instead. If you just run out of this place now, I'm not going to stop you. Go run loose in the streets of L.A. here and see what happens. It's your life."

Neo just stood there.

Keith went back to his work. "And if you're thinking of killing me, there's not much point in that. If I die, nothing would have changed. You'll still be stuck here. And there'd be no one left in this world who believes the four of you are who you say you are. Except for my brother, but he doesn't count much..."

A thought suddenly occurred to Neo. "You mentioned something about some... averager device. What's that?"

A smile spread across Keith's face. "Oh, that. The sub-meson averager can... alter the sub-atomic components of items or people from another universe. Without it, as I said, sooner or later the dimensional incompatibility will probably catch up with you and you'll die. I'm pretty sure of that. Some time ago I tried transporting objects over: a lightsaber, firstly. It worked for about a day, but eventually it died out and couldn't come on. After several more days, the metal casing started to break down. Then I

repeated the experiment, but this time I stuck it in the sub-meson averager. After a long time, the lightsaber still worked. At least, it did until my brother decided to take it apart to see what made it tick.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that the four of you don’t really have to die. Maybe three of you; I still want at least one control to see how long the dimensional incompatibility takes to catch up with living things. But I can stick the other three of you in the averager and this universe will, essentially, become your true universe. You can continue to live here as long as you normally would and nothing will happen. If you really want to live that long, in the first place. More likely than not you’ll end up driven to suicide. The truth still remains: you have nowhere to go.”

Keith grinned and sat back in his chair. “Funny, isn’t it, Neo? After all this, the question still remains the same. I think you know what that question is.”

“What is the Matrix?” Neo asked sceptically.

Keith nodded. “Precisely. On one hand, the Matrix is a system designed to keep humans from knowing the truth about what their world is really like. But on the other hand, *The Matrix* is a movie. It was released in the year 1999, the creation of two brothers from Chicago named Laurence and Andrew Paul Wachowski – born 21st June 1965 and 29th December 1967 respectively. It was a movie that revolutionised the movie special effects industry, made a lot of people in Hollywood a great deal richer than they had any right to be, and then spawned two sequels which were widely regarded as crap... though personally I kind of liked the third one.”

Keith opened a drawer in his desk and took out an unlabelled DVD in a clear case. He waved it in the air. “Want to know what *The Matrix* is? There’s only one way to find out.” He handed the case over to Neo and grinned. “You have to see it for yourself.”

**

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

“I don’t know what this means,” Jennifer murmured, her face paler than usual. On the computer, BTTf.com had been closed and the screen just showed the Windows 98 desktop.

“Yeah, it’s weird,” Bill agreed. “So they’re saying that all those things that happened to Marty were all just part of some movie?”

“It looks like it. But... I don’t think it’s just that. Doctor Brown’s inter-time-period communication device must have triggered off... something... maybe a portal, or... I don’t know.”

“But how is this linked to the disappearances? So what if it was all some movie, why’d Marty just vanish like that?” Bill paused. “And what about Ted?”

Jennifer gave a stressed sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe Marty *did* turn into a sheep after all, and we’re just searching for answers in the wrong place. But I don’t know about your friend; maybe he turned into a llama or...” Reluctantly, the teen sat back up in the chair. “What’s his last name?”

“Logan.”

Jennifer accessed Yahoo.com the way Marty had showed her almost two weeks ago, and typed Ted’s name into the search bar. She hit ‘Enter’, a lot of results scrolled down, and Bill’s mouth fell open.

”*Whoa.*”

The computer was turned off after some exploring of the links. There was not much point in searching any further, for whatever they found simply reinforced what they already knew – that in another universe, they and their missing friends were fictional.

“I just don’t see what all that has to do with the disappearances,” Jennifer said.

“Maybe someone didn’t want them finding out all that and kidnapped them or something. But Ted didn’t know anything about this, so why would they take him too?”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

Bill shook his head. "I can't. The band's going back to San Dimas tomorrow, and if we get back without Ted, his dad will totally *kill* me."

"Maybe you should just tell him what happened."

"No way. He'll never believe me."

"Well, he'll have to find out sooner or later."

**

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

He was curious, that much he had to admit, and curiosity was the main reason why Neo had taken the DVD from Keith in the first place. There were questions he wanted answered, and besides, he needed an idea of how much everyone knew about him – an area in which his increasingly paranoid imagination wasn't helping very much.

He locked the door to Room 436 from inside, then crouched by the DVD player beneath the television set. Turning it on, he put the disc in, then took the two remote controls and sat down on the bed.

He turned on the set and changed the channel to the one Keith had specified. The screen turned blue, and Neo picked up the other remote control. Heart thumping, he pressed the 'Play' button.

The lit words on the DVD player's LCD screen changed to 'PLAY'. A green light flickered on the player, the television screen went static-y black, and then loud sound blared out of the speakers as the ending of some commercial started.

Neo lowered the volume as the commercial informed him why Detergent A was better than Detergent B, and then the screen went black again save for the small TV-station logo on the top right-hand corner.

Then the movie started. Neon green numbers ran down the screen, merging and separating, as in the background came two voices Neo knew only too well – that of Trinity and Cypher.

Neo was vaguely aware of the fact that he was shaking as he sat on the edge of the bed, hands gripping tightly onto the mattress. Something told him that he shouldn't be watching what he was, because some things are just never meant to be seen by some people.

At the first commercial break, he went to the bathroom and threw up violently in the toilet, head swimming. If watching the movie was a trying enough ordeal for him, the commercial breaks only served to make it worse. What with the television announcer's cheery '*Don't go away, we'll be right back!*' followed by the commercials for various products, it all just seemed to forcibly drive home the fact that *this was a movie*.

One moment someone he knew might be dying on screen, and the next moment there would be some happy family romping through some bright sunny field with music to match in order to prove that kids who drink Brand A milk would grow up to be active, smart, loving and well-adjusted children of society.

The strong feeling of insecurity that had plagued Neo that morning came back full force, coupled with an unexplainable desire to break down and cry as he saw the private events of his life played out on screen. Who knew how many people had watched the movie? Who knew how many people knew *all about him*...

It was only at the third commercial break that Neo realised with a sinking heart that Keith had very likely been watching him all this time through the cameras, no doubt revelling in his agony.

He found the camera at a corner of the ceiling. Pulling a chair over, Neo climbed up and stared into the lens. He hoped that there was a microphone attached, which there was.

"F*** YOU, KEITH!" he yelled.

Neo gave the lens a good view of his middle finger, then he ripped the camera off the ceiling and thrashed it onto the floor.

In the background, the television announced why Shampoo X would result in smoother, stronger hair that would make you the centre of everyone's attention, so buy it now.

**

"What do you mean, he's really missing?" Lewis demanded.

"I mean I really can't find him anywhere," Bill explained.

Lewis rolled his eyes. "I *know* what the word 'missing' means. But the two of you were supposed to stay together all the time!"

"Yeah, but then he disappeared."

"Bill, people don't 'disappear'."

"Ted did," Bill retorted. "And Elvis did too," he added as an afterthought.

"Elvis is *dead*, Bill."

The younger teen's eyes widened in horror. "No way!"

Lewis sighed.

"Elvis is totally *not* dead, dude! Me and Ted saw him last month at..."

"LOOK HERE!" Lewis shouted, shocking Bill into silence. "I don't know why we're even talking about Elvis; he's dead, okay? DEAD. No one cares. The main issue here is the fact that your friend doesn't seem to be anywhere around, and we have to leave."

Chapter Eighteen

1st April 2004, Thursday

The Real World

About forty-five minutes earlier

"It's locked from the inside," Marty said, after trying the door handle of Room 436.

"What's he watching in there?" Ted asked curiously, staring at the locked door.

Marty shrugged. "Whatever it is, looks like he doesn't want to be interrupted."

Ted pressed his ear against the door and listened, but the volume was too low for him to make out much.

"Neo?" Marty called, but there was no response.

Ted stepped back from the door. "What do we do now?"

"I guess we can just explore around a little."

"Yeah. Which way do you want to start?"

Marty pointed right. "I went down the other way just now," he said as they started walking. "Nothing much there."

They eventually reached the room they had first arrived in, and Marty tried the door. It opened, and the two of them went in. There was another door in the room, but it was locked; it led out to the control room next door.

There seemed to be nothing different here from the last time they'd seen it, and the teens had almost decided to leave when Marty saw something on one of the walls. He stared at it and moved closer.

"What's that?" Marty asked, pointing at the short black streak across the otherwise completely white wall.

Ted came up to his side and ran his fingers along the streak. It was a slight depression in the wall, and it looked burnt. Ted took his hand away and saw bits of ash on his fingers. He flicked them off and shrugged. "I don't think this was here before," he said.

Marty was staring thoughtfully at the streak, and he suddenly gave a short laugh. "It looks like something out of *Star Wars*," he said. "Like the kind of mark a lightsaber would make..." Marty hesitated. "Maybe it was a lightsaber," he murmured.

"So you're saying that maybe Luke Skywalker's around here or something?" Ted asked. *Excellent!* he added silently, and grinned.

"No... I... I don't know. Maybe it's just some... mark made by something else." Marty turned and headed for the door, followed by Ted. "Wanna go downstairs?"

"Sure."

They took an empty lift car down to the hotel lobby. Walking out of the lift, they got a couple of quizzical glances, but nothing more.

"Pretty strange place to carry out interdimensional experiments," Marty commented. "I never knew such things happened in hotels."

"Maybe they do, only no one knows about it because they think such things don't happen."

"Uh-huh."

They strolled out the automated glass front doors and breathed in the fresh air outside. Two people looked at them curiously before walking on.

"Four," Ted said.

Marty looked at him. "What?"

"That's the number of people who've stared at us so far. It's becoming most annoying. Five," he added as a man gave them a strange look before going on into the hotel, face screwed up in concentration as though trying to remember where he'd seen them before.

"Maybe we should stop blocking the door, then," Marty suggested.

"Good observation, dude." Ted stuck his hands into his pockets and they started down the pavement.

"So this is the future," Marty mused. "2004. I kinda thought there would've been flying cars by now, seeing how many there were in 2015."

"Maybe it's different here."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Six," Marty said some time later.

"Where are we going, dude?"

"You know, I haven't the faintest idea."

"Seven," said Ted.

"Is that Luke Skywalker?" asked Marty.

They stopped and stared. Some confused-looking guy in strange clothes was walking around looking confused.

"Dude, if we stare at other people, we're going to have to start minusing from our count."

"Is that Luke Skywalker?" Marty asked again.

"Why don't you ask him?"

“Uh...”

Ted went up to the man before Marty could say any more. “Excuse me, are you Luke Skywalker?” he asked.

Luke stared. “How’d you know my name?”

Ted turned to Marty and gave him a triumphant grin. “See? You’ve just got to ask him.”

Luke was getting even more confused. “How... wha... whe... who are you?”

Ted smiled at him. “I’m Ted, and that’s Marty over there. Is that a real lightsaber?” he asked, pointing.

Luke blinked. “Yeah, it is, but wh...”

Ted’s face lit up. “Whoa! Can I try it?”

“Wha... No, you can’t...”

Ted looked woefully at Luke, who tried to ignore the teen and get a proper sentence out.

“Look here,” Luke started again. “I... uh...” He trailed pathetically off.

Marty grasped Ted’s shoulder and steered him away, giving Luke an apologetic look.

“What did you think you were doing?” Marty demanded when they were out of Luke’s hearing distance.

Ted shrugged. “You wanted to know if he was Luke Skywalker, so I...”

“You can’t just... It’s not him, okay? He doesn’t... he doesn’t exist...”

Ted raised an eyebrow. “Neither do we, then. You said so yourself that you thought the thing we saw was made by a lightsaber.”

“Yeah, but if Keith really brought Luke over, he would be locked up, not out here...”

“We’re out here,” Ted stated matter-of-factly.

“It’s not... it’s not the same, okay?” Marty said. “We’re talking about *Luke Skywalker* here. The guy from *Star Wars*. He’s just some... some movie character... fictional...”

Marty kicked at the ground and fell silent.

“Eight,” Ted said pointedly.

**

When they looked back, Luke had already wandered off, now even more confused than before. Marty and Ted continued walking around the streets and heading nowhere.

“I guess we can’t just go home, can we?” Ted asked.

Marty shook his head.

Ted kicked at an empty drink can lying on the ground. It rolled off and came to a stop further down the pavement, where it caused a great deal of inconvenience to a trail of ants heading that way. It also made Ted’s left shoe’s shoelaces come untied, but unlike the ants, they weren’t complaining. Ted kicked them around as he walked, and they still didn’t protest. These were very agreeable shoelaces.

“Nine,” said Marty in a defeated sort of tone.

“I still believe that was Luke Skywalker.”

Marty shrugged.

“He looked like he needed help, dude.”

"You looked like you just wanted to try his lightsaber."

Ted thought a while, then nodded. "Yeah," he admitted. "That too."

"Ten and eleven," Marty stated, giving a sideways look at the couple gaping at them.

The younger teen had meanwhile come to the conclusion that it might be much less of a bother and possible life hazard if he just stopped for a moment to tie his shoelaces. "Hold on," he said, and dropped down to do so.

Marty glanced casually at the shop window to his left. It was a movie rental place; new releases filled the display window, and Marty gave them a quick look-over. He hadn't heard of most of the titles, though one or two sounded vaguely familiar.

That was when his gaze landed on a blue and silver box set standing among the rest of them. A box set whose title was, unlike the rest, very, very familiar.

'Back to the Future'

Marty's heart stood still.

Well, nearly stood still, anyway. If it had really stood still, he would have died on the spot, which might have made things rather complicated and caused Ted a lot more trouble than was worth.

Shoelaces dealt with, Ted stood up again and roughly followed Marty's gaze. "Hey, a movie store!" he said happily. "Want to go in?"

Feeling nauseated but nonetheless unable to take his eyes off the box set, Marty shook his head slowly. "I think... this is the last place we should be," he said. He swallowed and finally managed to look away, his stomach still doing figurative somersaults inside him.

Inside the shop, the girl behind the counter looked up and saw them. She stared. Her eyes narrowed, and she continued staring. Ted smiled at her.

Marty tugged at Ted's jacket. "Let's go," he muttered.

"Go where?"

"Back."

"Which way's that?"

Marty hesitated and looked around. "Uh..."

Ted looked around. "We're lost, aren't we?" he asked. Marty didn't reply, and he took that for a yes. "Bogus," he sighed.

**

Lewis fumed as he left the police centre, inside of which Steven Dent was busy enjoying his fifth cup of tea for that morning.

"Twenty-four hours," Lewis announced. "They can't lodge a report until then."

"There's no way we're going to wait here another day just because his idiot friend went missing," Ivan said, with a sideways glare at Bill.

"The rest of you don't have to stay here, all right?" Lewis said. "One of you can just take the van and drive back like we planned, and I'll just... stay here with Bill. I'll call up Ted's dad, tell him his son has gone missing, and we'll just see what... what happens then."

"Thanks, dude," Bill said to him.

"I'm only doing this because you two were my responsibility, okay?" Lewis said. "Believe me, I'd much rather be leaving for home now." Lewis paced around in circles and threw a last glare at the police station. "Twenty-four hours," he muttered darkly. "People can die in that time."

Bill tried hard not to think about that.

**

Room 439 of Kenselton Hotel had been Keith's home for a good number of years, yet it had still managed to retain some semblance of hotel room -ness. Keith stuck his key card into the slot beneath the door handle. The light turned green with a friendly beep. He pushed the door open and entered.

With one glance he took in his brother sprawled out on the bed with the empty cans of beer on the carpet next to him. He put two and two together, got four, and then wondered why he was bothering with elementary mathematics at a time like this.

"There you are," Keith said in a rather redundant sort of way.

Adwin was out for the count.

Keith sighed. He went over to the kitchen area, filled a cup with water, put it down, then searched around for a large pot. He found one and placed it by the bed, then dragged his brother's still form until his head was situated just above the pot. Keith then proceeded to pour the cold water over Adwin's face, trying his best to get all the runoff into the pot and not onto the carpet.

Adwin spluttered into consciousness as water went up his nose. Yelling, he fell off the bed and Keith put down the empty cup with satisfaction.

"You unbolted the doors," he stated.

Adwin gazed blearily at him. "What? Oh... that. Yeah, I did..."

"Why?"

"I dunno... it was fun... and it's not like they have anywhere to go..."

"What're you doing here, anyway?" Keith asked, emptying the pot of water into the sink.

"I had to," Adwin said with a laugh. "I mean, Luke Skywalker's out there, wandering the streets of L.A. looking for a space..."

Keith stared at his brother, completely stunned. "*What?*"

"Huh?"

"You brought Luke Skywalker over."

"Uh, yeah, kinda..."

"And you let him out."

"Well, not really... he sorta had a lightsaber at my neck here, see, and I guess he... he wanted to leave, and I couldn't stop him..."

Keith swore. "What the h*** did you do that for?" he demanded.

"I told you he had a lightsaber and..."

"Get up," Keith ordered.

"What?"

"I'm going to look for him, and you're coming with me whether or not you can walk straight."

"What about the others?"

"It's not like they have anywhere to go. Come on."

**

Not quite knowing where to go, Luke just walked, when suddenly angry horns sounded around him and a car screeched to a stop centimetres away from him. The car behind the first crashed straight into it, creating a chain reaction all the way down the street.

Windows were wound down, angry yells and middle fingers filled the air, and Luke tried to apologise, realised no one was accepting his apology, and thought it might be a better idea to get out of the way when suddenly one of the drivers came out of his car and grabbed hold of Luke.

“WHAT THE **** WERE YOU DOING ON THE STREET, *****?” the driver yelled in a PG-13 sort of way. “LOOK WHAT YOU DID TO MY CAR! YOU OWE ME BIG FOR THIS, YOU KNOW THAT, YOU LITTLE S...”

“I didn’t...” Luke started, interrupting the man.

“AND WHO THE **** DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, DRESSED LIKE THAT?” the caps-lock driver continued. “CAPTAIN KIRK?”

“Huh?”

More drivers and their passengers got out of their car and surrounded Luke, yelling at him. Some other drivers and passengers remained in their cars, some unconscious, some trapped, some engaged in wrestling matches with airbags.

Sirens sounded down the street as the police arrived, and before Luke knew it he found himself sitting in a police station facing a frustrated police officer who for some reason didn’t believe that Luke was who he said he was.

“Look, cut the crap, okay?” Officer Blair half-yelled. “We both know you’re not Luke Skywalker. The guy doesn’t *exist*, for cryin’ out loud. So why don’t you just cooperate here for a moment so we can all get this over and done with. For the fifth time, I want your *real name*.”

Luke just stared back. “But it *is*...”

Blair made an annoyed sound. “*Fine*,” he hissed. “Where do you live, Mr. Skywalker?”

“Well, I grew up on Tatooine, but now I...”

Luke broke off as Blair buried his head in his hands and counted slowly to ten. When he had sufficiently calmed down, he looked back up at Luke and sighed.

“You *do* know that you’re responsible for five hospital cases and one death, don’t you?” he asked. “Not to mention a lot of damaged cars? The insurance companies won’t be happy with you, that’s for sure. I don’t know what on earth you were doing on the road when there were *moving cars* on it, but you should be glad you’re still alive. But jaywalking *is* an offence, you know, and considering the results of your particular case...”

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” Luke said. “It’s just that I’m new to this planet, and I was trying to figure out what’s going on here. I’m not sure how I got her, but I think it may have been some sort of teleportation device...”

Officer Blair nodded in resigned sort of way.

Thirty minutes later, Luke found himself being led through the doors of the Traven Institute of Mental Health by the men in white.

**

Keith and Adwin moved somewhat frantically out the doors of the Kenselton Hotel and out onto the streets of L.A., looking for Luke.

At least, Keith was frantic. Adwin mostly strolled along in not-quite-straight lines, enjoying the afternoon.

Keith hadn’t expected it to be so hard to find Luke. Where did he have to go, anyway? Keith scrutinised the faces of the people around, hoping to see them staring a particular spot where Luke might be.

The people around were all minding their own business and not looking anywhere in particular, so they were understandably discomfited when they saw Keith staring at them.

"Where is he?" Keith asked.

Adwin shrugged.

"Why'd you even bring him here?" Keith asked.

Adwin shrugged.

Keith looked questioningly at the long line of damaged cars on one side of the road. Police had cordoned off the area, and were directing traffic to the other side. "What the..."

Keith went up to a policewoman taking notes by the side of one of the damaged cars.

"What happened here?" he asked.

"Accident," the policewoman replied curtly. "Some jaywalker caused all this." She shook her head and said no more.

"Where's the jaywalker now?" Keith pressed on.

"At the station, I suppose. They'll probably send him to hospital or something."

"He's injured, huh?"

"Not *that* kind of hospital. The guy's crazy, from what I heard. Prancing around the streets dressed like someone out of *Star Trek* or something."

"Ah," Keith said.

"Luke's at the funny farm," he reported to Adwin a quarter of a minute later.

Adwin grinned. "Cool!"

"No," Keith said. "*Not* cool. Why'd you bring him over for, you idiot?" he asked for the umpteenth time. "We can't do anything now. I just sure hope that the men in white don't find out that Luke's connected to us. If we get in any sort of trouble, it's all your fault."

"I thought you said it was okay if they left, because they wouldn't have anywhere to go."

Keith gritted his teeth. "I was talking about the other four, who at least come from *Earth* and *look* like they come from Earth, and know basic accepted earthling behaviour, like not walking out onto a road when there are moving cars on it. Let's get out of here."

Chapter Nineteen
July 1992
Room 439, Kenselton Hotel
The Real World

Keith surveyed his new home with satisfaction. Well, so perhaps it wasn't exactly a home, just a hotel room; but then again, how many nineteen-year-olds had their very own hotel room that they could call home? It was just like an extra large bedroom with an attached kitchen area and bathroom.

Adwin had opted to stay put in their house after their father had started the hotel. It wasn't really a bad choice, because it effectively meant that he got the whole place more or less to himself. Nathan Fong was rarely home; his wife Hazel and their one-and-a-half-year-old son Andrew were the only other somewhat regular occupants of the house, and they didn't take up much space.

But Keith still preferred living in the hotel. It was a new experience, for one. It was also a lot quieter and more private. The rest of the fourth floor was empty, set aside for the family and special visitors.

Plus, he got a double bed with the room.

The three medium-sized boxes of his personal belongings stood by the doorway, and Keith scrutinised them for a while, regretting not having brought a penknife or scissors along with him because the taped up boxes looked fairly dauntingly un-open-able. He got down onto the carpet and fiddled with the tape on one of them before giving up. With a sigh – he'd been looking forward to the fun and excitement of unpacking in his new home – he left the room, wandered down to his father's office and poked around until he found a nice pair of scissors.

Returning to Room 439, Keith slit the tape on the first box and carefully took out the books in there, placing them on the carpet. He glanced around the room, wondering where to put them. There didn't seem to be any appropriate place... Keith made a mental note to get hold of a bookshelf or make one. He wondered what to do with the books in the meantime, and finally settled for stacking them neatly up on the desk.

Further unpacking revealed that he would probably need more furniture to store the various belongings he had, because one desk, one closet and two bedside tables just weren't enough; especially since half the desk was taken up by his laptop and the books.

Keith sighed. He hung up his clothes in the closet and arranged his toiletries and towel in the bathroom, then went to see what was on television.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. Keith turned off the television and went to answer the door. He let Adwin and Andrew in. Andrew started toddling happily over to the bed as Adwin kicked the door shut, ignoring Keith's protest at his treatment of said door.

"D'you get free room service?" Adwin asked.

"Yeah," Keith said, crouching down by the door to make sure it was still in good condition.

Andrew lifted up the bed comforter, peeked under it, and giggled. He released it and toddled over to the open boxes of Keith's belongings.

"Don't kick the door again, okay?" Keith pleaded. "And tr... *Andrew, put that down!*" Keith swore under his breath and half-crawled over to his step-brother, who gazed at him in puzzlement, Dem's notebook in his hand. "Give me that," Keith said, prying open the toddler's fingers and rescuing the precious document which the mysterious old man had given to him the previous year. He placed it safely back into the box, then closed the lid.

"What's that?" Adwin asked curiously.

"Nothing."

"School stuff?"

Keith made some non-committal noise and carried Andrew off to another part of the room. "What're you doing here?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"Box," Andrew interrupted, pointing at the box.

"Yes, that's a box," Keith agreed. "I keep things in it, and you're not supposed to touch them. *Ever*. If you do, weird jelly-like creatures from outer space will come down to Earth and eat you up."

Unknown to all three of them, this particular statement would in future turn out to be the source of Andrew's unusual phobia of boxes and jelly that no one could ever quite explain.

"I didn't have anything to do," Adwin said. "I thought I'd just drop by."

"Get a summer job or something," Keith suggested.

"You never did that."

"Yeah, and I never went around complaining that I had nothing to do," Keith retaliated, then realised that Andrew was currently trying to put the wastepaper basket over his head. "No... Andrew, stop that. This is *not* a hat."

"Hat," Andrew said happily. "This hat."

"No, it's not. Maybe it is in some exotic country out there, but over here in America, wastepaper baskets are *not hats*. Adwin, can you take him out of here before he burns the place down or something?"

"Fire!" Andrew said, and giggled.

"We have a future arsonist in our family," Keith muttered.

"What's ar-son-ist?" Andrew asked.

"Nothing you need to know about. Shoo."

Adwin sighed. "All right. Andy, c'mon, let's go downstairs."

"Downstairs," Andrew said. "Go downstairs."

"There're some nice matches down there that you can play with," Adwin continued, picking up the toddler and leaving the room.

Keith watched them go with relief.

Chapter Twenty

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

The two teenagers tried retracing their steps; they started by going down the road they had come, but it was not long after that that they realised that a lot of other directions looked familiar, and that they therefore had probably been walking through the same area multiple times in different ways.

Also, it just so happened that the time in Ted and Marty's universe was more or less in sync with that of the real world, which basically meant that not only were they lost, they were also getting hungry for lunch.

According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, every major Galactic Civilization goes through three distinct stages that can be referred to as the How, Why and Where phases. The first is characterized by the question, "How do we eat?" the second by the question, "Why do we eat?" and the third by the question, "Where shall we have lunch?"

According to Marty McFly and Ted Logan, they couldn't care less about what anyone else said. All that they knew was that there was only one major question currently bugging them – "*When* can we have lunch?"

Hunger is a strange driving force. It is also good motivation. It wasn't very long before the two of them came across a snack shop in which Ted bought a packet of potato chips. It wasn't exactly lunch material, but he figured it would do for the time being. The shopkeeper spent an inordinate amount of time staring at the teen as he made the purchase, but eventually accepted the money and let Ted go.

Ted and Marty shared the potato chips as they walked, and finally, after several minutes, they saw Kenselton Hotel ahead. Deciding that it would be less conspicuous if they took the stairs instead of the main lifts, they hunted around for the stairs, found them, spared little thought towards contemplating the irony of their willing return to their prison and raced up to the fourth floor.

Marty hammered on the door of Room 437. "Frank!"

From behind the door came the faint sounds of snoring. Marty sighed.

"Do you want to try next door?" Ted asked.

"You go ahead. I'm staying here 'til he wakes up." Marty whacked the door with his palms. "FRANK!"

The door to Room 436 was ajar. Ted pushed it open and entered the room.

Neo was sitting on the bed, glaring defiantly at the blank television screen.

"Neo?"

The man turned his head to glance at him, then looked back at the television.

Ted trooped over to the bedside and held out the almost empty packet of chips. "Want some?"

Neo looked back at the teen. He hesitated, then reached into the packet and took out half a handful of potato chips. Neo gazed at them in his hand.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

Ted sat down beside him on the bed and tossed some chips into his own mouth.

They munched together in silence for a while.

**

Frank Bannister dearly wished that people would stop disturbing his sleep, because he valued it very much. He scowled at the ceiling as he lay on his back and vowed not to budge. The ceiling scowled back at him, but Frank didn't notice.

Outside, Marty heard the snoring stop and gave himself a small grin of victory.

"I KNOW YOU'RE AWAKE!" he yelled, thumping on the locked door for the umpteenth time. The door went into depression and started contemplating suicide. It communicated its life-ending plans with the other doors via telepathy, but they all told it to hold on and not give up: something which was becoming increasingly harder to do with each blow Marty dealt to it.

Oh, just get up, won't you? the door thought irately at Frank, who was then treated to a sudden unpleasant sensation of what it was like being an abused door. He blinked, the feeling went away, and he attributed it to his imagination.

The aggressive knocking on the door then came to an abrupt end.

Finally, Frank thought, settling back down.

Then an ear-splitting scream ripped through the air, and before Frank knew it, he was standing at the room's open doorway looking uncomprehendingly at two grinning teenagers.

"I told you it would work, dude," Ted said to Marty.

"Wh..." Frank said. "Th... y... wha..."

Neo was standing off to the side, forehead against the wall and hands over his ears. He now took his hands away and moved over to the doorway. "Good morning," he said, eyeing the half-asleep Frank with some displeasure. "May I use the computer?"

**

The four of them talked. Not much, but enough to assess the situation and get an idea of the options available.

Frank could have almost laughed at it all. Everything was so simple, and yet not. They could just walk out of the hotel right now – all four of them – and nobody would stop them, but then what? It wasn't as if they could all just go walking along the streets without attracting too much attention and too many awkward questions they couldn't answer. Escaping was the easy part. What they did after that was the hard part.

In an unlocked hotel room, Keith had them completely trapped and he knew it.

What was probably worst of all was how everything looked so *normal*. If they tried hard enough they could even imagine that they were just on some holiday somewhere and that this was the hotel they were staying in. Through the window could be seen parts of a completely normal looking city filled with normal buildings, normal roads, normal people. The kind of place no one would have paid them a second look in had they been back home. But here, all they had to do was walk out and who knew what would happen?

To put it simply, that would be a stupid thing to do. People would be sure to stare. It wasn't everyday that you saw fictional characters walking down the street. They would have to split up, for sure, if they went out of the hotel – if ever. But even that didn't eliminate the risk of being besieged by crazy rabid fans wanting autographs from who they wrongly supposed were their favourite movie stars.

Keith had them totally trapped.

After splashing cold water on his face, Frank had been able to feel somewhat more awake than before, but the effect was already wearing off and he could feel his exhaustion creeping up on him once again. Marty and Ted were hungrily digging into the last packet of potato chips in the room, and Neo was staring at the ceiling. At first, Frank thought that Neo was thinking, until he too noticed the lizard up there. The aforementioned lizard scampered its way across the ceiling, lost its grip, and scabbled wildly in the air as it fell down dangerously close to the open bag of chips.

Frank was beginning to have doubts about the cleanliness of the hotel.

Across the room, the teens got up and went next door to look for more food to satisfy their hunger, as it didn't look as if lunch would be served anytime soon. Neo followed them out but turned right instead towards the lift lobby on that floor. He wondered if there were other people staying in the hotel; the display numbers showing the lifts moving up and down proved that to be true.

Neo started to leave, when there was a 'ding' sound and a lift door opened next to him. Standing inside was a little boy of about five years old whom we shall call Rupert. He had been supposed to wait for his parents to enter the lift to go to their room on the seventeenth floor, but he had forgotten to hold the 'open door' button and the lift hadn't waited. Scared, Rupert had hit all the numbered buttons in the lift, including the one for the fourth that had a sign saying 'Closed for Refurbishment' in big friendly letters next to it.

Neo stared at Rupert, and the boy's eyes widened, his mouth falling open. Then the doors closed, and the lift happily made its way to the fifth floor, followed by the sixth, the seventh, and so on all the way to the seventeenth. When it finally arrived there, Rupert stumbled out into the arms of his parents who had been wondering exactly where their son had got to and if he had fallen into the toilet again like last time.

Rupert wasted no time in reporting his strange encounter. "Mum, Dad, I saw Neo!"

"Who?"

"Neo! Thomas A. Anderson! The guy from *The Matrix*! He was on the fourth floor, I saw him!"

Rupert's mother muttered something about the unhealthy number of times he had seen that movie, which by the way wasn't exactly suitable for someone of his age, and why didn't he watch nice children's shows such as *Barney and Friends* instead like every other kid did?

"The fourth floor?" his father asked. "Isn't that the one that's closed for refurbishment?"

Rupert shrugged. "I don't know. But I saw Neo, I really did!"

His mother sighed. "You can't have seen him, Rupert. He's not real. It's just a movie."

"But..."

"I think we should cut down on the amount of television you've been watching lately."

"But I SAW him!"

Rupert's father shook his head, a small smile on his face. "Good April Fool's joke. I just remembered it's April 1st today."

"But..."

"And anyway, I think Keanu Reeves has better things to do than walk around a hotel on a floor that's closed for refurbishment."

"But..."

"Forget it, Rupert."

"But..."

The boy cast a last look at the lift he had exited from, now merrily making its way from the twenty-second floor to stop at the twenty-third, and the twenty-fourth, and the twenty-fifth... Rupert scowled. He'd seen Neo, he *knew* he had.

Back in the room, Frank had fallen asleep again. Neo gave him one look, realised it meant that the computer was now available for use, and accessed the Internet.

Now to find out what he was in this world.

**

The Traven Institute of Mental Health was, on most days, a fairly quiet affair when viewed from the outside. Like most other mental hospitals, it had its share of crazy yelling madmen, but their cries rarely escaped the soundproofed walls of the institute.

The main building was a gleaming white and fronted by a neatly manicured lawn, all in all a picture of serenity.

This morning, however, screams suddenly broke out – not from the vocal cords of the resident crazy yelling madmen, but rather from that of the staff.

A young man suddenly ran out the building and down the steps, a blazing lightsaber in his hand.

Luke was feeling more and more confused by the second. Firstly the men in white had made him enter that building, and then they had shouted at him to get out after he demonstrated that his lightsaber was, in fact, a real weapon, and not a stick of dead metal as they claimed.

He deactivated his lightsaber and stuck it back into his utility belt.

Luke was hungry. He wondered if he should go back in and ask them where he could get some food, then he remembered the horrified looks with which they had regarded him and his lightsaber and decided that maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea after all.

Luke left the grounds of the institute and went towards the sound of traffic where there would probably be people.

He stopped a passer-by on the street. "Excuse me, but do you know where I can find some food?"

The passer-by blinked. "Uh, yeah," she said with a questioning look at Luke's clothes. "There's a McDonald's across that street..."

"What's that?"

"Uh, McDonald's?" she said. "You know, burgers and fries and stuff? Are you foreign or something?"

"Yes," Luke said.

"Uh-huh... Okay, um, look, I'm really sorry, but I'm kind of in a rush here... Just go over there and check out the place, okay?"

"Okay," Luke said.

The passer-by continued her passing by, and Luke set out to discover McDonald's.

Chapter Twenty-One
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

Frank woke up one hour later and chased Neo off the computer. Neo would have protested if not for the fact that he was more in the mood to lie down on the bed and dwell on the fact that Keanu Reeves currently had a total fortune of about 350 million US dollars, whereas he, Neo, had spent the better half of his life trying to make do with his pathetic salary, dingy little apartment and cheap food.

It was probably the hardest e-mail message Frank had ever composed in his life, but he managed somehow, although when he read back through it again he had to admit that it didn't sound very convincing. He just hoped it would have to do; at least there was still some hope, no matter how small, that Michael J. Fox would believe him and perhaps find some way to help the four of them. Perhaps. If he did, Frank would promise to leave his cash alone.

Marty and Ted entered the room, having just finished watching an episode of *Sesame Street* in the other room for lack of anything better to do.

"What're you doing?" Marty asked.

"E-mail."

"To?"

Frank hesitated, wondering if he should tell him. "Michael J. Fox," he finally said.

Marty raised an eyebrow.

"Look, I know it's not going to work, okay? But it couldn't hurt to try..."

Ted glanced at the bottom right hand corner of the computer screen and nodded. "Yeah, it's not going to work, dude."

Frank sighed. "I KNOW. No one would ever believe..."

"Nope. Not that. Look at the date on the screen."

They looked.

April 1st, 2004, it said happily in big friendly letters.

"It's April Fools' Day, dude," Ted said nonchalantly, turning to stare at a lizard crawling along the ceiling towards Neo.

It took a moment for the words to sink in... and when it did, Frank swore really, really loudly.

Neo started. Above him, a certain lizard was similarly affected, decided to fall off the ceiling, and landed on his head.

"AAAAAHHHH!"

Marty was suddenly struck with an idea. Heart thumping away and trying to ignore the sight of Neo trying to grab hold of Liz and get her off his head, Marty took over the computer and typed 'www.hillvalley-online.com' into the address bar.

He hit the 'enter' key and waited with bated breath... and then the page loaded.

It was there.

The main page of the Hill Valley Online website.

Marty almost cried at the familiarity of it all. The site existed. Which mean that Hill Valley and everyone in it still existed too... for the time being, at least, until the portal closed.

Why hadn't he thought of trying this earlier? Marty wondered briefly about that, then realised that it was because Frank had been hogging the computer all the time. The teen gratefully logged onto his e-mail account and typed out an SOS to Doc:

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

Doc, I hope you can get this. There's some psycho guy named Keith holding me and three others captive in a hotel somewhere in some other dimension. It's the same one the BTF.com website came from.

Get us out of here, please! I don't know how much longer we have to live.

- Marty

**

Andrew Fong ran another search through his half-brother's office, getting more and more frustrated by the second. Where on earth had Liz gone? His pet lizard – smuggled over from Singapore – had run away before, it was true, but never for this long... and in a huge hotel like this, who knew where she could be?

Andrew scowled. Adwin had promised to look after her for him, but if an open container marked 'That Stupid Lizard' located next to an empty food tray was any clue, Adwin hadn't been doing a very good job. Didn't he know that lizards could climb?

The fourteen-year-old sighed and swivelled around in Keith's chair, finally turning to face the desk and switching on the computer. Logging onto BTTF.com, Andrew spent a nice time on the message boards, completely oblivious of the fact that the main character from his favourite movie was currently just three floors above him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

The issue of lunch was soon brought up, as well as how they didn't seem to be getting the room service that Keith had promised.

Frank decided that he would be the one to go out to get the food; he was probably the least conspicuous of the four of them.

There was a McDonald's across the road from the hotel, and Frank made that his destination. The four of them pooled their money together and discovered they had enough for several Big Macs with fries and Coke. Marty and Ted were still hungry, despite having finished off a lot of potato chips. And when I say a lot, I mean a lot. Think big.

"Uh... I don't suppose any of you have sunglasses, right?" Frank asked, pocketing the cash. "So people won't recognise me so easily..."

Neo hesitated, then reluctantly dug into his pocket and emerged with the sunglasses case. He opened it and took out the pair of really cool sunglasses. "Here. But you better not lose it... Are you listening to me?"

None of them were; all had been completely entranced by the sight of the really cool sunglasses.

Frank blinked. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. Thanks." He reached out a hand to get them, put on the sunglasses, and grinned. "Cool."

"If you break them, I'll kill you," Neo added casually as Frank headed out the door.

"Can you lend me the sunglasses later?" Ted asked.

"No."

Marty picked up a pen that was lying on the table, looked at it, and put it down again for lack of anything better to do. "So what're we going to do until he gets back?"

There were a few seconds of silence... and then Ted started singing.

*"A hundred green bottles
Hanging on the wall
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.
Ninety-nine green bottles
Hanging on the wall..."*

Neo groaned and resigned himself to a long, long wait.

"And if one green bottle were to accidentally fall..."

Neo went over to the computer, still on, and decided to do some random Internet surfing.

*"Ninety-seven green bottles
Hanging on the wall..."*

Neo went to IMDB.com and typed random things into the search bar. This gave him a lot of negative results, so he decided to type more meaningful things into the search bar and learnt that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* movie was coming out in 2005, starring Martin Freeman as Arthur Dent, Mos Def as Ford Prefect and Sam Rockwell as Zaphod Beeblebrox. Neo typed more stuff into the search bar.

*"There'll be ninety-six green bottles
Hanging on the wall."*

Marty went over to the next room to see if there was anything he could do over there. There wasn't, and he came back. The teen flipped open the cable TV guide and started to read.

"And if one green bottle were to accidentally fall..."

Neo went to Yahoo.com and typed not so random things into the search bar.

*"Ninety-five green bottles
Hanging on the wall..."*

Neo grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and got to work learning to forge Keanu Reeves' signature; he never knew when it might come in handy.

*"There'll be ninety-four green bottles
Hanging on the wall."*

Marty spotted Michael J. Fox's name somewhere in the TV guide, freaked out, and closed the book. He spent about two pointless minutes absent-mindedly drumming out the rhythm to the song against the bedside table, then joined in the singing.

*"Eighty green bottles
Hanging on the wall
Eighty green bottles
Hanging on the wall
And if one green bottle were to accidentally fall
There'll be seventy-nine green bottles
Hanging on the wall."*

**

Really cool sunglasses on, Frank entered the lift, then jabbed at the button for the first floor and waited in silence as the life slowly descended the four floors. Had it been a Sirius Cybernetics Corporation Happy Vertical People Transporter in the headquarters of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the lift would have been delighted to go down. However, this lift was just a normal lift and couldn't care less about which direction it was made to go in.

The lift lobby on the ground floor was near empty, and not many people paid much attention to Frank when he got out of the lift. People getting out of lifts happened all the time, after all. Only one person was staring at him any more than necessary.

His name was Rupert.

Mouth hanging open, the boy tugged at his father's sleeve. "Dad..."

His father was busy filling up a form at the hotel counter, and was slightly irritated at being interrupted. "What?" he asked, not turning around.

"Is that..."

Richard Murdoch heaved an exasperated sigh at his son. "WHO? Neo again? Luke Skywalker? Mr. Spock? Marty McFly? I'm *busy*, Rupert!"

That guy did kind of look like Marty, but Rupert didn't think it was a good idea to say so and shut his mouth.

Frank exited the hotel, trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible as he headed in the general direction of the McDonald's building. He couldn't help but notice several people starting to stare at him.

They made him nervous, and he looked away. Some of the people on the other side also started staring at him and whispering among themselves. They also made him nervous, and Frank was about to just run off somewhere else when someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind and made him jump.

The person was a teenage boy dressed all in black staring intently at him. "Sorry," he started with a slight smile, "but... uh... can you tell me where you got those sunglasses? They look just like the ones from *The Matrix*, and I think they're really cool!"

All around Frank, people were nodding in agreement, looks of awe on their faces as they stared spellbound at his really cool sunglasses.

Frank was so going to kill Neo when he got back.

"So... like, where'd you get them?" the youth asked again, hopefully.

"They cost me three million dollars, kid. I don't think you can afford them." The traffic lights chose that time to turn, and Frank thankfully ran across the road muttering darkly under his breath. He took off the really cool sunglasses and stuck them in a pocket. He'd probably attract less attention that way, ironic though it seemed.

The group of people who had been staring at him quit staring at him and started staring at his pocket instead where the really cool sunglasses were. Meanwhile, another group of people started staring at him instead.

Frank was getting really, really nervous. The McDonald's was not that far away. He'd go in, get the food, and leave. That seemed like a good plan, and he was about to start carrying it out when another person tapped him on the shoulder and made him jump again.

A teenage girl smiled shyly at him. "Excuse me... are you Michael J. Fox?"

Frank ran.

**

*"Thirty-two green bottles
Hanging on the wall
Thirty-two green bottles
Hanging on the wall
And if one green bottle were to accidentally fall
There'll be thirty-one green bottles
Hanging on the wall."*

Marty had been watching the clock; they were singing at a rate of approximately six bottles per minute.

**

Frank leaned against the side of the McDonald's building, happily licking away at the free chocolate ice cream one of the McDonald's staff had given him in exchange for an autograph. He had tried putting on the really cool sunglasses again a while ago, and had been paid \$20 by some crazy *Matrix* fan for letting him try them on.

Frank changed his mind. He was beginning to like this place.

**

Jessica Wiedlin had seen her fair share of weirdos. All sorts of people came to McDonald's (heck, just a while ago Michael J. Fox had dropped by for a visit), some less normal than others. She was therefore not too perturbed when she saw Luke Skywalker come through the door and look around in a confused sort of way before joining the queue. She'd once taken orders for two Trekkies in full Klingon costume – they'd ordered four cheeseburgers, two large fries, Coke, and one Happy Meal – and she was more than prepared for this guy who evidently thought he was Luke Skywalker or something. Well, she could play along. They didn't pay her for nothing.

"Hi," said Luke when he reached the front of the queue. "Uh... you have food here?"

"Yeah, we do. What'll it be?"

Luke scanned the menu above the counter and hesitated. "Uh... what do you recommend?"

People behind Luke started muttering darkly about idiots who joined McDonald's queues without knowing what they wanted to order beforehand.

"Look, just get a cheeseburger or something, okay?" an irate fellow behind Luke decided for him.

"What's that?" Luke asked.

"A burger with cheese in it," Jessica dutifully supplied.

"Um, okay, I'll have one of that..."

Jessica rang up the order on the counter. "That'll be 89 cents, please."

Luke hesitated. "Uh, I don't have any money with me..."

Jessica inwardly groaned. At least the Klingon fellows had had cash on them.

"Oh, just get out of here," the-guy-behind-Luke said.

Luke faltered a moment, then obeyed and left McDonald's, his hunger unsatisfied.

All in a day's work, Jessica thought drolly.

**

*"One green bottle
Hanging on the wall
One green bottle
Hanging on the wall..."*

Finally, Neo thought with relief. It was high time that stupid song was over.

*"There'll be no green bottles
Hanging on the wall."*

A few seconds of blissful silence followed. Neo reached out for a bottle of water on the table and drank. He was thirsty.

*"A hundred green bottles
Lying on the floor,"* Ted started.

Neo coughed on the water and turned round in incredulous indignation to face the singers. Marty grinned and joined in the second part of the song. He was bored.

*"A hundred green bottles
Lying on the floor
And if..."*

Marty and Ted looked at each other.

"And if..."

“And if one dumb person were to kick one out the door...”

“YEAH!”

*“There’ll be ninety-nine green bottles
Lying on the floor.
Ninety-nine green bottles
Lying on the floor...”*

Neo stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him. The teens grinned and high-fived each other.

**

Frank gleefully counted the money he’d managed to collect so far. He had a hundred dollars, just from letting people try on the sunglasses. He hoped that Neo wouldn’t mind, though... there weren’t *that* many fingerprints on the lenses after all.

**

Outside Room 436, Neo leaned against the closed door and shut his eyes, trying to block off everything. From the room, strains of a song about ninety-six bottles lying on the floor reached his ears and he tried to ignore it.

Neo didn’t know what to think. It didn’t seem that long ago when the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* had dragged him out of the world as he knew it, plunging him instead into some strange future place run by machines, which they claimed was the real world. And then, just as he was finally getting used to that and the fact that he’d never be able to eat another McDonald’s burger again, Keith had to drag him out of *that* world into another that *he* claimed was the real world, which despite having McDonald’s burgers, wasn’t that great otherwise.

Exactly how many ‘real world’s were there, anyway? How did he even know that this one was the real one? Why did he keep ending up in strange Twilight Zone-y situations like this? Why was he asking all these questions again?

Neo half-expected Rod Serling to walk out of nowhere and give the television viewers an introduction to the weird life of one Thomas ‘Neo’ Anderson and his nowhere-near-brief journey through that mysterious place known as The Twilight Zone.

But Rod Serling didn’t appear; he was dead, after all.

The song in the room had reached eighty-seven bottles and was showing no signs of stopping just yet. In fact, the rate had increased to seven bottles per minute.

And that was another thing. Ted scared him, scared him big-time, scared him like no one Neo had ever known or thought he would ever know. Ted Theodore Logan was, without a doubt, the freakiest person he had ever had the unfortunate chance to meet. He didn’t like what the teen implied that he too was capable of, of the potential he had to be as much of a clueless idiot as Ted was. Well, fine, so maybe he already was a clueless idiot, because if any word could describe how he currently felt, it was ‘clueless’. Here he was, grabbed out of the life he knew and dumped into some weird other dimension where – if he were to leave the hotel – he would most probably be mistaken for some actor whose name he couldn’t even pronounce.

Neo wanted so desperately to leave this place. Part of him wanted to just dash out of the hotel into the streets right now and just run... somewhere. Anywhere. But that would be an idiotic thing to do. He and Ted probably had more in common than he dared to dare imagine.

The teens were at eighty bottles and going strong.

There was a ‘ding’ sound, and Frank walked out of the lift, carrying a bag of McDonald’s food in his left hand and munching on French fries with the other. Seeing Neo, he moved the bag over to his right hand and used his clean one to take out the really cool sunglasses. “You could have warned me,” he said, returning the sunglasses.

“What?”

"I went out wearing those, and everyone within a five mile radius started staring at me because they thought the sunglasses were really cool. Kind of defeated the purpose, if you ask me."

Neo stared down at his really cool sunglasses. "Why are there so many fingerprints on them?"

Frank decided that it was better not to answer that particular question and instead pushed open the door and entered the room.

"*Seventy-five green bottles* – oh, hi." The singing stopped, and Frank gave the teens a strange look as he dumped the food onto the table. Neo walked in behind him, using the really cool sunglasses cloth to wipe away the fingerprints of uncertain origin on them. About two seconds later, he decided to forget it and go after the food instead. Neo didn't know how long ago it had been since he had last eaten a McDonald's burger. Come to think of it, he never had. Those hadn't been real burgers, but ones created by the Matrix.

It didn't matter. A Big Mac is a Big Mac is a Big Mac, and Neo happily devoured the two flame-grilled patties, lettuce, tomatoes and cheese on a sesame seed bun.

No, this fic was not sponsored by McDonald's.

"So what took you so long?" Marty asked, going over to the table to grab a burger.

Frank gave a non-committal shrug. "That's none of your business," he said after a while, trying not to think too much of the hundred bucks in his wallet that he had earned.

"Is this Pepsi?" Marty asked, lifting up a cup.

"No, that's Coke."

"Oh." Disappointed, Marty put the cup back down. "So where are we?"

"L.A." Frank reached over a hand. "Pass the fries, Ted."

The teen reluctantly passed them over. On the ceiling, Liz decided that Marty's head would make a nice landing spot. The lizard mentally calculated the angle at which she should kick off the ceiling, taking into account wind speed and direction.

Liz adjusted her trajectory and jumped.

Marty moved.

Liz hit the ground and swore.

Wiping his hands clean on a serviette, Marty scooted over to the computer and logged onto his e-mail. To his disappointment, Doc hadn't replied... but he supposed that chances of that happening in such a short time were minimal.

"Look, I'm leaving this on, okay?" he asked, swivelling around in his chair to face the others. "If Doc replies, just tell me."

Random nods of assent met his request. Liz ran frantically around on the ground, wondering where her tail had gone.

Neo picked out the camera in the room, tucked away in a corner of the ceiling, and decided to put it out of action once he was done eating.

Chapter Twenty-Three
16th October 1997
Room 439, Kenselton Hotel

It was four in the morning, according to the clock. Keith realised with a slight jolt that he had been twenty-five years old for four hours.

He gazed into his computer screen with coffee-induced energy, his head hurting from thinking too much. He was almost on the verge of giving up, but he couldn't; he had vowed to work this out before the break of dawn, and he intended to keep to that vow.

Yet his father's words of years before had an annoying tendency to pop up in his mind, and try as he might to ignore them, he couldn't.

You can't just throw reality out the window like that. This is the real world.

A part of him told him it was true. This was, after all, the real world, not some science-fiction story where wondrous things could happen. In this world, people led horribly normal lives that followed all the laws of physics. If you jumped into the air, gravity would pull you back down. If you jumped into the air and then tried to fall to the ground and miss – which, according to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is the only way to fly – you would hit the ground anyway.

This was the real world. Santa Claus didn't exist. There were no fairies at the bottom of the garden. If you stopped and smelled the roses, chances were that you'd find yourself in detention the next day for not finishing your homework. School buses did not take trips through someone's digestive system. A purple dinosaur toy that comes to life and sings should be sent to an exorcist. If, on the off-chance aliens did exist and one visited Earth, phoning home would rack up a gigantic galactic phone bill that would in all probability force it to declare bankruptcy. If you fell into a pool of toxic waste you'd probably just get cancer and die. If you sliced up the head of an airhead, you would, unbelievable as it might seem, find brains.

This was the real world.

And the real world had certain rules of normality, and zapping things over from other universes just didn't fit into the definition of 'normal'. It might be theoretically possible, but then again, it is also theoretically possible for a penguin to get up in drag and dance the hula, and that's not been happening. Not in this world, anyway.

This world...

Keith gave a start. He clambered clumsily out of his standard-shaped chair and stumbled over to the safe in his room. With fingers trembling from too much caffeine, he keyed in the access code and opened the safe, reaching inside and taking out the notebook that Dem had given him seven years ago.

There is information this world will not allow to be known...

Reading quickly through the first few pages, a chill crept up his spine. It found creeping tiring business, and decided to just run up Keith's spine and get it over and done with.

The diagrams, notes, equations, everything... Keith knew he'd found just the information he needed, and not only that, but the means to it.

In this world, some things can never happen. Some machines can never be built, even if you knew how to, because the laws of this world that govern normality wouldn't allow it, and would come up with ways to stop it from happening – either by a lack of information, or resources...

Keith turned the book over and lifted the back cover as he had done several times before. It was a pocket, slotted in which was a thin sheet of a deep turquoise metalloid, the likes of which had never before been seen in the real world.

Forbidden resources, needed to build a forbidden machine.

And at the bottom right hand corner of the folder lay the unfamiliar address stamp of the book's origins:

Asirot Research Facility
39-C Cilamir Road
Aqintos, 561413
Aqintos, Xavarin, Nexus

The chill made a return journey down Keith's spine.

Reality got defenestrated.

Chapter Twenty-Four
1st April 2004, Thursday
Room 1721, Kenselton Hotel

The television was on in front of him, but Rupert Murdoch had his mind on other things. He was sure that there was something going on on the fourth floor other than refurbishment work. Something weird. He'd seen Neo with his own two eyes, and furthermore, he bet that Neo was still there. If only he had the chance to prove it...

His father was out on business, and his mother was sleeping in the hotel room's second bedroom, the door closed.

Leaving the television on, Rupert quietly checked to see if his mother was still sound asleep. She was.

Heart pounding, Rupert headed for the door. He was about to go out, when he remembered the key card; he'd nearly just run the risk of locking himself out.

Rupert rummaged around in his mother's handbag until he found the key card. He took it out and stuck it into his pocket. Going over to the door, he reached for the door lock and turned the catch as he had seen his parents do; then with some effort he pushed the door open and stepped out.

A wave of exhilaration swept over him, along with an underlying feeling of guilt. This probably constituted running away, but he wouldn't take long... he just had to *know*...

Entering the lift lobby, Rupert smacked the 'down' button and waited with growing excitement as the lift car slowly descended to his floor. Eventually, the lift doors opened and he got in.

Rupert looked for the button with a '4' on it and pressed it.

Seconds later, the boy stepped out onto the fourth floor of Kenselton Hotel. There was a strip of tape blocking off the lifts, but Rupert easily ducked under it.

He'd made it...

The five-year-old looked around the deserted floor in awe. He could stay here forever, he thought, walking soundlessly out to the corridor. Every forbidden step sent a thrill running down his back... no one knew he was here, no one...

Now to find Neo.

Rupert paused momentarily to listen, eyes closed. His mind filtered off the soft music in the corridor, and behind that he could make out the faint sounds of voices...

They were coming from the door just several metres away from him. Rupert went over and pressed his ear against the door of Room 437. There were definitely people there, he thought feverishly.

Rupert glanced at the doorbell, high above his reach. He couldn't reach it, so he settled for the next best. Raising his right fist, he knocked.

Almost immediately the voices fell silent. Then one spoke: "Who's that?"

Rupert wasn't too sure as to how he should answer. "Me," he said.

There was a pause, then the door opened slightly and a face peeked out. "Who are you?"

"My name's Rupert, and..." He caught sight then of Neo further inside the room, and his face lit up. "Neo!" he shouted jubilantly. "I *knew* you were here, I saw you..."

Marty looked doubtfully back into the room. "Do you know him?" he asked Neo.

"I... saw him just now, but..."

"My dad said you weren't real, but I knew you were 'cause I saw you and no one believed me..."

Marty opened the door a little more and let Rupert in. The boy's face was flushed, his eyes shining with the joy that can only be attained upon the discovery that one of your favourite fictional characters is real and sitting dumbfounded at a computer only several metres away from you.

Neo suddenly realised that everyone in the room was staring at him.

"Um," he said intelligently.

"You *are* real!" Rupert enthused in a painfully Walt Disney -esque way.

"Uh... Rupert, right?" Marty cut in. "Do you parents know you're here?"

Rupert smiled, a look of triumph on his young face. "No," he said. "My mother's supposed to be looking after me now, but she went to sleep so I came up here."

The others exchanged looks. Frank shook his head and wandered off to gaze out the windows.

Neo contemplated getting out of his chair, then decided he would be more comfortable sitting and so stayed there. "I don't think it's such a good idea for you to be here without anyone knowing..."

"I could tell my mom and dad," Rupert said eagerly, "then they'll have to come here and they can see you and they'll know I'm telling the truth..."

"And then they'll get the press over and we'll be shipped off to some freak show," Frank muttered to the windowsill. He sighed and turned around to face Rupert. "Look here, kid. You can't tell people about us, okay? You're not supposed to be here. *We're* not supposed to be here. Your parents probably won't believe you even if they saw us, because... because most people just can't accept things that aren't *normal* and that don't fit into their idea of what's possible and real, even if it's right there in their faces..."

"But I believe you," Rupert said.

"You'll grow out of it eventually, trust me," Frank said somewhat fiercely. "And you'll remember all the weird unexplainable stuff that happened to you as a kid, and you'll find ways of explaining them, and you'll laugh over it with your friends and wonder how you could've ever thought it possible that you met a bunch of movie characters in a hotel room. It's the stuff of fantasies. Childish dreams. We're all dreams here, not you. Go back to the real world where you belong, and be happy at the fact that your whole existence isn't due to some bearded guy from New Zealand."

Rupert blinked. Frank turned back to the window and glared at it. Sleep deprivation never put him in a good mood.

"I brought cookies," Rupert finally said, reaching into his pocket. "I thought you might be hungry."

No one else moved or said anything, so Ted took it upon himself to accept the proffered cookies.

"Thanks, little dude," he said. "But you shouldn't keep your mom and dad waiting. They would be most worried about you."

"You look like Neo," Rupert said.

Neo buried his head in his hands and heaped figurative dirt over it.

Ted smiled. "Yeah, I know."

"Can I come see you guys again?" Rupert asked hopefully.

"Perhaps you'd better not," Marty said. "Keep this all a secret, okay?"

Rupert nodded after some hesitation. "Sure." He paused. "I guess I'll go, then."

"One departure from the Twilight Zone," Frank murmured to the windowpane.

Marty saw Rupert out the door and closed it, then plopped himself down on a bed.

"Anybody want cookies?" Ted asked.

Eyes still on the computer, Neo reached out a hand. "Give me one."

Ted extracted two cookie halves from the packet, then went over and placed them in Neo's hand. He glanced at the screen. "What are you doing?"

"Research," Neo said vaguely, although it looked more like he was hacking into a *Matrix* fansite to make it display the words 'NEO WAS HERE' whenever someone logged in.

Frank left the window side and went into the adjoining bathroom to take a shower.

Chapter Twenty-Five
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

It rained. Frank stood by the windows of Room 437, gazing contemplatively at the rivulets of water making their way down the glass panes, occasionally merging into a small stream that would then speed up and slide away from view.

From the other side of the room, the steady tap of Neo's fingers on the keyboard filled the air, pausing now and then, punctuated with the clicks of the computer mouse.

Ted was sitting at the foot of the bed and missing Bill. He wondered what his best friend would be doing now, wondered if they'd ever get to see each other again. Since childhood, the two of them had rarely been separated. Never before had they been literally worlds apart.

Next to him, Marty was feeling most egregiously bored.

Rain, rain, go away, come again another day, he thought.

"What are we doing here?" Marty asked rhetorically.

Ted shrugged. He hadn't felt homesick for ages, and he didn't want to be interrupted now that he was.

Marty got up and went over to see what Frank was looking at. It turned out that Frank was not really looking at anything, unless sheets of rainwater falling past the windows counted as something.

"What?" Frank asked, looking at Marty.

"Nothing," the teen replied. "I'm just bored."

"As Neo to let you use the computer," Frank suggested.

"Dream on," Neo muttered.

Marty left the room. Ted looked up, wondering briefly if he should join him, then decided against it and went back to being homesick.

Keith was standing outside the door to the control room, leaning against the wall and lost in thought. The sound of the closing door of Room 437 alerted him, and he turned as Marty came around the corner.

"Hi Marty," he greeted.

"What're you doing here?" Marty asked.

Keith shrugged. "Nothing much. You?"

Marty didn't reply, so Keith went on. "Feel any symptoms of impending death yet?" he asked. "Nausea, dizziness, headaches?"

"No," Marty replied tersely.

Keith stuck his hands into his pockets and went back to staring at the opposite wall. "Yeah, I guess it would take some time."

"What's it like," Keith asked several seconds later, "knowing you're not real?"

"I *am* real," Marty said.

"So you say. I could program a computer to say the same thing. I bet Barney the Dinosaur thinks the same thing, but as we all know, he's just a dinosaur from our imagination."

"Who?" Marty asked.

"Oh, that's right. You wouldn't know about Barney yet."

There was a moment's silence.

"Are you thirsty?" Keith asked.

"Why?"

"I could make you a cup of coffee or something."

"So you're gonna start being nice to us now?" Marty asked suspiciously.

"No. I'm just immensely bored right now. I need something to do." Keith paused. "I could make you tea instead, if you like," he offered.

"No thanks."

"I mean, you're here, so the machine works, and now I've got nothing left to work on."

"What about finding a way to send us back?" Marty asked.

"Whatever for? As I said, 'back' doesn't technically exist. Theoretically, yes, but not really... though I suppose it may be an easier option than having to look for a place to bury the bodies when you guys die. It'd be much more convenient to just zap the corpses off to a parallel universe where the police won't find them," he mused.

"You're just sick," Marty said.

"Thank you. Do you want to watch *Back to the Future*?"

Marty hesitated. "No."

Keith grinned. "You know you want to. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Ever wanted to be on TV?"

"Not that way."

Keith shrugged. He turned around and opened the door of the control room. "Come on," he said, and went in while Marty hung back at the doorway in apprehension. Keith emerged shortly with the *Back to the Future* DVD box set in his hand. "I'll start it up for you," he said, and led the way to Room 436, Marty following uncertainly behind.

Marty contemplated grabbing Keith from behind and performing the Vulcan neck pinch on him; but then he realised that, firstly, he wouldn't know what to do after that, and secondly, he didn't know how to administer said Vulcan neck pinch.

Marty tried not to dwell too hard on the fact that Vulcans and their neck pinches were both fictional. He had the ungrounded feeling that if he did so, Mr. Spock might come out of one of the rooms and proceed to demonstrate just how fictional the neck pinch was.

Keith stuck a key card into the key card slot of Room 436 and opened the door. He held the door briefly for Marty, used the card to turn on the room's electricity, then went over to the television set and turned on the DVD player. He put the disc in, got the remote control, selected the correct channel, and selected 'PLAY' when the menu loaded.

The screen turned black and the Universal Studios opening credits started playing. Standing by the bed, Marty watched them, stupefied.

"Want me to watch it with you?" Keith offered.

"I said I didn't want to see it," Marty said hollowly. His stomach did a figurative roll at the sight of one of the names in the credits.

My life is a Steven Spielberg movie, he thought in a dazed sort of way.

That's Doc's garage, he thought a moment later, his mind reeling uncomfortably.

"Would you like some popcorn?" Keith asked. He grinned. Then his gaze moved over to the decommissioned camera lying on the floor, and he grimaced. "That camera cost money," he muttered. Keith went over to the fallen camera and picked it up, giving it a look-over.

Marty dropped heavily down on the bed, blue eyes fixated on the screen. He didn't want to look, but at the same time he couldn't *not* look...

Not much later, Marty heard his own voice coming through the speakers of the television, and a funny feeling arose in the back of his throat.

Shaking his head, Keith left the room with the camera and let the door close behind him.

Inside, Marty McFly stared helplessly at the television screen and fought the simultaneous urges to throw up and cry.

**

Staring at rainwater can eventually get boring, and so when Frank Bannister heard sounds from next door and registered the fact that Marty had left, he decided to go see what was happening there. He left the room and knocked on the door of Room 436. "Marty?" he asked. "Are you in there?"

The only response he got was the continued sound of the television. Frank turned and went back to Room 437; perhaps one of the other two had the key card. He rang the doorbell, and Ted soon answered the door.

"D'you have the key for next door?" Frank asked.

"Sure, dude." Ted dug in his pockets and produced it.

"Thanks," Frank said, taking it. Ted followed him out, and Neo mentally swore as he heard the door close, knowing that probably neither Frank nor Ted had taken the key for *this* room, which basically meant that the next time the doorbell rang, Neo would have to leave the computer and go answer it.

**

Marty didn't look up when the door opened; he didn't notice when Frank came in and stood by the bed, silently watching the movie. *The Power of Love* was playing in the background of the movie, which Marty had noticed with a weird feeling that was almost happy; a feeling that was covered up quickly by everything else.

"You skateboard really well," Frank said softly.

Marty gave a start, his eyes darting towards the direction of the voice. Then recognition hit. "Frank..." he croaked.

No, it's Michael, Frank thought randomly, then decided that Marty currently looked too pale to take a bad joke like that. He sat down on the bed next to Marty and looked at him. The teen's eyes were back on the screen.

"You're shaking," Frank said.

Marty took a ragged breath and temporarily squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted so much to stop watching the movie, but at the same time he *had* to see it. His curiosity was too strong.

Frank unclenched Marty's right fist, which was attempting to strangle a part of the bed comforter. "Calm down, Marty," he said. "It's just a movie. Be glad it's not a sit-com with a laugh track and corny music."

Some subconscious part of Marty's brain registered that fact and acknowledged that, yes, that would be worse. The conscious part of his brain was engrossed in the movie, partly freaking out and partly watching the old, before-the-time-line-changed Jennifer on screen and realising how much he missed her. And even Strickland and the rest of Hill Valley...

His heart ached for the television screen to magically open up and suck him into the movie, back home. He then realised with a funny feeling that many *Back to the Future* fans around the world had probably had that same desire at some point or other in their lives, and he thought somewhat angrily that at least *his* longing was justified. He just wanted to go *home*, not get whisked off on some cool time travelling adventure.

"I wonder what Superman would think of all those little kids who go jumping out of windows, wearing their underwear outside their clothes with a towel tied round their necks," Frank mused.

"I wonder what kind of toilet paper Batman uses," he pondered aloud some time later.

Several minutes went by, by which time Marty had more or less stopped trembling and was gazing homesick-like at his onscreen family.

Frank got up. "I'll go see what Ted's up to," he said, and left the room.

**

Ted Logan wasn't particularly up to much. Frank had said not to go in after him, and Neo adamantly refused to open the door, so he had wandered off and through the open doorway of the control room, where he found Keith fiddling away with what looked like a broken camera. Keith gave him just a cursory glance before returning his gaze to the camera bits.

"Look what Neo did to this," he said, indicating the pieces.

"Neo said you were watching us through the cameras," Ted said warily.

Keith shrugged. "Big deal. They do that in shopping centres too, you know. And elevators. And these things cost money," he added as an afterthought. "So... having fun?"

"Not really," Ted said. "It's becoming most heinously boring."

"Marty's watching a movie. You could join him," Keith suggested.

"Frank told me not to go in."

"What's Neo doing?"

"He's on the computer in the other room. He won't let me in either."

"So you're stuck here with me, huh? Want me to make you a cup of coffee?"

"Nah."

"Or you could be my first human subject in testing out my sub-meson averager," Keith suggested.

"What's that do?"

"It alters the sub-atomic particles of whatever's in it, such that they become like those in this universe and are no longer regarded as foreign. Basically, if I use it on you, you probably wouldn't end up dying of universal incompatibility and this universe would, technically, become your true home."

"Why would I want to do that?" Ted asked.

Keith raised an eyebrow and poked at a dislodged camera lens. "Well, if you prefer to die, I'm not stopping you," he said.

"We're not going to die, dude. Marty told Doctor Brown where we were. He's coming in his time machine to rescue us."

At that, Keith looked up at Ted. "Really?"

"Yeah."

Keith appeared to think for a moment, then a brief grin appeared on his face. "When's he coming?" he asked casually.

Ted shrugged. "I don't know. He hasn't replied."

"But I guess we'll find out eventually, huh?" Keith said cheerfully. He got up from his chair, smiled, and ruffled Ted's hair. "Thanks for the info." He went over to the door, opened it, and gestured Ted out. "Just leave me alone for a while, okay?"

"Sure, dude," Ted said, not sure what was going on. He went out, and Keith closed and locked the door before going back to his desk to do some serious planning.

Ted met Frank in the corridor.

"Where'd you go?" Frank asked.

"I was talking with Keith."

"What about?"

Ted shrugged. "Nothing much."

They turned down the corridor, and Frank knocked on the door of Room 437. "Hey, Neo, open up!"

"I tried that, dude," Ted said. "He won't listen."

"Neo?" Frank called out again.

Inside the room, Neo calmly opened up another Internet window and ignored the knocking. *How d'you like the taste of your own medicine, Bannister, huh?* he thought.

"Maybe he's dead," Ted suggested from the other side of the door. "There's this thing called spontaneous combustion where people just..."

"I don't think Neo spontaneously combusted," Frank interrupted. He started to give up and turn away, when a thought suddenly struck him. "Spontaneous combustion... Hey, where'd you get that idea?"

Ted regarded him questioningly. "I don't know, dude. I just thought of it."

"There was... a quote on IMDB about..." Frank paused. "You wouldn't happen to know what Keanu Reeves' PIN number is, would you?" he asked as casually as he could make it.

"1 2 3 4 5?" Ted hazarded.

"Really?"

Ted shrugged.

"Forget it then," Frank said, realising that even if that was indeed the correct number, there was still the issue of getting hold of Mr. Reeves' ATM card, which might turn out to be a little hard to borrow.

Frank thought of the unattainable 350 million dollars, and he felt a little sad.

Frank realised that there wasn't much to do out there in the corridor.

"Would you mind if I go back in there?" he asked Ted, indicating the door behind which Marty was watching *Back to the Future*.

"Go ahead, dude."

"Thanks."

Frank unlocked the door and went in.

Ted realised that there wasn't much to do out there in the corridor.

He went over to the next room and knocked. "Neo?" he called out. "Can I come in now?"

Oh no, not again, the door thought mournfully to itself as Ted went on knocking to no avail. *Humans*, the door thought bitterly.

Still no response came from inside the room. Ted leant resignedly against the wall, when an idea struck him. Brightening up, he started:

"*Seventy-five green bottles, lying on the floor...*"

The door soon came unlocked and was opened.

"Thanks, dude," Ted said, but Neo was already walking back to the computer, looking frustrated.

"Why aren't the lights on?" Ted asked as the door swung shut behind him.

"I prefer them off," Neo said, sitting back down.

Torrents of rain fell past the windowpanes, the stormy sky outside casting a greyish-blue light into the room.

Ted wandered over to the computer and stood next to Neo. "What are you doing?"

"Looking things up." Neo considered shooing the teen away and requesting some privacy, then changed his mind. Opening up a new Internet window, he typed a string of words into the search bar, hit 'enter' and then clicked on one of the results. The page loaded, he scrolled down, and he highlighted a paragraph of text. "Here... read this."

Ted did so, and a grin spread across his face. "He crashed into a *mountain*?"

Neo gave a rare smile. 'Yeah. And ruptured his spleen.'

"*Whoa.*"

Neo typed in another address into the URL bar, and continued to introduce Ted to more crazy exploits of one Keanu Charles Reeves. It made him suddenly feel a whole lot closer to the teen.

**

Frank tried to make his presence unfelt as much as possible; the movie was, after all, a display of Marty's private life, and it didn't seem right to intrude by watching it with him. Although there was, of course, that little fact that thousands of people around the world would have seen it.

Frank found the kettle and put some water on to boil. He was thirsty, and a cup of coffee or tea or just plain water wouldn't do him any harm.

A CD case sitting by the television set caught his eye, and he picked it up. *The Matrix*, read the little plastic stick-on label. Frank put it back down and thought that it could make great blackmail material. He flipped through the magazines stacked by the TV, chose one, and sat down on the bed to read it, looking up now and then at the movie.

About one and a half hours later, it finished. Credits rolled to Huey Lewis and the News' song 'Back in Time'.

"How d'you turn this off?" Marty asked, still looking slightly green. Frank tried out the various remotes, and after accidentally altering the screen's proportions and changing the language to Portuguese succeeded in getting it back to the DVD's main menu. Music played amid a quick montage of shots and sound clips from the movie. Marty plugged his ears with his fingers and stared at his knees.

Frank found the arrows on the DVD remote, fiddled around and managed to select 'Special Features'.

"Want to watch the making of your life?" he offered.

Marty shook his head.

"Outtakes... deleted scenes... make up tests?"

"No."

Frank took out the DVD and put it back in its case. "What about the sequels?"

"Okay," Marty said after some hesitation. The movie hadn't been *that* bad after all. It helped to think of it as just some glorified home video with superb editing, a soundtrack and a seemingly omnipresent cameraman.

Frank popped in *Back to the Future II* and started up the movie, then went to pour himself and Marty cups of the now-cooled boiled water to drink.

Chapter Twenty-Six
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

About five minutes from the start of *Back to the Future II*, the doorbell rang in Room 436. Frank opened the door to see Adwin standing there and grinning at him.

"Shoo," Frank said, and closed the door in Adwin's face.

"Hi!" Adwin said to Neo six seconds later in the doorway of Room 437. Neo regarded him in a glazed sort of way, mostly the result of having spent too much time in front of the computer laughing at Keanu Reeves.

"Can I come in?" Adwin asked.

"..." said Neo, intending to say: "Why?", but his brain didn't seem to be working too well, mostly as a result of him having spent too much time in front of the computer laughing at Keanu Reeves. His hand therefore decided to take things into itself and opened the door to let Adwin in.

Adwin strolled in, grinned at Ted, and sat down on the bed.

"How's it going, dudes?" Adwin asked.

"Not good," Ted admitted.

"Getting bored, huh?" Adwin continued. "Welcome to the real world. Nothing interesting ever happens here."

Two years into the future in a country halfway around the world from where Adwin was speaking, the author narrowly escaped being knocked down by an ambulance.

"Bogus," Ted didn't say.

"So... what've you two been doing?" Adwin asked, bouncing on the bed.

"It's none of your business," Neo said before Ted could open his mouth.

Adwin shrugged. "Fine." He stopped bouncing on the bed because it was making him feel slightly nauseated. "Why don't you get out of here?" he suggested. "The doors are unlocked."

"We don't have anywhere to go, dude," Ted said.

"Yeah, but you don't have to stay here either. Just get out on the streets... wander around... find a nice cardboard box to settle down in, or murder Keanu Reeves and take over his life... There's a whole world out there. Maybe it's not as interesting as the ones you guys came from, but it's still something. D'you really want to spend all your time cooped up in a little hotel room?"

"Why not?" Ted asked.

"...That was a rhetorical question," Adwin said, slightly miffed.

"What's a rhet-"

"Forget it," Adwin said. "Stay here till you rot, then, if that's what you want." He got off the bed and left the room.

There was a moment's silence.

"Fifty-three green bottles, hanging on the—"

"Ted, shut up. You can't sing."

There was a moment's silence. Ted looked at Neo. Neo looked back. They gained no insight whatsoever from this ocular activity, and looked away.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Ted asked in a way that came out sounding a lot more rhetorical than he'd intended.

Neo scratched his ear and gazed blankly at the computer screen. He gave up, turned off the computer, and went to look out the window, a part of him hoping to see just what Frank had been so intently staring at earlier that day. He saw nothing but traffic and buildings and people.

Ted discovered a cookie crumb on the carpet and wondered if he should eat it. He eventually decided to spare its life and put it back down.

"This has been a most egregiously boring day," he concluded.

Neo saw a pedestrian picking his nose by a traffic light. He squinted, and saw the pedestrian then proceed to eat his nasal excavations. Neo turned away from the window and sat back down in the computer chair.

"Wanna play Twenty Questions?" Ted asked.

"No."

"Charades?"

"No," came the firm reply.

"Tic-tac-toe?"

Neo gave in, tore a sheet of paper off the hotel memo pad on the table, picked up a pen, drew a quick grid, and put an 'X' in the centre before passing it to Ted.

We get zapped into a parallel universe, and all we do is sit around playing tic-tac-toe, Neo thought.

They tied on all four of the tic-tac-toe games attempted and soon gave up playing. Several more minutes of non-activity followed, during which they just sat and listened to the television from the next room showing *Back to the Future II*.

Neo went to make some tea. He felt once again in a strangely British mood, and he knew that most British people derived large amounts of comfort from drinking tea. While waiting for the water to boil, Neo poked around the sachets of coffee, creamer, teabags, and sugar.

Ted's eyes lit up at the sight of the sugar. He took a packet, tore it open, and emptied its contents into his mouth before Neo could stop him. Liking the taste, Ted reached out for another packet of sugar, and this time Neo grabbed hold of his hand to stop him. It was Neo's honest opinion that the teen was already too hyper for his liking, and sugar would just make things worse.

Ted trudged despondently off to sit down on the bed and stare off into nothing as the last vestiges of sugar dissolved in his mouth. He got up and went to look out the window, wondering just what Frank and then Neo had been staring so intently at.

He saw some guy standing by the traffic light digging his young son's nose and then eating whatever came out.

That is most heinously gross, Ted thought, and turned away from the window.

Neo went off into the bathroom. Ted saw the door close, and he grinned. *Sugar!* he thought happily, nipping over to the basket of drinks stuff. Now he could take all the sugar he w...

Ted blinked in stupefaction. The sugar was all gone.

"No way," he whispered in disappointment.

The kettle clicked to announce it was done boiling. The toilet flushed, the tap ran, and Neo came out of the bathroom. He gave Ted a cursory glance, and then went to make his tea, dumping a teabag into a cup of hot water and extracting two sachets of sugar from his pocket.

Ted's eyes travelled to Neo's pocket. *Sugar*, he thought sadly, and went off to watch television.

We get zapped into a parallel universe, and all we do is sit around watching television, Neo thought, joining the teen after a sip of his freshly brewed tea left Neo with a slightly burnt tongue, and he decided it might be best to let the tea cool a little before any further attempts at drinking it.

Neo briefly toyed around with the idea of killing Keanu Reeves and taking over his life, as Adwin had suggested. He wondered where he could bury the body. Unless he burned the thing...

350 million dollars. Whoa.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

1st January 2000

Room 439, The Kenselton Hotel
The Real World

Looks like the world hasn't ended yet, after all, were the first thoughts that went through Keith's mind when he awoke. He shut his eyes again, not wanting to get up just yet.

There were sounds of someone else moving about in the room.

"Adwin, s'that you?" Keith mumbled. "You're not s'posed to be here."

"Ah, you're up," came a reply in a voice that was not Adwin's. Yet it sounded familiar...

Keith's eyes flew open and he bolted up in bed.

Dem looked coolly over and held out a cup. "Tea?" he offered.

"What... what are you doing here?" Keith spluttered.

"Oh, just checking up on you," Dem said, sitting down on the bed. "You've grown," he observed. "Oh, and Happy New Year, by the way." He stirred the tea, realised that Keith didn't seem to want any, and so took a sip himself.

"Is that mine?" Keith asked, looking at the tea.

"Yes it is. You weren't up and I was a little thirsty; dimensional hopping does that to you, you know. So I made some tea. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Keith said, feeling more than a little dazed.

"I could make you some if you like," Dem said.

"No... uh, you don't have to..."

Dem shrugged. "All right then," he said, and drank more tea.

Keith tried to move himself into a more dignified position on the bed.

"So how's your little inter-dimensional machine coming along?" Dem asked.

"I..." Keith hesitated. "How did you know about that?" he blurted. "And that... that book... how did you know..."

Dem waved aside the question. "So does it work?" he asked.

"Huh?" I... uh... I've... tried..."

"Bringing things over from other dimensions?" Dem asked pleasantly, as though he were discussing the weather.

"Uh... yeah. Um, cheese," Keith said lamely. He didn't quite like the direction this conversation was thinking.

Dem raised an eyebrow. "Cheese," he said.

"Yeah. I... uh, thought I'd start out with something small..."

"Did it work?"

"Sort of. I got mozzarella instead of cheddar." Keith paused. "Tasted pretty good," he added as an afterthought.

Dem raised his other eyebrow. "It is generally not wise to eat your experiments," he said with a reproachful tone.

"Uh, yeah. I know. Uh, sorry." Keith grimaced. He was not at his best in the mornings, especially not after having just woken up. And Dem was just making it worse.

Dem finished his cup of tea and got up. "Come on," he said, placing the cup in the sink. "Let's go see how things are going."

He walked over to the door and looked back at Keith, still sitting up in bed. "Well?" he asked.

Keith mumbled something and got out of bed.

**

Dem whistled a cheery tune as he led the way to the room that housed the machines. "You first," he said, stepping aside and letting Keith go in. Dem entered after him, gazed around the L-shaped room, and then headed for the row of computers. Next to them on the table lay a half-eaten hunk of mozzarella cheese on a plate with a knife next to it.

"What're you doing?" Keith asked sleepily, seeing Dem sit down in front of one of the computers, do some clicking about, and then type furiously. Lines of complicated-looking computer code flew rapidly across the screen faster than it was possible for any human hands to type.

Dem's fingers were a blur on the keyboard. Keith watched him with suspicious curiosity. He picked up the knife, cut himself a small slice of cheese, and chewed on it appreciatively.

"Helping you out a little," Dem answered. He hit a few more keys, then moved away from the computer. "Try it now," he said.

Doubtfully, Keith went over to the computer and keyed in several commands.

The machines hummed to life. The room shook a little. There was the distinctive sound of the space-time continuum being mercilessly ripped apart.

And then there was silence.

Keith went through the adjoining door out of the control room and into the larger modified function room where the actual inter-dimensional travelling took place.

In the middle of the clean white floor lay a lump of something yellow. Keith picked it up, broke off a piece, and stuck it into his mouth.

"Cheddar," he said, with some surprise. "It worked."

Dem gave him a look of utter incredulity. “*Cheese?*” he asked.

“Want some?”

“I give you the means to bring anything imaginable into this world, and you bring *cheese?*”

Keith looked a little disgruntled. He muttered something about not having had breakfast yet.

“You don’t,” Dem said, taking the cheddar out of Keith’s hand, “eat your experiments.”

“Right,” Keith said tersely, wanting his breakfast back. He gazed around the room, glancing at the various bits of machinery and starting to feel mad with Dem for some reason he couldn’t quite identify.

Dem popped some cheese into his mouth when Keith wasn’t looking.

“You don’t understand the potential of this machine,” Dem said, putting the rest of the cheese into his pocket and walking up to Keith’s side. “It can do a lot more than get you free cheese. This is ultimate power, Keith. The ability to harness the full powers of the multiverse. Anything imaginable – and then some – can be brought over. All for you.”

Keith shook his head slowly, staring off into space. “This is crazy,” he said quietly.

“Isn’t everything?” Dem asked. He turned and walked back into the control room.

Lost in his thoughts, Keith was only alerted to Dem’s departure when the machinery suddenly came loudly to life.

“Hey!” he shouted in the general direction of the control room. “What are you-“

There was a flash of light and a flwop sound and a piece of paper floated to ground out of nowhere. Curious, Keith walked over to it and picked it up.

On the paper was boldly printed two parallel lines in black.

They intersected.

Keith blinked.

He was staring at the paper with his mouth open when Dem came back out and walked over to his side.

“Intersecting parallel lines,” Dem explained.

Keith squinted and held the paper up in different directions.

“Optical illusion,” he finally decided. “I think,” he added in a more uncertain manner. He stared at the lines again. They were parallel, and they intersected. It made his brain hurt.

Keith released the sheet of paper, and it fluttered to the ground.³

“But of course,” Dem said, “what you really want... are *people*.”

Keith turned to look at him, a startled look in his eyes.

“What started it all, Keith?” Dem asked softly. “What made you want to break the barriers of the multiverse?”

Keith’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Dem smiled. He went back into the control room, leaving Keith staring soundlessly after him.

The machines powered up again, and this time the noise seemed to last for a longer time.

A coloured ripple of light flash through the air, and out of it suddenly fell a young woman in her mid-twenties. She hit the ground flat, her head whipping up in horrified panic at her sudden journey through the multiverse.

³ Later that day, it would end up in the trash and drive three garbage men bonkers

Keith just stared, a lump rising in his throat.

"Mom?" he whispered.

The woman had started hyperventilating. "Who are you?" she asked with barely controlled hysteria. "Where am I? Where is this... *what happened to me?*"

Dem came up to Keith's side and regarded the newcomer calmly. "Technically, her name's Clarisse," he informed Keith. "She just a movie character. I thought it would be more... interesting."

"How can this be happening?" Keith asked softly.

Dem shrugged. "Why not?" He stuck his hand into his pocket, broke off a piece of cheese, and put it into his mouth.

Keith just continued staring at Clarisse.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked in a panicky tone, gathering herself off the ground and backing into a wall, looking wildly about her. "Let me out of here!" she screamed, more than a little unnerved by the way Dem and Keith were observing her.

Clarisse was used to screaming. She was, after all, just another one of those pretty little things who go screaming at pretty big things like giant mutated armadillos from outer space.

And then Clarisse saw what was happening to her left arm, and she screamed again.

Its flesh was undulating in ways that were not natural. Every now and then streaks of psychotic colour would shoot along it, shifting, changing...

Keith gave a start.

"What's happening to her?" he asked Dem.

"Dimensional incompatibility," Dem replied casually. "The bigger and more complex the thing you bring over, the faster and more intense the effects. The machine's not quite perfected yet, but I'll leave it to you to fix that."

"But... why can't you-"

Clarisse was now on the ground, writhing in pain and screaming fit to wake the undead. The dimensional incompatibility effects had spread through more of her body, strange and unpleasant sensations overwhelming her from all over.

Keith hurtled over and dropped to her side, taking in the sight of her suffering.

"No..." he said. "No..."

"She's not real, you know," Dem said. "She's fictional."

"Stop it," Keith said through gritted teeth.

"It's a little too late now," Dem said. He ate more cheese.

Clarisse retched violently on the floor, choking up on her vomit, her body still shaking.

Then she gave two final jerks and was still.

The ripples of colour still surfaced here and there on her skin, rippling along it, but they were all that moved.

Keith cried.

"Three minutes and five seconds," Dem said, checking his watch. "That's how long she lasted. You'll have to work on that. Meanwhile, here's some advice – it's always easier to break into universes where there's already been some meddling with the space-time continuum. Connected universes are usually

affected as well to some extent. In fact," he said, digging into another pocket and extracting a small piece of paper, "I've discovered one such opening while on my travels. Here you go."

He handed the paper to Keith, who took it without looking at it, his eyes still on Clarisse's still form.

"Have a good day," Dem said cheerfully, and vanished.

On the paper was written:

Back to the Future
Emmett Brown creates portal, end-March 2004
Easiest path.
The Matrix, The Frighteners, also affected
Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure - same universe as Back to the Future

**

2nd January 2000
1:06 am

Keith hated the situation he was in. The machine was supposed to have been *his* invention, all of it, the result of *his* own work, not helped on with un-requested assistance from Dem. At the same time, without Dem's help, he knew he would not have managed so much.

He didn't like being in debt to some mysterious old man.

And Clarisse – Dem had just stood by and watched as she had suffered, as she had died... The morning had grown late, Keith had fully woken up, the fog had cleared from his mind, and the true horror had hit.

The disposing of her body that night was something that would continue to haunt Keith for the rest of his life, and it was because of it that he was now pacing fitfully around his room at one o'clock in the morning.

Dimensional incompatibility had wrecked most of the body, but it was still recognisable enough as that of a human who bore identical physical resemblance to his young mother. Somehow or other he had managed to get up the nerve to wrap it up in garbage bags and then – several hours ago – drive it far away where he dumped it.

It had been as though he were her murderer, what with all that sneaking about; and in an indirect sort of way, he realised that he was.

It sickened him.

"It's Dem's fault," he muttered under his breath, executing a U-turn at the windows and pacing back down in the other direction. "It's Dem's fault. He did it."

Keith threw himself backwards onto his bed and lay there, legs dangling off the foot of the bed and breaths still coming quick as he glared at the ceiling.

It's all right, he tried to tell himself. *She didn't feel a thing. It wasn't her. It was Clarisse, that idiot from that stupid B-grade horror flick she did in '71. She's fictional. Dem said so. She's not real. Didn't feel a thing...*

Eventually he fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World

Richard Murdoch paid for the newspaper and walked off briefly scanning the front page. Nothing caught his eye; that is, until he looked up from the newspaper and saw someone strangely familiar sitting on a bench a little way from him.

Richard shook his head. *Nah, it can't be*, he thought, but was unable to keep his gaze away from Luke Skywalker. He wasn't the only one, though. There were quite a few other people looking at Luke, for the young Jedi-in-training stood starkly out among the people of this universe.

Richard told himself that it was probably just some *Star Wars* fan dressing up, but he failed to convince himself.

His son had said he'd seen Neo; perhaps Rupert hadn't been making it up after all, if Luke was here too. If it was Luke. It seemed to be a day where movie characters roamed the land.

Richard's eyes travelled to the lightsaber hilt stuck in Luke's utility belt. Serve him right, perhaps, for not believing his son. In his mind, he heard Rupert's voice chiding him: *"I told you so."*

Richard went a little closer. Luke looked up at him momentarily, then dropped his head back down. But that single glance seemed to confirm that it was probably not just some look-alike fan; the man on the bench looked every bit like Luke Skywalker or at least Mark Hamill, and Richard was pretty sure that the actor didn't look that young any more.

Mark Hamill has a son that age, Richard thought, in another attempt to grab on to reality. The little voice in his head told him to stop thinking up excuses and just admit to himself that, yes, his fictional childhood hero was sitting right there in front of him, and no amount of denying would make him go away.

Then Luke looked up again and spoke to him, haltingly: "Excuse me... I'm sorry, but, uh, could you give me some money for food? I haven't eaten all day, and I don't have any cash..."

In normal circumstances, Richard Murdoch would never have given a complete stranger money, for food or otherwise. But these weren't normal circumstances, and he saw the sincerity in Luke's eyes along with his desperate hunger.

"Sure," Richard said. "Come with me. I'll get you something to eat."

This could be his good deed for the day, Richard thought as he watched Luke wolf down a plate of spaghetti. Or perhaps this was just a chance to make up for his scepticism.

"Do you have somewhere to go for the night?" Richard asked.

Luke looked up temporarily and swallowed a mouthful of food. "I'm trying to get home," he said.

Richard nodded. "I wish you luck."

Later that evening back in the hotel room, Richard called Rupert to him.

"I saw Luke Skywalker," Richard told his son.

"Really?"

Richard nodded seriously. "Yeah."

Rupert smiled. "I believe you, Dad."

**

21st December 1985, Saturday
Hill Valley, California

Steven Dent quavered, grasping hold of his cup of tea for comfort as he repeated his statement about twenty-four hours.

"I *know* about the procedure," Captain Logan spat. "But I think you're missing the point here, officer. It's three days before Christmas Eve, and my son has gone missing four hundred miles from home. Is that too hard for you to comprehend?"

"I..." said Steven Dent. He looked at his cup of tea for reassurance. It looked back at him, calm and milky brown as always.

"Uh, yeah," Steven said, cradling his cup of tea. "I, uh, understand you perfectly, sir..."

Minutes later, both reports had been lodged, and Steven retreated to his office with his tea as the police cars were dispatched to search for the missing teens.

"My Preciousssss..." Steven murmured, eyes half-closed as he stroked the cup's warm body.

Lifting the cup of tea to his mouth, he breathed deeply, inhaling the sweet aroma of freshly brewed tea. A slow smile spread across his face, chasing away the memories of Captain Logan and his demands.

"Ahhhhh..." he sighed, savouring the moment.

"It's just you and me, baby," Steven whispered seductively to his cup of tea, cradling it protectively in his hands. "Just you and me. No more crazy guys from out of town trying to persuade us to go against normal procedure, oh no. Just you and me, as it should always be, my Preciousssss..."

At the front of the rented house, Bill sat on the doorstep gazing out into the distance and missing Ted. Lewis sat next to him with a piece of paper, composing lyrics for a new band song. Jennifer came out to join them. "I called the McFlys," she said. "They aren't home." She sat down next to Bill.

Bill pulled out a blade of grass and looked at it before chucking it aside. It hadn't been that bad after all, he reflected. Captain Logan had given him and Lewis a brief lecture about responsibility, but it seemed that he was too worried about Ted's disappearance to do much scolding. Now he was out there with the rest of the police, searching...

Bill had the feeling that it would be no use. He hadn't seen or heard Ted leave the house that morning, and there was no other way out from where the telephone was situated. Ted had just *vanished*, that was all. Out of this world. They wouldn't find him in Hill Valley; that much Bill was sure.

**

Frank found the correct button on the remote control, and the DVD player ejected the disc, cutting short the credits of *Back to the Future III*.

Marty sat on the bed with a glazed look in his eyes, partly due to having stared at the television set for so long at a shorter distance from it than that recommended by optometrists if you wish to retain good eyesight.

Frank kept the DVD and then sat down next to Marty and joined him in gazing dazedly at the blank television screen that now reflected them and the room.

"Are you hungry?" he asked after a while.

"What time is it?" Marty mumbled, eyes still on the screen.

Frank looked at the clock on the DVD player. "7:46."

Marty acknowledged this bit of information in silence. He didn't want to talk if possible, didn't want to hear his own voice coming out of his mouth after he'd heard it coming from the television speakers.

Marty decided he needed the toilet. He got up from the bed and walked unsteadily into the adjoining bathroom.

Frank lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. He had a headache, partly due to having stared at the television set for so long at a shorter distance from it than that recommended by optometrists if you wish to retain good eyesight. He heard the sound of the toilet being flushed, and then the tap running as Marty washed his hands.

In the bathroom, Marty dried his hands on a fluffy hand towel, gazed hesitantly into the mirror, and decided that he looked more or less like a member of the living dead – a far cry from the version of himself he'd just watched in three movies.

Marty tried to look less pale. He went back into the main room and got himself a cup of water.

**

Several minutes later, Frank rang the doorbell of Room 437.

Neo eventually answered it, looking half-asleep with his hair sticking up at odd angles. Inside the room, Ted laughed as a talking yellow sponge said something to a talking pink starfish on TV.

After several more minutes of aimless hanging around, the four of them decided that the issue of dinner could not be put off any longer. Frank pointed out that since he was the one who had risked his sanity to go Out There to buy lunch, he was not going to do so again.

After a good five minutes of debating, Neo finally gave in and agreed to go. He had to admit that he was practically dying to get out of the confines of the room, and this at least gave him a reason to do so.

Being the only two with usable – albeit slightly outdated – money, Marty and Ted were forced to pay up for the second time that day. As of lunchtime, all the cash that Frank had had was in New Zealand dollars, and they had no reason to think that the contents of his wallet had changed or increased in any way since then.

It was dark outside, which Neo figured was a good thing: there was a substantially lower risk of anyone recognising him. And besides, he had the really cool sunglasses with him. Frank was about to make some comment on just how inconspicuous the really cool sunglasses made a person, then decided that it was too dark to really matter and merely advised Neo to take the stairs down instead of the lift.

In the end, Neo ditched the idea of using the sunglasses because for some reason there were fingerprints on the lenses and he couldn't see clearly with them on. It also happened to be night, and there wasn't much sense in wearing sunglasses at night. They had a certain tendency to impair your vision, and although they made you look cool to some extent, there was nothing very cool about bumping into things because you couldn't see them.

"Oh, and I really don't think you should do so," Frank added, "but there's this girl working at McDonald's who'll give you a free ice cream in exchange for an autograph."

Pocketing the money, Neo left the room and went down to the ground floor via the staircase. On his way down, some guy who was climbing up to the third floor saw him and fainted. Other than that, though, nothing of much interest happened. Neo reached the bottom of the stairs and opened the door.

Cool night breeze hit him as he stepped out. Neo stood there in the doorway for a while, looking out into the darkness and tasting the freedom just out of his reach.

Then he set off, heading in the direction of the small and inconspicuous café Frank had told him about.

He should have borrowed someone's jacket, Neo thought, as he walked down the pavement. The temperature was a little too low for his liking. He turned the corner, and saw a figure huddled by the side of an alley. He glanced briefly at him and was about to look away when the glint of shiny metal hanging by the side of the figure caught his eye.

Neo stared. It looked uncannily like a lightsaber... his eyes travelled up to the face of its sleeping owner, and his heart nearly skipped a beat. *Luke Skywalker?*

It can't be, Neo thought. *Probably just some guy who happens to look like him...*

Yeah, and with a lightsaber, because that sure looks like one.

It's not possible.

Why not?

Because... uh...

Neo didn't know how to answer himself. Shaking his head, he went on and turned right into the welcoming warmth of the café. There were two other customers sitting at a table by the side, but neither looked up when he entered. Neo scanned the menu above the counter, trying to see what he could get for four people with the cash he had.

Coming to a decision, he walked up to the counter and placed his order, trying not to look at the man behind it any more than necessary.

So far, so good, he thought, as the man took his order and went over to the back of the café. Neo glanced casually around the place, when he realised that the other two customers were staring at him. Overcome with a sudden feeling of self-consciousness, he turned back to the counter and tried to appear interested in the price of steak and mushroom pies.

He didn't like people staring at him. He really did not like people staring at him, because it made him very nervous, but he bet that the two guys at that table were doing just that, and he wished that they would stop, because he really didn't like people staring at him...

His fingers tapped out a rapid rhythm on the countertop. Ten seconds later, Neo stole a quick look to see if the two men were still staring at him.

They were.

He wished that the café guy would hurry up.

The food finally arrived, and Neo took the bag with relief. Now all he had to do was walk out the door, and he'd be saf...

"Are you Keanu Reeves?"

Neo froze in his steps, two metres away from freedom.

Oh, s***.

Closing his eyes, Neo took a deep breath and let it out, then he turned slowly to face the two guys.

"My *name*," he said as firmly as he could, "...is Neo."

One of the men raised an eyebrow.

Neo turned and walked with deliberate steps out the door. Then, when he was sure the people in the café could no longer see him, he ran all the way back to the hotel.

**

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has this to say about irony: "Guide HQ said that I should make this entry really ironic, but I'm zarking tired now and I don't give a swut about what they think. I only joined up for the fringe benefits. So zark off and go read something else."

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has this to say about the writer of that entry: "Sacked."

According to the world renowned Internet Movie Database, more commonly known as IMDB.com, Mark Hamill is one pretty rich guy – actors tend to be. Rich ones, anyway. It was therefore ironic that on that April night in 2004, Luke Skywalker, the character who had made him famous and one of the most well known fictional people in the world, had to make do with sleeping in an alleyway like some bum.

He was hungry, cold, and lost.

And confused.

And therefore understandably miserable.

Luke didn't know what had woken him. He stared wonderingly at the alley wall opposite him, before remembering with a muted jolt where he was. Turning to his left, he discovered an old, battered copy of *The Coxford Singlish Dictionary*, placed there by courtesy of the Infinite Improbability Drive. Flipping through the newly-arrived book, Luke soon gave up and put it back down.

That was when he felt a breath of wind disrupt the otherwise still air. There was nothing very significant about the wind itself; what startled him was the sudden sensation of being briefly reunited with the Force, a sensation that disappeared the moment the wind died away.

The night suddenly seemed a whole lot quieter. The sound of traffic grew muted; a child's cry in the distance was reduced to a mere whisper. Along the roads, the light from the streetlamps suddenly took on a faded quality.

The zephyr wafted by again. Luke was standing up now and facing it, prepared this time... although for what, exactly, he could not be sure. He felt the Force flowing along with the strange breeze; merely a hint of it, but that was enough. Luke made a mental grab at it, and held on, pulling it towards him, his eyes closed, reaching out with his mind and with his senses...

When he opened his eyes again, the streets of Los Angeles were gone. He was standing on a grassy plain in the dark, a road before him and a small house to his far right down the road.

A warm light was shining through the windows of the house. Feeling as though he were in a dream, Luke made his way towards it.

The thirteen o'clock wind had struck again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
21st November 1895, Thursday
Hill Valley, California

It had long been a dream of Emmett's to enable inter-dimensional travel in the time train, ever since that fateful incident in which they had ended up in the alternate reality, 1985-A, where Biff Tannen ruled Hill Valley. He wondered if it would be possible to revisit such alternate realities – albeit better ones – at will, without needing to alter history first.

A year before, he had formulated the basic way of making it work, but had not discovered how to make the time train travel to specific dimensions.

Emmett had spent a good amount of his time studying the computers' early records of the readings from the device he'd created for him and Marty to communicate, paying special attention to the points where they had skewered from the norm, signalling the entrance of different universes. Yet that was all he could do; he had no idea how to translate those readings into identifiable universes that could be travelled to.

On this night, Emmett was in a dilemma. Marty's SOS still showed on the computer screen in the room next door to his laboratory. In the laboratory, Emmett was frantically pacing the floor and muttering to himself, occasionally pulling at his untidy white hair or absent-mindedly putting various tools between his teeth, taking them out, waving them about, and returning them to the places from whence they came.

Emmett knew that just about every second counted and that it was just unwise to waste so much time pacing up and down. This knowledge, however, served only to increase his agitation.

Marty was being held captive in some foreign universe, and the teen had contacted him, trusting that Emmett would somehow have a solution. But Emmett did not have a solution. The time train at present could no more travel to other dimensions than a penguin could obey a command to dress up in drag and dance the hula in order for its actions to be caught on tape and the footage used to disprove a point.

Every second counted. This was not a normal day when, to get more time, all Emmett had to do was take a little trip in it. The space-time continuum was gradually falling apart, all throughout time. It didn't matter when you were; when the time came, everyone and everything would be simultaneously affected, your four-year-old self sucked into a vortex of destruction at precisely the same time as your hundred-year-old self. Naturally this would result in no end of paradoxes, which would in all probability cause the space-time continuum to give up trying to work them all out and choose instead the much easier method of blowing up.

Emmett came to a halt in front of a wall. He let out his breath, took a fresh one in, and continued in his frantic pacing.

"What do I do?" he muttered. "*What do I do?*" he demanded of a portrait of Isaac Newton. "What do I –"

"Hello there."

"AAAAAGGHH!"

Emmett fell back against the wall, knocking over bits of miscellanea in the process.

"Need some help?" Dem offered.

“How did you get in here?” Emmett hollered.

Dem shrugged.

“Who are you?”

“Well, I’m mysterious, I’m old, and I’m a man. They call me the Mysterious Old Man.”

Emmett’s mouth moved in ways that indicated that he had a lot of things to say, but didn’t know how to say them.

“You can call me Dem,” Dem said.

“Aah... Wh... wh... b... y...”

“Need some help rescuing your friend?” Dem asked. In his hands was a flat metal box with an LCD screen and several coloured buttons on one end, and a lot of wires on the other end. He placed the box on the cluttered desk and patted it.

“Everything’s programmed in here,” Dem said. “You’ve just got to connect it to the time circuits and the rest of the train. This big red button here turns it on. The first green button here sets the coordinates for where Marty and co. are. Second green button is for this universe, namely yours, Marty’s, and Ted’s – Ted’s one of the guys you’ve got to rescue. Third is for Neo’s universe, fourth for Frank’s. The purple button over there doesn’t do anything, but I thought it looked pretty. Look, I’ve written it out here for you so you won’t get confused,” Dem said, pointing to the masking tape labels over each button. “When you press one, this screen will give you the exact coordinates for the respective universe, with the date it currently is over there with respect to how much time has passed since the captive was taken out of his world; although the destination time will be that of the current universe you’re in. The time circuits will reflect whatever information is needed. It’s really all very simple.”

“W... blg... g...” Emmett said. “*What?*” he finally managed to splutter.

“Oh, and don’t worry about the rips and eddies in the space-time continuum,” Dem said. “They’re not your fault. I made most of them. The effects just seem to be more obvious in universes where people like you mess about with space-time in general. It sort of aggravates the rips, I think. But the point is that they’ve been around for quite a while. Fun things to create, they are. One day I hope that the cumulative effects of all those little tears in the fabric of space-time will bring the entire continuum crashing down. But it’ll be a while before that happens, and when it does, you’ll be too busy being wiped out of existence to worry about it.”

Dem looked at Doc. “Do you intend to stand there all day?” he asked. “People need rescuing.”

Emmett just continued staring at him wide-eyed.

Dem sighed. “Oh, all right, I’ll do it for you.” He ambled over to the time train with his box and fiddled about with the wiring.

Emmett meanwhile found his tongue. It had been in his mouth all the while, the naughty thing. “What reason do I have to trust you?” he asked Dem.

“None at all,” Dem admitted. “But your objectives are precisely in line with mine. You get to rescue your friend, and all that mucking about in space-time will help bring my Armageddon a little nearer. It’s a win-win situation. There. It’s ready. Get in that train. People are waiting.”

Dem pushed the red button. The LCD screen on the metal box lit up with a ‘HELLO THERE!’ He pressed the first green button. Numbers flashed on the screen, and the time circuits changed their destination display to ‘APR 01 2004 20:35’.

“Cheerio,” Dem said. He got out of the train, walked past Doc’s desk, and vanished.

On the time circuits, the destination time changed to 20:36.

1st April 2004
Room 437, Kenselton Hotel
The Real World

Dinner that night in Room 437 was a fairly quiet affair that consisted mostly of biting, chewing, swallowing and digesting. The four of them didn't have much to talk about, save a short grouse from Marty regarding the depletion of his week's pocket money. Ted then pointed out that *his* money had also contributed to the food fund, and Marty therefore proceeded to explain to the younger teenager that a larger percentage of the fund had been from his truly, and would Ted like him to get out a calculator and prove it? Ted said no, it was okay, he believed him.

Other than that, dinner that night in Room 437 was a fairly quiet affair that consisted mostly of biting, chewing, swallowing, digesting, and the author repeating sentences.

Nothing much of interest happened, so we'll just fast forward to the time when they were done eating and Frank decided that he was bored and wanted to go out for a walk. It was the night, after all, and a pretty dark one too, so what better time was there to go for a little stroll without having to worry about the risk of being seen?

Frank left by the back staircase, leaving the other three alone in the room. Neo went over to the computer and logged onto the Internet.

Sitting on one of the beds, Marty and Ted looked at each other.

"So... where'd we stop at? Seventy-five, right?"

"Yeah."

*"Seventy-five green bottles
Lying on the floor
Seventy-five green bottles
Lying on the floor..."*

Neo swore, shut his eyes, and counted quietly but firmly down from ten.

*"And if one dumb person were to kick one out the door
There'll be seventy-four green bottles
Lying on the floor."*

Neo cheated, breaking off at six, and whipped around in the swivel chair. "Can you two either shut up or go next door?" he asked way more calmly than he felt.

There was a moment's pause, during which Ted realised the pointlessness of going next door to sing about bottles where no one could hear them. He sighed and flopped backwards onto the bed. Kicking off his shoes, he edged higher up the bed and settled down on the pillow.

Marty muttered something about taking a shower and went off into the bathroom which, due to the presence of towels there, was at present the most massively useful place an interdimensional traveller could be.

Marty emerged ten minutes later with his hair dripping wet and a towel slung around his neck. He hung around for a while, discovered that Ted had fallen asleep, threw his massively useful towel to dry over a chair and left for Room 436.

Soon after he left, the computer beeped and a small sign popped up in a corner announcing the arrival of Doc's e-mail reply. Neo abandoned his efforts to hack Keanu Reeves' bank account and turned his attention instead to the message.

From – julesvernefan@yahoo.com
To – futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: RE: HELP!

Marty, I can get you out of there now. I just have to know exactly where you are in that universe. 'A hotel somewhere' isn't descriptive enough.

Please reply asap.

- Doc

Neo sat down and typed.

From – futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To – julesvernefan@yahoo.com
Subject: RE: HELP!

Dr. Brown,

Neo here. Marty's not around at the moment, but I'll tell him about your message later.

We're at the Kenselton Hotel in L.A., fourth floor, rooms 436 and 437.

Thanks.

Neo hit the 'send' button and sat back in the chair, enjoying the quiet of the night. He glanced over at the bed, saw Ted fast asleep, then turned back to the computer screen and opened up a game of Minesweeper.

**

Reaching the door of the house, Luke hesitated. He wondered what he was going to say to the owner of the house. He barely had any idea as to what was going on. He could ask for lodging, perhaps, but that seemed more normal than his circumstance warranted; something a passing traveller would say rather than one who had just been plonked clueless-ly in the middle of a new world.

It was as he was thinking that he noticed how strange the light seemed. There were no moons in the sky, and the only ground lighting was that from the house; yet the whole place was lit with a dim radiance of unknown source.

Luke finally decided that it was pointless just waiting around. He raised a hand and knocked on the door.

When nobody answered his second knock, he tried the knob and found it turned easily. Cautiously, he opened the door and stepped into the room.

A fairly large wooden table took up most of the centre, and on it was piled huge amounts of all kinds of food. Some looked vaguely familiar to Luke; most others he had never seen before. On one side, a door led out to another room, and opposite to that wooden stairs climbed above the ceiling.

All around could be seen a curious collection of other things that seemed to have come from all over the space-time continuum, from ancient-looking ornaments to a futuristic computer-like object sitting in a corner of the room. Everything looked out of place; yet at the same time they complemented each other in an unusual way.

Luke moved towards the table, almost salivating at the sight of the food yet not daring to take any. He didn't know who this place belonged to; what if its owner caught him stealing? By chance, Luke then looked up and he saw the plaque affixed to the wall opposite the door he had come in by.

*Pause here, you weary travellers,
The road ahead is long.
Here may you find the rest you need.*

He supposed it was all right then. Pulling out one of the chairs, Luke sat down and hungrily attacked the food.

When Luke had eaten his fill, he got up to take a better look around. He went through the side-door and emerged in what looked like a kitchen. Boxes of supplies lined one wall, and adjacent to that another door led out into a small grassy yard behind the house.

Luke went back into the main room and headed up the stairs. On the upper floor were six beds situated parallel to each other. Opposite them were two bathrooms in a different fashion from what Luke was used to seeing, but he soon discovered how most things worked and had a quick wash up before going over to the bed furthest from the stairs to continue his previous interrupted sleep. The plaque below *had* said he could rest here, after all. Luke put his senses on alert while he slept, just in case any danger might arise.

He could look for answers later.

Chapter Thirty-One
1st April 2004, Thursday
The Real World
Meanwhile

Frank strolled along the streets, remaining unnoticed for the most part. Somewhere along the way, he was hit with the crazy idea to just run away in any direction as far as his legs would take him, but it was stupid and he knew it. Sighing, he headed back to the hotel the way he came.

The place looked cosy and welcoming from the outside, the letters 'Kenselton Hotel' lit up against the night sky. The lobby looked quite full, but Frank decided to risk taking the lift. He didn't particularly want to climb back up.

**

Meanwhile

Night time. Peaceful, dark.

No light for a long way, save the warm glow from the windows of the mansion in the distance. Marty looked towards it. Beneath his feet, a long dirt track stretched out, leading through the grass all the way to the mansion's front door.

A light breeze ruffled through his hair as he started to walk along the path. Dark forests clung in the background, their secrets a mystery to all but those who lived within.

Silence.

Just the sounds of crickets chirping, the rustle of leaves and Marty's footsteps one after another.

He reached the porch and looked up at the huge wooden door, mahogany with gold trimmings. Slowly, he turned the knob. The door opened, and Marty stepped in into the light. The door closed softly behind him without a creak.

A well-furnished room. The house of someone very rich, but no one was around besides him. Strains of gentle music reached Marty's ears as he padded through the mansion's carpeted hallways, each room lit with the same warm, homely glow.

No one else was there. No one at all. He was all alone.

"Doc?" Marty called out tentatively. "Clara?"

No reply. The teen's footsteps took on a slightly more hurried pace. "Mum? Dad?"

No reply. He was all alone.

"Dave? Linda? Jules? Verne?"

Panicking now, Marty raced through the catacomb of corridors, each as silent and beautiful and deserted as the next.

"Anybody? Hello?"

Marty ran up and down the rooms, desperately flinging open every door he came to.

No one else was there.

He was all alone, all alone, all alone, all...

"AAHHHHH!"

Marty jolted out of bed, heart thumping. Who had screamed? It had sounded like him, but he didn't recall... Marty hit on the bedside lights and looked over to the other bed.

Frank wasn't back yet.

Fearing the worst, the teen jumped out of bed, opened the door, and rushed out into the hallway. Frank was on the ground, a terrified look on his face, and Keith was standing over him with his ever-trusty pistol in his hand. Neo and Ted had been brought out too by the screaming, and they stood in the doorway of their room not knowing what to do.

Keith grinned evilly at the three newcomers to the scene. "Hi."

"I thought you were supposed to leave us alone!" Frank yelled. "How about all that stuff about dimensional incompatibility and all that?"

Keith shrugged. "Change of plans."

"So you're just going to kill us?" Neo asked.

Keith appeared to think about it for a moment, then he shook his head. "Nah. He will," he replied, pointing at Frank.

**

Keith beckoned down the corridor they had come from that first day – a day that now seemed so long ago, but in reality it had been less than twenty-four hours since they'd first arrived. "Move," he said.

None of the three budged.

Keith swapped his little pistol for a more dangerous-looking one and pointed it at Frank's head. "Move," he said again.

They moved.

Frank was doing his best to suppress the urge to run as they made their way down the corridor. He couldn't afford to take any chances, not when there was some psycho guy threatening to blow his brains out. He didn't have many doubts over whether or not Keith would be willing to pull the trigger. He didn't even think Keith considered them human in the first place.

Which was precisely the point. Keith didn't. After all, that was what Dem had said. Clarisse hadn't really been hurt, because she wasn't really real. Likewise, he knew the four of them weren't real, so he didn't have any qualms whatsoever about killing them off if he felt like it. Dem had been fine with letting Clarisse suffer; Keith would be just as fine with letting the four of them suffer.

People killed off fictional characters all the time, after all. Writers, moviemakers, computer gamers, storytellers... He couldn't get sent to jail for murdering four movie characters. Keith was just doing what so many others did regularly. It was just on a more 3-D level for him.

And he was enjoying himself. It all seemed so... real. Keith had always wanted to know what it was like to brutally kill somebody, and now he could do it without harming anyone at all. He grinned in a psychotic, Ford Prefect sort of way, giving Frank the unnerving feeling that he was about to go for his neck.

They turned a corner, and Keith motioned them into the room they had first arrived in. He shut the door behind them, and stood with his back to it.

"Okay," he started. "I could just shoot you all right now, but that won't be fun, will it? So instead I'll give Frank here the gun, and he can do it for me."

Frank snorted. "Oh yeah? And what makes you think I will?"

Keith smiled evilly. "Because if you don't, I'll make your three friends die a very long and painful death, starting with Marty. You've got no idea what kind of things I can do to you... So it's your choice. You can give them a quick and painless end, or watch them suffer. And don't even think of shooting me. If you so much as point that gun in my direction..." Keith took out another pistol. "You die. Then they suffer."

Keith was really enjoying himself. Placing his second gun back into his coat pocket (plenty more where that came from), he took out a bunch of handcuffs. It was always good to take precautions, he thought, and he had come prepared. He definitely couldn't afford one of the other three deciding to make a run for it or doing something else rash. Taking out three from the bunch, Keith tossed the rest aside and called out to the seemingly most harmless person in the room.

"Hey, Ted," he said, reaching out to pass over the handcuffs. "Cuff those two for me, will ya? Then do yourself after that."

Frank was desperately trying to think up an escape plan that didn't involve lightsabers, weapons of mass destruction or Keith spontaneously combusting. He couldn't think of anything. His brain didn't seem to be working too well, possibly due to having a pistol pointed at it.

Uncertainly, Ted approached Keith and paused before the latter's outstretched hand. The teen glanced back at Marty and Neo, looked at the gun at Frank's head... and he made a decision.

Ted lunged at Keith and got him on the floor.

The gun went off.

Frank fell.

Marty screamed.

Liz burped.

Keith grabbed Ted's arm and twisted it, pushing the teen away. He smirked as Ted screamed in pain.

"Who d'you think you are?" Keith whispered. "Neo?"

He kicked out and sent Ted sprawling onto the ground.

Neo rushed over and jumped Keith, and the two of them started fighting as Ted struggled to get out of the way. Ignoring them, Marty scrambled frantically over to his friend's still form, where a small pool of blood had already begun to form.

"Frank?"

Frank groaned, and Marty gave a sigh of relief.

"I think he got my arm."

"Yeah... looks like it... Ew, gross. I can see the bullet."

Behind him, Keith pinned Neo against the wall and grinned. "Welcome to the real world, Neo. You aren't so fast any more, are you? You can't defy gravity or do any other kinds of weird stuff... Over here, Mr. Anderson, you're only human."

Neo glared back at him, fierce determination in his dark eyes. "So are you."

He pushed off from the wall, and the two continued their battle in the centre of the room. Keith got Neo against the wall again and held him there, taking out his second pistol with his other hand. Keith grinned again. This was fun.

"Goodbye, Mr. Anderson," he said, cocking the trigger... when the door flung open, and the unmistakable barrel of a 2035 model Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster was pointed at his head. It was a futuristic gun, something infinitely more powerful and with a much more cooler name than the boring little pistol Keith had.

"Put down the gun," the newcomer said.

From his corner of the room, Marty slowly lifted up his head and stared, not daring to believe his eyes.

"DOC!" he yelled, leaping off the ground and dashing over to Emmett, the most welcome sight he had seen in days. Emmett briefly turned his head to look at his young friend and smiled grimly, gun still levelled at Keith.

The latter just stared coolly back. "That was fast," he muttered.

"Put down the gun," Doc repeated. Next to him, Verne stared wide-eyed at the scene.

Keith shrugged and obeyed. Neo went forward and picked it up, then chucked it into a corner where it accidentally went off and killed a cockroach looking for a place to build its nest and raise its family.

Emmett glanced at the four in the room, then passed his Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster to Neo. Neo hadn't the faintest idea where the trigger was, but he figured he could cross that bridge when he came to it.

Doc walked over to Frank's side and crouched down. "Do you think you can walk?"

Frank winced in pain. "Yeah, I think so..." Slowly, he stumbled to his feet, gripping his injured shoulder with one hand as Marty moved forward to support him.

Keith did some quick calculations in his head, eyes darting around the room. Marty and Doc were occupied with Frank; Ted was watching them; Neo was busy admiring the Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster... and Verne was exposed.

Keith moved slowly to the side, then with one swift motion grabbed Verne, took out another pistol, and pointed it at the boy's head.

Verne screamed.

The others looked up. Keith grinned at them, his confidence back. "Hi," he said unnecessarily. "Change of plans again, I'm afraid."

"You're making a big mistake," Doc said.

"Am I? Well, you'll be the one making a big mistake if you don't show me the way to the time train right now." Keith's finger stroked the trigger on his gun, and Verne shut his eyes.

"What..." Marty started.

"BE QUIET!" Keith yelled, glaring at him. "Don't talk!" He motioned out the door. "Move it, old man," he told Doc. "And the rest of you... stay put."

Silently, the inventor obeyed. Neo waited until they were out of sight, then rushed after them in time to see the lift doors close on Keith, Doc and Verne in the lift.

Neo swore. He glanced around, and the other three looked at him expectantly.

"Take the stairs," Neo said. Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster in hand, he ran over to the stairwell door, opened it, and raced down the four floors, the others following somewhat more slowly behind, slowed down by the injured Frank.

"Where'd they go?" Marty asked as they exited the building.

And then a revelation suddenly hit him.

"No..." he said. "They didn't go down... they went up! There's no way Keith would be able to get through all those people while holding Verne hostage, and it's a flying train... what better place to land unseen than the roof?"

Frank gave him a look of incredulity. "You mean we have to climb all the way up there?"

The four of them looked up at the building. It rose at least twenty storeys high.

"Whoa," Ted said, deciding that the only way anyone could make him get up there would be by lift.

Marty shook his head slowly. "Is there a service elevator or something we could... Hey, where're you going?"

"UP!" Neo yelled back, as the door to the stairwell slammed shut behind him.

The other three glanced at each other.

They glanced at the stairwell door.

They glanced at the height of the building.

They glanced at the brightly lit hotel lobby, filled with people.

They glanced at each other again.

Then the sound of three sonic booms filled the air, and they glanced up at the sky just in time to see two pairs of fire trails vanish behind the clouds.

"They left?" Marty gasped.

"Come on," Frank said, eyes still on the sky. "They'll be back any second; it's a time machine, right? Ted can take the elevator, but the two of us had better use the stairs because I'm kinda dripping blood here..."

"What if they don't come back?" Marty asked quietly as they started moving towards the hotel's main entrance.

Frank looked at him. "Just hope they do. Go on, Ted."

Seconds later the younger teen was walking through the hotel's glass doors, keeping his head down as he headed towards the lifts. One lift car arrived, disgorging several people out into the lobby, and he entered it together with a relatively harmless looking thirty-something-year-old woman. She asked him what floor he wanted.

The teen scanned the buttons on the side, looking for the highest floor.

"Um... twenty-five," he said. "Thanks."

The doors closed, and the lift made its ascent up to the building. Ted had the uneasy feeling that the woman was staring at him, mainly because she was.

"You know, you look familiar," she said.

Ted gave a nervous smile. "Really?" He was beginning to regret not waiting for an empty lift car.

"Yeah." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "What's your last name?"

Ted toyed briefly with the idea of answering with "Reeves", just to see how she would react, then decided that there was no point. "Sorry... I'm not allowed to tell strangers my name," he said instead.

"Oh." She looked disappointed. "All right, then."

The lift arrived at the woman's requested floor, and she got out. Ted hit the 'close doors' button with relief and waited as the lift continued its climb upwards. He got out at the top floor, and headed out into the corridor looking for a way to the roof.

He soon found a door labelled 'Roof Access – Maintenance Staff Only'. It was not only unlocked, but also slightly ajar; evidence that Keith had probably gone through it not that long ago. Admittedly, it could also mean that some careless maintenance staff had forgotten to close and lock it, but there was no point being pessimistic at a time like this.

Three sonic booms boomed sonically through the air. They were back.

Ted was about to open the door when at the other end of the corridor, a door burst violently open and Neo hurtled out. Neo's eyes widened as he saw him, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

"You're fast, dude," Ted commented.

"How'd you get here?" Neo demanded breathlessly, staring with incredulity at the teenager.

"I took the elevator," Ted replied. He opened the door; behind it was a ladder leading up to an open hatchway.

"What? Didn't... didn't anyone see you?" Neo put a hand against the wall to steady himself, trying to stabilise his breathing.

"Yeah," Ted replied in all seriousness. "So now there're a couple of people who think that I'm Keanu Reeves' illegitimate kid."

"WHAT?"

Ted grinned. "Just kidding, dude." He grasped the ladder and climbed up, leaving Neo standing at the bottom with a stunned expression on his face until he realised that he wasn't going to achieve much from doing so.

Chapter Thirty-Two

1979, 8:40 p.m.

The Real World

"Left and keep on until that tall building there, then go right."

With no other choice, Doc obeyed. "May I ask what you intend to do?" he asked as the cloaked train turned left in the night sky. Below them, the city lights shone in the dark.

"It's none of your business," Keith replied, still holding the gun against Verne's head.

"It is," Emmett said. "This is my vehicle you're using, and that's my son you're holding hostage. I have every right to know."

There was a short moment of silence before Keith's hesitant reply. "Ten minutes from now, my mother will be killed by a drunk driver," he said quietly. "I'm not going to let it happen."

The smallest of cynical smiles crossed Doc's face. "I thought as much," he said.

"What?"

"It's always the case, isn't it? So many time travel stories and movies out there have some character getting hold of a time machine in order to go back in time and prevent some past tragedy from taking place: very often, the death of a loved one. And I assume you know what happens, most of the time, to those characters who do so."

Keith shook his head. "It won't be like that. I've worked it out. I save her, the timeline changes, I vanish from here along with you and everything that's happened since today in 1979 won't happen. Marty and the others never leave their universes, and meanwhile the Echo Theory comes into play to ensure that an echo of me will still be present here to save my mother and change history. Nothing will go wrong."

"That may be, but history was never meant to be tampered with. Especially when it concerns the events not only of your own universe, but so many others. Don't think you can understand how time works. No one can. I doubt anyone ever fully will."

Keith scowled. "Shut up and fly."

"You can still turn back."

"No."

They reached the tall building Keith had pointed out earlier, and the train executed a right turn.

"So this is why you brought Marty and the others over? So I would try and rescue them, and you could hijack the time machine."

Keith gave a small laugh. "No. I didn't think it was possible for you to come. You're not even supposed to exist, for crying out loud. You're fictional, just part of some moviemaker's story..."

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," Doc quoted. "William Shakespeare. All our lives are stories. In a sense, you're as fictional as I am; it's all a matter of perspective. In my world, you don't exist either; at least, not that I know of."

"Land over there," was Keith's only reply, as he pointed at an empty stretch of grass below them.

The train put down where requested, and Doc opened the doors at Keith's command. Releasing his hold on Verne as he left, Keith ran out into the night.

Verne watched his father watch Keith go. "You're letting him do it?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course not!" Emmett said, getting out of the train as Verne followed. "If I'd tried to stop him earlier, he would have killed you! It's best that he doesn't know where we are."

**

The place seemed different, somehow, from what he remembered. Different, yet familiar. Time had changed his memory of this night in some areas, but the main things were there. Keith remembered this road, remembered the sound of the cars whizzing by in the night, headlights sweeping the way before them.

He remembered.

And he was ready.

On the opposite side of the road, Rachel Kenselton-Fong walked out of a store, her young son tagging behind her as she counted her change. The traffic lights turned and the two of them started walking across the relatively empty street.

Keith moved in closer. Any moment now...

On the street, almost at the opposite curb, Rachel suddenly dropped her purse. Cursing mildly, she got down to scoop up the scattered coins as her son looked on.

"Mom?"

"Go on, Keith, I'll be there in a moment."

Reluctantly, the boy moved up onto the pavement. Ahead, a car careened unsteadily round the corner. Keith picked up his pace. He had to make it look as though he didn't know what was going to happen, as though he was just some stranger who had taken it upon himself to prevent an impending disaster...

Timing was everything, he thought, averting his eyes from his younger self. Timing was everything... he steeled himself and prepared to rush out onto the road...

Suddenly, a hand tapped his shoulder and Keith jumped around in shock to see a confused-looking fellow standing before him.

"Um... Excuse me, uh, sir, uh... what time is it?"

Keith blinked. "What? I..."

The sound of a resounding crash shook the street. Too late he turned, eyes widening in horror, and before he knew it he was running, running towards the accident he had been trying to erase from history, the screams of his younger self ringing in his ears, but the cars were still moving, and a blue car ploughed straight into him...

Red flooded his vision as he flew through the air and landed painfully on the road. Red, black, red again, and he was faintly aware of some commotion going on around him, but it was insignificant in the light of the pain that seared through his body.

He could feel the prickly tar on the road beneath his knees, and every second or so he caught a warped glimpse of what looked like a car tyre mere centimetres from his face. Then his vision would fizzle out again, only to temporarily return once more.

He couldn't move much. It hurt him. His hearing momentarily cleared and he was assaulted by a mass of noise: cars honking, people screaming, sirens blaring in the distance, and the ever-present unintelligible chaos of sound that was many humans talking at once.

Ignoring the pain, Keith shifted his head slightly to view the other casualty whose death now embodied his failure.

Perhaps it was just as well. Time would go on. History was never meant to be tampered with. But all the same, he couldn't help thinking of what could have been.

It had all come to this, Keith thought. All those years spent inventing and constructing the machine, all those plans laid out in his mind to get hold of the time train... it had all boiled down to him lying here now, about to die from a car accident of the past.

Reality's been defenestrated, Dad, but nothing's changed.

He smiled bitterly.

This was the end, then. The same time and place where it had all begun.

The space-time continuum was not without a sense of irony.

The last thing Keith saw were the tear-filled brown eyes of his younger self staring bewilderedly down at him; then all went black, and his story ended.

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The young man's voice was hollow, his face pale as he witnessed the second death of the minute. "You knew," he chocked out, "you knew he was going to run out like that... that's why you asked me to distract him, isn't it? But... but it didn't work..."

"Actually, it did," Emmett admitted quietly. "Although not in the way we intended."

The local's eyes widened. "*What?*" he spluttered. "You wanted him to *die*?" He started backing off, but Emmett grabbed firm hold of his shoulder. The man yelled but could not get away.

"What's your name?" Doc asked, not unkindly.

"R... Richard. Richard Murdoch."

"Richard, I'm sorry we've gotten you into this. I can assure you that we never meant what happened to happen the way it did."

"But..."

"What you *did* do was prevent something even more disastrous from happening."

Richard wanted to ask what that was, but he was trembling too much to do so.

"All I ask you now is that you never tell anybody about this," Emmett continued. "Do you promise that?"

Richard was still trembling. In all his craziest nightmares he had never dreamt of being apprehended by a wild-haired, wild-eyed scientist in the middle of the street who had just told him to do something which had led to another's death. Come to think of it, he had never before seen anybody die in front of him, let alone two people in such a short interval of time.

"Do you?" Emmett asked again, more sternly this time. The young man nodded.

"Good," Doc concluded. Then his tone softened. "I'm sorry we had to meet like this," he said, releasing Richard's shoulder. "But these aren't normal circumstances. Come on, Verne." Emmett placed a hand on his seven-year-old son and steered him back in the direction they had come, leaving Richard to regain his composure.

About a decade from then, Richard would sometimes be heard to tell about the time he once met two people who looked uncannily like Dr. Emmett Brown and his younger son from the *Back to the Future* trilogy. Most of these times, however, Richard would also be drunk, which meant that no one – save for his young son, Rupert – ever believed him.

Which was just as well.

Eventually he would start to wonder if perhaps he had imagined it all, and he would start to become aware of the fact that people were laughing at him and his tales. He would start to recognise those knowing grins, and realise that the seemingly serious questions of: "Seen Mr. Spock or anyone else lately?" were just other peoples' way of poking fun at him.

And he would be mad at them, and mad at himself for believing that his little encounter with two movie characters could have been real in this world of normality.

**

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"What're we gonna do about Keith?" Verne asked. "We can't just leave him there."

"I'm afraid we have to, Verne. I doubt it will be practical for us to try and remove his body in front of all those people. More likely than not we'll end up in even more trouble."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"If he's not now, he soon will be. That car virtually crushed him. Future technology would be hard put to cure him, let alone the medical options available here."

They arrived at the time train and entered.

"I suppose he deserved what he got," Emmett mused as he got into the driver's seat, "but then again... maybe not." He pulled a lever to close the door, activated the cloaking device, then set the time circuits, got hold of the hover controls, and they blasted off back to the future.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*

Trinity and the rest of the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* had long given up on the search parties and resigned themselves to sitting around in the *Nebuchadnezzar* waiting for Neo to miraculously pop out of somewhere. Suddenly, someone spotted something coming up on radar.

It was getting closer... and then they saw it, a ship with several words printed on the side.

Trinity stared. "Special Bottle Deliveries," she murmured under her breath. "What the..."

**

21st December 1985, Saturday
San Dimas, California

Meanwhile, back at the rented house in Hill Valley, Bill Preston suddenly heard a knock on the door.

"Ted...?" Jumping off the sofa, he rushed to the door and swung it open. To his disappointment, standing there was some guy with a few crates of something.

"Hi, I'm from Special Bottle Deliveries," the guy started, "and I was supposed to bring this order of one hundred green bottles to this address for Ted Logan..."

Bill stared. "You know Ted? Hey, where is he?"

"Well, I'll just be leaving the bottles here for him then." The SBD man left for his delivery truck. Bill watched him enter the driver's seat, then ran up to him.

"Hey, wait... where's Ted?"

The SBD man shrugged. "I don't know, kid. I just work here." He powered up the truck's engine, and drove away for his next delivery.⁴

**

They were most probably never going to come back again, and Neo didn't like the idea of wasting an opportunity he would very likely never get again. Besides, he was hungry.

Really cool sunglasses on in the hope that it would cause fewer people to recognise him, Neo walked casually into the McDonald's across the road as the others waited with Verne in the cloaked train. Had he known, however, that a *Matrix* fan club was currently having their monthly meeting at a few of the tables there, he would have probably not have gone in.

As it was, the members of the aforementioned club stared open-mouthed as he entered.

Maybe the sunglasses had been a bad idea after all, Neo thought uneasily, remembering what Frank had told him.

So he took them off.

The mouths of the members of the *Matrix* fan club dropped open even further.

Swallowing nervously at the many stares he was attracting, Neo decided to just get to the point of his dropping by and leave as soon as possible. "Uh..." he started, "who was it that was giving out free ice cream in exchange for an autograph?"

**

"You got *fourteen* ice creams?" Marty asked, blinking at the tray that Neo brought in.

Neo grimaced. "I could have got more, but I ran away and they couldn't catch me."

The sound of running feet and people screaming gradually grew louder. Neo swore and ducked.

"What's that?" Marty asked. He looked out of the train and saw several people brandishing free ice creams as they ran towards them.

"The fans," Neo muttered. "Ted, *get down!*" he hissed, grabbing the teen and yanking him out of sight of the ice cream bearers.

"They're just trying to give you ice creams," Frank said, glancing out the windows.

Emmett sighed. "And how, may I ask, are we going to eat all of them?"

"I can manage three," Verne offered helpfully like the good kid he was.

Emmett dug around the cabinets under the seat at the back of the train and emerged with a piece of cloth, made it into a makeshift sling, and passed it over to Frank before getting into the driver's seat and activating the cloaking device.

Outside, the *Matrix* fans stared in astonished horror as their quarry vanished mysteriously from sight. A collective 'whoa' rose from the group.

"I'm taking Frank home first," Doc announced, pressing the fourth green button on Dem's little box. "Just in case that wound is anything serious. I doubt it, but you never know. And I think it would be much better if the bullet was taken out."

Seconds later, a strong breeze of unknown source blew dust at the *Matrix* fans and their free ice creams as Doc powered up the hover circuits.

"What are you gonna say happened?" Marty asked Frank, as the ground started dropping away from the train.

"I could tell them I fell..."

⁴ The idea for the bottle delivery came from Eternal Density of FanFiction.Net, who initially submitted an e-mail informing Bill and Trinity of it.

"And landed on green bottles," Ted chipped in. "A hundred of them." He caught Marty's eye and the teens grinned.

*"Seventy-four green bottles
Lying on the floor.
Seventy-four green bottles
Lying on the floor
And if one dumb person were to kick one out the door
There'll be seventy-four green bottles
Lying on the floor."*

Neo decided to just concentrate on his ice cream and ignore the animated singing as best as he could, though it got progressively harder as Verne joined in as well with much enthusiasm.

The train hit eighty-eight, and for a moment the song was drowned out by the sound of not three, but four sonic booms as the machine ripped through the space-time continuum and departed forever the skies of the real.

CONTINUED IN PART THREE