
REAL WORLD: PART THREE
Homeward Bound

"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending."

- Maria Robinson

Chapter One
14th November 1998, Saturday
New Zealand

The train arrived in Frank's universe around nine in the evening there – the same time in the universe they had just left – and they were flying in the skies just above the east coast of South Island in New Zealand. The two teens and Verne fell asleep as they made the journey to the outskirts of Christchurch, and Neo was left to finish off the ice cream. They were his, anyway, and besides, those were the first ice creams he had taken in his life. The others had all been fake, so there was not much harm in taking a few more.

Frank was sitting in front with Doc, gazing out the window at the bright blue sea below. He'd be home soon. The pain in his arm was already less intense. Frank glanced back at the three fast asleep, and turned back to Doc.

"I can let them stay at my place for a while," he offered softly, so as not to wake the others. "I doubt they'd have the energy to go anywhere for the moment."

Emmett nodded consent. "Thanks."

It was strange, Frank thought, looking at Doc. The inventor looked exactly the same as he did in the movies... Here he was, talking with a movie character and flying in a time travelling train as if there were nothing at all weird with that, and yet, in some other universe, he was fictional too.

What was real? That was the question.

Behind him, Neo had finally had enough of the ice cream. He'd managed to finish four without getting his fingers sticky, too. Taking out his really cool sunglasses from his pocket, Neo proceeded to wipe the fingerprints off them with the really cool sunglasses cloth. For the umpteenth time, he wondered just what Frank had been doing with them to get them that grubby; he should have told him to handle them better.

Neo painstakingly wiped the lenses clean until they shone, then moved his way down the handles before carefully replacing them in his pocket.

A curious bird drooled as it stared at Neo's pocket from outside, and seconds later was a bloody mess on the front of the locomotive.

Moral of the Day: Curiosity kills the bird.

They eventually landed. Marty looked out the window at the huge mansion beyond the gates.

"You live here?" he asked sleepily, stepping out of the train.

"Yeah," Frank replied, using his good hand to unlock the gate with a set of spare keys he took out from behind a bush. "It was the cheapest place I could find. No one else wanted to live here because everyone says it's haunted, and the dealer was desperate to get rid of it. I even got all the furniture along with the house..."

"So is it really haunted?" Verne asked excitedly.

"Yep. But the ghosts are kinda friendly, once you get to know them. One of them's Bob, and the other's Eddie. Fairly nice guys, though Eddie's got a few screws loose."

Inside, the house was a veritable mess and reminded Marty of how Doc's garage used to look. Papers and other sorts of random stuff were strewn all over, and to one side was a computer monitor on screensaver mode. Frank made his way over and shook the mouse, causing the screensaver to go off. He shut down the computer.

"Sorry for the mess... it's much cleaner upstairs," he said. "Ah... you can sleep wherever you like, just don't touch the blue Chesterfield sofa because that's Eddie's sofa and he's kind of overprotective of it. There's food somewhere in the kitchen if you're hungry, and you can use the computer if you like... I'll just let the guys know you're here."

Frank went up the staircase and yelled to the two resident ghosts. "Hey, some friends of mine are here, so don't scare them away, okay? ...I just got shot, it's not... no, I won't be dying anytime soon... It's a long, long story... yeah, don't worry, I told them about your sofa... Right, see you later."

Frank came back down the stairs. "Okay, that should be all..."

Doc drove Frank over to the nearest hospital in the BMW, while the others turned in for the night, sleeping in the same room upstairs. Despite what Frank said, none of them fancied being apart with Bob and Eddie on the loose.

Chapter Two

The Nexus

Before long, it was morning, and Luke awoke to find someone sitting at the table downstairs waiting for him.

"Hello," Akner said as Luke descended the stairs. "Had a good sleep?"

The young Jedi-in-training eyed him warily. "Who are you?"

"Akner Jansilan, but the main question here is, who are *you*? You look like a foreigner to me."

"My name's Luke Skywalker," Luke said, "and I... I don't really know how I got here; there was this wind, and..."

Akner nodded knowingly. "I see. Another newcomer brought over by the thirteen o' clock wind, huh? We've had lots of those lately. Are you hungry?"

Luke blinked at the unexpected question. "Yes..."

Akner gestured at the food-laden table. "Then why're you just standing there? Tuck in. It's all free."

Luke willingly complied. "Do you own this place?" he asked, biting into a piece of Elven lembas bread that had originated from a variation of the *Lord of the Rings* universe.

"No," Akner replied. "No one really owns this house. It belongs to itself and to the Nexus, and seems to attract newcomers a lot. I come by now and then just to check on things and see if there's anyone like you around."

"Where does the food come from?"

Akner shrugged. "Different people. Most are those who have benefited from this place and want to give something back in return."

"Doesn't the food go bad after a while?"

"Nope. Not in the Nexus. Time is almost stagnant here. Nothing grows bad, nothing grows old. You can stay here all your life and not age a second, though who would want to do that? Time is money in the Nexus, literally. The older you are, the richer you are. Of course, people usually don't want to get too old; once they reach a certain point, they start converting their age to cash."

Luke would have probably done a lot of interjecting if not for the fact that he was too busy eating.

Akner popped a grape-like fruit into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully for a while. Then after some hesitation, he said, "You do know you're never getting home, don't you?"

Luke choked. "What?" he spluttered when his mouth was empty enough to do so.

"This is the Nexus, Luke," Akner continued. "Once you get in the way you did, you're here to stay forever whether you want to or not. There's no way out. The only times when you can leave the Nexus are when you don't really enter it, when it just appears as an extension into your own universe, like the Restaurant a little way from here. But other than that, once you're in the Nexus, you can't get out, unless you're one of those beings who are naturally able to move in and out of universes at will... which I doubt you are. Apparently some of them have some kind of spells or secret phrases they use, but no one really knows... "

"But... but I've got to get back! People will be looking for me!"

Akner sighed. "It happens all the time, I'm afraid. That's why you always hear of missing people who are never seen again; many end up in the Nexus."

"But..." Luke said pathetically.

"Although if you manage to find a portal to a part of your universe, you'll be able to enter it to a limited extent. Though you won't be able to move far in it or you'll just find yourself back in the wood."

"What wood?"

"The wood that makes up the Nexus. It goes on to infinity, but there are clearings here and there like this one. There's a town further down the road from here, but most people prefer to be on the move because you never know what you might find when you explore. The wood is filled with portals; each tree is a portal, and each leads to part of a different universe. Some of those universes may be no more than a small room, while others are vast worlds of their own... though you'll only be able to go as far as the portal allows."

Luke took a while to digest all this, and would take quite a while longer to digest his breakfast. "Can I take things out of those universes?" he asked.

Akner swallowed the chewed up remains of his third grape-like fruit. "Sure you can. But they have to be dead. You can't transport living matter out of the Otherlands into the Nexus. That means no people, no plants, and no germs too. Fruits and vegetables are usually dead, so they're okay. If you try to bring something living across, you'll simply come out in the wood empty-handed. Don't even try to bring other people across – it's pointless, and it could lead to complications like this messy incident once involving a bionic arm of an Otherlander which got separated from its body when someone in the Nexus tried to drag its owner across." Akner ate another grape-y fruit. "Of course, living matter *from* the Nexus is a different thing altogether. Any person in the Nexus can go to any universe and come out fully intact."

"I really can't go home?" Luke asked, staring unseeingly at a bowl of unidentifiable steaks.

"Yes."

Luke nodded. He didn't fully know why he cared; after all, he had no family back home, his old mentor Ben was dead, his life ahead looked to be full of assorted dangers... Well, he had his friends back there, but he hadn't known Han and Leia for very long. He would have liked to. Especially Leia. Not that he had a choice now.

"Ready to go?" Akner asked.

Luke looked up. "Where're we going?"

Akner got up from his chair and slung his cloth bag around his shoulders. "Off to the town. I'll have to get you some things you'll need. You can't just go wandering around the Nexus like that, empty-handed and everything."

"Okay."

They left the house and set off together down the road towards the town of Fesham, Atmena, Nexus.

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Soft yellow light played on the travellers' faces as they walked down the road. Luke would have thought it was sunlight, if not for the fact that he couldn't see a sun. The light came from all over: the trees, the sky, the ground...

The wood flanked them on both sides, the trees spaced unnaturally far apart from each other such that one could look through one end and see fifty metres or so into the wood. Dead leaves and twigs carpeted the ground, and now and then more would fall off the golden-trunked trees to join them. Other than that, all was still. Not a bird sang from the branches, not an insect scuttled over the ground, yet at the same time the place felt strangely alive.

And all over, the light. The leaves on the trees were not so much green as gold with the curious radiance that covered everything in sight; the trees looked almost as though they were on fire.

About fifteen minutes passed before the path opened out into a large clearing, and there before them lay the town of Fesham that Jules and Verne had, not that long ago, unintentionally visited.

Like the house in which Luke had spent the night, the town was a conglomeration of several construction styles from all over the space-time continuum. The buildings were made mostly of wood from the plentiful trees of the Nexus, while others had been constructed from materials stolen from other universes.

The streets were fairly empty that morning save for the occasional bicycle or car or horse rider or hovercraft. As they passed the small building known as the Fesham General Hospital, a young girl of perhaps nine or ten years old called out to them from across the street.

"Akner! Where have you been?"

Akner turned to look at her, and pointed at Luke. "Another new guy!" he shouted back. "I went to get him!"

The girl acknowledged his reply and walked away.

"Who was that?" Luke asked.

"My mother." At Luke's stunned look, Akner continued: "She ran into a huge debt some time ago. I offered to help her pay it off, but she wouldn't hear of it."

Akner led Luke between two rows of old brick buildings and into one of them. They climbed a flight of rickety stairs to the second floor, where they went down a dark corridor and stopped outside a metal door. Akner pressed his thumb to the fingerprint lock next to it and the door slid open to reveal Akner's small but neat apartment.

"You live here?" Luke asked, looking around.

"Some of the time," came Akner's reply. "I've got a place in Aquintos too – that's a much bigger town than Fesham here, and it's located quite far north in the Xavarin region. I haven't been up there in quite some time."

"What's it like there?"

"Oh, it's different from here. Every region in the Nexus is different. In the Atmena region here, which stretches from the outskirts of Fesham to the Restaurant at the other end, everything's pretty laid-back. Whereas up in Aquintos, things move fast. It's a very advanced place, technologically at least. They have flying vehicles and all sorts of stuff like that, and there are all these strange underground scientific

experiments going on which no one really knows much about. You can go on to Aquintos if you like; it's about six days walk from here, but you'll be passing through the Renaken region on the way there, so you might want to stop along the way... Here you go."

Akner had been digging around in a box, and he now emerged with a device that bore more than a fleeting resemblance to a squarish pocket calculator if you ignored the fact that it was made of a dark polished wood, which most self-respecting calculators are not. A screen was set into the wood above several rows of buttons with numbers and other markings on them, and the screen lit up as Akner pressed a quick combination of buttons to turn it on.

"What's that?" Luke asked, coming closer to look at it.

"Something that will hopefully keep you from getting lost. It's a digital pathfinder; I've got several around, so you can take this one. All you have to do is key in the coordinates of your destination, say Aquintos – that's 13110-2112-18..."

The screen changed, and an arrow appeared pointing in a north-north-east direction. Like a compass needle, it stayed put in that direction, even as Akner turned the pathfinder until the arrow aligned with a marking above the screen.

"You'll just have to follow that arrow, and you'll reach there eventually," Akner said. "Most of the major towns and places are already stored in here – you've just got to press this button for the directory, see – so there's not much need for you to memorise any coordinates, though that's always useful. And you don't have to worry about conserving energy, because this uses very little, and more importantly it runs off the energy of the Nexus which is more or less infinite. At least, I'd like to say it's infinite, but some beg to differ. Whatever it is, you can leave that thing on all the time if you want to."

Akner left the pathfinder in Luke's hands and resumed his digging about in the box. In a much shorter time than before, he found and took out a small, disc-shaped contraption with a thick string wound around it.

"This thing here's a converter," Akner stated, unwinding the string such that the device swung freely from both ends of the string. It was hollow inside, with a slit to the side wide enough for a large coin to be slotted in. On the front, a top semicircle of wood had been cut away to expose the currently empty insides, and on the bottom semicircle was a small screen with five buttons curving around the lower circumference.

"You'll need this for any financial transactions you intend to make," Akner continued. "It converts time to a usable form, and vice versa." Akner took out a bundle of a hundred or so transparent plastic-like discs from the box and separated one disc from the others. A raised coloured marking at its centre said '1 PH'.

Akner slotted it into the converter, whose screen then lit up with the words 'OUT 1PH'. "Give me your hand," Akner said, and Luke complied. The back of the converter held a smooth, shiny circle of metal in its centre, and Akner pressed it down on Luke's open palm. He pushed the central button on the other side of the converter.

A strange but not unpleasant feeling shot through Luke's body and out through his palm. Immediately after, the disc was filled with a colourful liquid-gas substance that swirled around inside, unable to come out but quite happy where it was.

"What was that?" Luke asked.

Akner ejected the disc from the converter and showed it to him.

"Just took one hour of your time away," Akner explained. "You're now one hour younger, though you probably can't tell. Oh, and here's another reason why you should always keep this converter with you – some places have their own converters, some of which are older models which don't just take away your time but your memories of that time as well. Some can even remove all physical evidence on you – scars and suchlike – that prove a certain period of time ever happened. It's potentially dangerous stuff."

Akner slotted the now-filled disc back into the converter, which now read 'IN 1PH'. "Hand," he requested. Luke opened his palm, and Akner placed the converter on it. "You just have to do the opposite to take in time," he said. He pressed the button, and the disc emptied its contents into Luke. "Understand everything so far?"

"I think so..."

"Good." Akner returned the empty disc to the rest of the bundle and held up the bundle. "These can each take a different fixed amount of time – the markings on them tell you how much, though you'll learn to recognise them by their shapes and sizes soon enough. The most a pre-fixed disc like that one just now can take is ten years, but the blank discs with no markings can take any amount. Just use the two side arrows on the converter to determine the input or output for any one of those, and this button here lets you toggle between minutes, hours, days, months and years. For standardisation purposes, one month is thirty days and one year is 360 days."

Akner paused. "You should be safe while in the Nexus, but some of the Otherlands can get dangerous, and there's also been a recent surge of Gaminorans coming down to these parts from the far West. There have been... attacks, nothing major yet, but you never know... Got a weapon?"

"Sure," Luke said, patting his lightsaber hilt.

Akner regarded it doubtfully. "What's that do?"

Luke willingly demonstrated, the blue blade of his lightsaber hissing to life from the hilt. Akner gave a low whistle. "Laser sword. All right, that should do fine."

Chapter Three

15th November 1998, Sunday
Christchurch, New Zealand

It was past midnight when the once-haunted BMW rolled into the driveway of Frank's house. Its headlights clicked off as the car powered down, and the doors opened to let Frank and Doc out. There was a jangle of keys as Frank took them out and unlocked the main door with his good hand, the other one now in a proper sling.

He opened the door and entered the lighted kitchen area, Doc following behind.

"Looks like they've all gone to bed," Frank said, locking the door and chucking the keys onto the kitchen counter.

"It's late," Doc said rather pointlessly.

Frank trudged up the stairs to the second floor and found the others all asleep in the first room. He let Doc into the room next to that, which had a bed available. They exchanged goodnights and Doc went to bed.

Frank went back into the first room and stood there for a while amidst the sounds of breathing and the occasional snore. Marty had taken the bed, sleeping on top of the covers due to how deceptively warm the early night had been; that early night was now midnight and not half as warm. Frank took a throw rug from a nearby sofa and covered Marty with it, pausing momentarily to marvel at the teen's sleeping position.

"Good night," he finally said, and left the room for his own bedroom on the first floor, where he soon fell asleep.

About one hour later, Ted suddenly woke up. For several seconds the teen lay there on this random sofa he had found and wondered what had woken him. Then he noticed that the desk light on the nearby table had come on, and there was something moving above it. Curious, he got off the sofa, walked over to the table, and sat down.

The thing moving was a pen, and as Ted watched, it wrote a word on the piece of paper below it.

Hello.

Whoa, Ted thought. *That sure is one smart pen!* He grinned, then sat down on the chair, picked up another pen and wrote a reply.

Hi!

What's your name?

Ted.

What were you doing on my sofa?

Ted looked back at the sofa he'd been sleeping on. And for the first time, he noticed that it was a blue Chesterfield. Eddie's sofa...

Sorry, *dude*, he wrote back.

Indeed.

Yeah. *I didn't know it was your sofa, dude.*

You're from another world, aren't you? Eddie wrote.

How did you know?

I can sense it. I was from another world too, of sorts. More like a world between worlds, actually – they called it the Nexus. One day I came here and accidentally died; I tried to go back, but I couldn't. I've been stuck here ever since. Last year there was a disturbance in the space-time continuum and this sofa just appeared out of nowhere. I thought it might be a way out, but it's never done anything particularly un-sofa-like.

Frank says you're crazy, *dude*.

Sometimes. I can be a little psychotic when I want to be. I think it's fun. I get to do all sorts of cool things. Like that time I killed two guys and two sheep and wrapped the guys up in the sheep fleece and put their clothes on the sheep. Apparently one of the guy's friends saw me, so he killed me and that's how I died. Heheh.

Ted backed his chair slightly further away from the table.

"Whoa," he said under his breath. A little uneasy now, he reached out to write on the paper, but Eddie continued.

You don't have to write to me, you know. I can hear you perfectly fine when you speak.

"Oh. Um, it's been really nice knowing you, *dude*. But, uh, I guess I'll go back to sleep now, and... I'll use another sofa. Yeah. Catch you later, *dude*."

Ted was about to get up and leave, when his chair was suddenly pushed from behind and he yelped as he got crushed between it and the desk.

Marty murmured something about sheep and rolled over.

Not so fast, kid.

"What?"

You still slept on my sofa, even though you were told not to. You've still got to pay.

"I'm totally sorry, *dude*! And I don't have any money left. We used it up that day to buy lunch at..." Ted broke off in mid-sentence as he read what Eddie had written.

Just a favour.

It won't take too long. Follow me.

Ted watched as the pen and paper floated up into the air and moved towards the door, hovering by the open doorway and waiting for him to follow.

Hesitantly, the teen got up and went towards it. Beyond was almost pitch darkness; the light from the room's table lamp only spilled partly out the door, reflecting off the white surface of the paper, which flapped a little further off.

Ted glanced back into the room. The others were all soundly asleep.

With the paper, Eddie beckoned to follow. Ted made up his mind and obeyed.

It wasn't that dark after all, he realised. The paper and its surrounding area seemed to give off a faint blue glow, enough for him to see it and follow it.

"Where are we going, dude?" he asked as they turned into yet another dark corridor, but Eddie wasn't able to answer. Ted looked back, but all he saw was the same blackness that he saw in front. He raised his hand to his face and was barely able to make out his fingers. The only thing he could really see was the paper, still moving onward. He had no choice but to follow.

Suddenly, his foot struck the bottom of a step and he tripped, yelling in pain as he fell and his head hit the edge of a higher step.

A staircase.

All sense of adventure suddenly gone, Ted felt his way in the dark back on to his feet, wincing as he rubbed the emerging bruise on his head.

Back in the first room, Neo jolted awake.

He sat up uncertainly, not knowing what had woken him, when his gaze alighted on the sofa where Ted had been sleeping and he saw that it was empty.

Neo had a bad feeling about this. Getting off his sofa, he went over to the blue one to check to see if the teen was indeed not there. He wasn't.

"Ted?" he called out softly.

"Yes, ol' chap, I'd rather like a cup of tea," Marty murmured, in the midst of a particularly British dream. He rolled over and let out a small snore, then smiled as in his dream he received the requested cup of tea.

Neo went over to the open doorway and stood there for a moment, squinting out into the darkness.

"Ted?" he called out again, a little louder this time. His voice faded off into the silent dark. Neo went back into the room and stared at the lighted table lamp for several moments. There was a pen on the table, but it didn't look particularly suspicious.

He moved back to the doorway again, still stuck in the dilemma of whether or not to go out to look for Ted. The teen might be in danger; but this *was* a proven haunted house, after all, and although Neo would have died rather than admit it, he still retained from his childhood a fear of the dark. And this was *dark* dark, and furthermore if he went out there he wouldn't be able to convince himself that the things going bump in the night were merely a figment of his imagination, because in this universe such things existed, and it was fact that this place was home to at least two ghosts who might not be as friendly as Frank made them out to be.

Neo returned to the room again and paced a bit. He wandered over to the blue Chesterfield sofa; Ted's jacket was draped over one side of it, and Neo checked out the contents of the pocket, more to stall for time than anything else.

Wallet, house keys, tissue paper, a pen, some strange thing Ted's aunt gave him, torch, a rather knotted-up piece of string...

Neo saw the torch and translated its name from British to American.

Flashlight. How convenient, Neo thought darkly.

He didn't have much of an excuse now. Neo clicked the torch on, and a steady beam of orange light shone out one end.

Here goes nothing, he thought, and walked out into the dark.

The light chased shadows away from it, and the movement made Neo wonder if it may not have been a better idea to go without the torch after all – at least complete darkness stayed still – or if perhaps Ted had just gone off in search of the toilet and wasn't in any sort of danger regarding the dead occupants of this house.

From the doorway, a little to his right and straight ahead was the staircase leading down to the ground floor. He shone the torch down it and onto the kitchen area on the left, the computer on the right.

On Neo's left, the corridor went on for a short while before going up a short flight of steps, pausing at a window, and turning left. On his right, the corridor went on past the stairs and turned right, going deeper into the mansion. He took this path.

His shoes trod softly on the carpeted floor as he passed assorted wall hangings and doors leading off to several rooms. Here and there bits of the faded wallpaper had been torn off, and Neo withheld the urge to strip more off just for the fun of it.

The corridor split up after not much longer. One went straight ahead, and the other turned right. He paused, wondering which way to go.

Neo closed his eyes and tried to access his non-existent innate Force abilities, only to discover that they, being non-existent, did not exist and never had, and all he had accomplished was to make himself look more foolish than he already felt. Nonetheless, he kept his eyes closed, reaching out mentally to try and sense Ted's presence and perhaps communicate telepathically with him; after all, the fact that he had woken to find the teen absent possibly indicated the presence of some psychic connection between them.

Neo tried to send telepathic messages to Ted.¹

Something brushed lightly against Neo's hand and caused his eyes to fly open. In front of him, a ghostly shaped white bed sheet was hovering slightly off the ground and glowing slightly, two circles cut into it near the top for eyes.

Neo screamed.

The cut-out eyes of the bed sheet looked mournfully at him, watching as Neo stumbled back into a wall and dropped the torch.

Under the bed sheet, Bob shook his head. He held up the piece of card he had written on and let Neo read the words there, printed on in his neat handwriting in glow-in-the-dark ink.

'Hi, I'm Bob. I know where Eddie and Ted are. I'll take you there, but you'll have to hurry if you don't want to miss them.'

Chapter Four

Outskirts of Reskun, Renaken, Nexus

¹ The teen never received them, but several universes away, Keanu Reeves on a headlight-less midnight mountain road bike ride started hearing voices in his head, lost control of his motorbike, crashed into a mountain, and ruptured his spleen.

After some time, a rough path became visible through the grass. It went between what looked like two small fields of unidentifiable crops, then led up to a yard and farmhouse. Several bird-like creatures wandered around the yard, occasionally wandering out of the open gate and onto the road. Luke stared as one casually walked onto his foot and sat on it.

"Hey," Luke said, shaking his foot to try and dislodge the creature.

The churkey just stared solemnly up at him, bouncing around with Luke's foot.

"Um," Luke said. He walked awkwardly over to the yard, the churkey still obstinately sitting on his foot. Luke crouched down and tried to lift it off.

The churkey looked at him, then something seemed to click in its brainless head.

"Mouseworks," it chirped randomly, then got off Luke's foot and continued its wandering about the yard. The door of the farmhouse opened then, and a woman came out. She stared at Luke.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, getting back to his feet. "I was just walking here when that... bird sat on my foot..."

"Autobahn," said a churkey.

The woman took in the sight of the open gate and sighed. "Looks like Zeran left that gate open again," she muttered. She went out into the yard to close it, kicking a churkey out of the way. "Where're you from?" she asked Luke. "I've never seen you around before."

"I'm... uh, new here. I'm trying to get to this town called Aquintos; I heard it's up through here."

"Yeah, it is."

"Belachan," said a churkey in an unnaturally deep voice.

Luke looked at it. "What kind of creatures are those?" he asked.

The woman gave a short laugh. "Churkeys. They're not exactly living creatures; they're bred just for meat, so they don't really have any consciousness. The first churkey breeders thought it would be a good idea to have meat that was never really alive, so that people didn't have to feel guilty when killing animals for food. So... churkeys don't have brains. They function entirely on a simple neural system, and they're programmed to just wander around and say the occasional odd thing to give them some semblance of life."

"Wow."

"Functioning, functioning," droned a churkey, before keeling over and lying still on the ground.

"...That tends to happen sometimes," the woman admitted, looking at the motionless churkey. "What's your name?" she asked Luke. "I'm Jemma. Jemma Laivon."

"I'm Luke Skywalker," said Luke.

"Elvis has left the building," said a churkey.

"How long have you been in the Nexus?" Jemma asked.

"Not very long," Luke said. "I arrived just last night."

"Why don't you come in for a while?" Jemma offered with a friendly smile. "I could use some company. I've got a whole basket of tocberries to de-thorn today."

"Wtcospoaoup," burped a churkey.

Luke followed her into the small but neat farmhouse where a basket of purple tocberries sat in a corner, waiting to be de-thorned.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Nexus has this to say about tocberries:

Tocberries are regarded as one of the finer things in Nexus life. Small, purplish berries that are found in the higher regions of canopy trees, tocberries bear a fair resemblance to smulberies, but with a thorn stuck through each berry. When a tocberry ripens, it falls off its branch, impaling any unfortunate person beneath.

Renowned for their horrible taste, disgusting smell, and murderous thorn-spike, after much thought it has been multi-universally agreed that there are some people in life we just can't stand, and the tocberry is the solution.²

From this had emerged a surprisingly good tocberry economy. People would now request de-thorned tocberries to place in berry hampers to their worst enemies, making use of the fact that a de-thorned tocberry is virtually indistinguishable from a sweet and juicy smulberi, and that some strategically placed fruit-basket-air-fresheners are usually sufficient to mask the distinct tocberry smell.

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Ted reflexively shut his eyes as sudden brightness filled the place, lighting up the library with a warm orange glow. Rows of shelves stacked with old, dusty books lined the room, on the high ceiling of which hung a crystal chandelier from where the light now came.

The paper floated off to the end of the library and settled down on a wooden desk against the wall. Curious, Ted walked over to it, and watched as the desk drawer opened and from out of it floated a sealed yellow envelope and a small box. They too settled on the table, and Eddie started writing again, the words appearing quickly on the paper.

There exist spells to get temporarily into the Nexus from any location in another world. I am one of the few who know them, and many times since my death I have tried – in vain – to return through them. It seems they only work on the living. This is why I need your help. I left a wife back in the Nexus, and I want you to pass her this letter from me. Her name is Jemma, and she should still be living in the Renaken region, at our farm. You have only an hour or less before you're brought back here, so try to hurry. It might take time to find her.

The box opened, and from inside four scraps of tattered cloth were taken out. They floated towards the teen and stopped before his hand. He scooped them out of the air and regarded them questioningly.

All that remains of my clothes from the Nexus, Eddie explained. You need them to get there. Place them on four sides around you and say these words:

'L'anaicha kamanju, din air rala namanju.'

Then touch each piece of cloth in a clockwise direction starting from the top one, and finally read those words again. That should do it. Any questions?

"Um, yeah," Ted admitted. "Which way's clockwise, dude?"

Eddie rolled his eyes, but being an invisible ghost, his little action went unseen. He drew out a circle on the paper, then added in arrows to answer Ted's question.

Taking the paper and letter, Ted sat down and separated the pieces of cloth, placing them as instructed. Stumbling slightly, he read out the words of the Nexan spell; was it his imagination, or did the cloth bits move slightly? He touched each, starting from the top and moving clockwise. Each piece seemed to hum slightly as he touched it, and soon the humming started to envelop him – a beautiful sound, a pure musical note that went on and on...

He touched the fourth piece, and was dimly aware of someone yelling his name; ignoring it, Ted started reading out the words for the second and final time – someone was running towards him – as a golden shimmer seemed to rise up and spread out from each piece of cloth, covering him, blocking out this world...

² This entry was written by my brother, with some edits by me.

Neo pounced. He landed on Ted, something went bzzap, and a moment later they tumbled out onto a grassy plain in the west of Renaken, Nexus.

Neo stared at the grass. He stared at the trees. He stared at the sky. He stared at Ted. He blinked.

"...Neo?" Ted asked.

"What happened?"

Ted showed him the letter. "Eddie told me to pass this to his wife here," he said. "You didn't have to come along, dude."

Neo picked up the piece of paper that had fluttered to the ground and read through the conversation Ted and Eddie had been having.

"You stole my handwriting," he concluded.

Ted wasn't quite sure how to reply to that, and so he didn't say anything.

Neo looked up from the paper. "So we just have to find this Jemma person and give her the letter?"

"Yeah."

"Where is this place, anyway?"

Ted shrugged. "Apparently it's called the Nexus or something. And Eddie said we've only got an hour or less before we're sent back," he added.

Ted checked his watch and took note of the time.

"We'd better get going, then," Neo said, trying to ignore the fact that he'd just been transported into another world.

The wood behind them shone in the light of the Nexus, while before them the grassy ground sloped downwards towards a cluster of small cottage-like buildings surrounded by fields. It was to this that the two of them walked, seeing no viable alternative.

For a couple of minutes there was silence between them, then Ted broke it.

"What's that thing at the back of your head, dude?" he asked.

"None of your business," Neo replied.

"Can I stick my finger in it?"

"No."

Ted looked disappointed.

The sleepy little village of Reskun appeared dead at first. The small houses along the single road were silent; only from what looked like a café came the faint sounds of conversation. Outside it, leaning against the café wall, was parked a weatherworn hovercraft that bore some resemblance to a *Star Wars* speeder.

Breakfast appeared to be in full swing. The smells of food wafted aimlessly around the place and made Ted hungry despite it technically being in the middle of the night for him. There is never a wrong time for food, unless of course you're on a diet.

Ted gazed longingly at the assorted edibles around him, when Neo brought him back to the task at hand with a poke.

Several people were looking at them with the kind of idle gaze reserved for those who walk in on you and your friends having breakfast and then proceed to stare hungrily at your food.

"Excuse me, but do you know where I can find this person named Jemma?" Ted asked the guy behind the counter.

The eyes of the guy behind the counter narrowed slightly. "Why're you looking for her?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to pass her something."

The guy behind the counter briefly scrutinised the teen, then apparently came to the conclusion that Ted looked harmless enough. He wasn't too sure about Neo, but as the latter seemed only half awake, he decided that there was no immediate danger at hand.

"Zeran!" he called out, and a young teenager of non-existent gender chocked on aer coftea.

Coftea is basically a mix of coffee and tea, a drink that is, for good reason, not commercially available. It was because of this that Zeran had opted instead to purchase both drinks and a large empty pitcher so ae could mix it up aemself, a venture into the culinary field that ae was increasingly beginning to regret.

"Yeah?" Zeran asked.

"These two fellas are looking for your mother. Say they have to pass something to her. Take care of 'em, will ya?"

"Sure," Zeran said. Ae stared mournfully at aer coftea, on one hand thinking that it had been completely not worth the three hours and twenty minutes ae'd paid for its components, but on the other hand rejoicing inwardly at the fact that ae now had an excuse to not finish drinking it.

Sighing inwardly, Zeran got up from aer chair.

"Are you going to finish that?" Ted asked, pointing at the coftea.

"Nah. Should never have made it in the first place."

Ted's face brightened. "Can I have it?"

Zeran raised an eyebrow. "Sure."

Ted grinned, took a gulp of the drink, and ungrinned.

The coftea laughed silently at the teen's reaction and stuck a figurative tongue out at him.

"You're looking for my mother?" Zeran asked redundantly as the three of them went out of the café.

"Yeah."

The walk took a while, but they soon arrived at the farm. Zeran pushed the gate open and kicked a churkey out of the way.

"Wardrobe malfunction," said the churkey in a suspiciously Elvis Presley -like voice.

"Mom?" Zeran called out. "Some guys are here to see you." Zeran opened the door of the farmhouse and paused when he saw Luke there. "Who's that?" ae asked.

"A newcomer," Jemma replied. "He's going up to Aquintos, so I let him stop by..."

"Mom, you can't just let strangers come in whenever you want..."

"*Luke?*" Ted asked, and his mouth fell open.

There was a moment's silence, then recognition dawned on Luke. "Hey, you're that guy who wanted to try my lightsaber..."

Zeran raised an eyebrow. "You lot know each other?"

"It's *Luke Skywalker*, dude!" Ted replied. "I met him that day when me and Marty went out in the streets..."

"One hour, Ted," Neo reminded him. "Keep this for later." He looked at Luke. So it was him that he had seen that night, he realised.

Ted remembered the purpose of this trip and took out Eddie's letter from his pocket. He handed it to Jemma. "I'm supposed to give this to you," he said.

Quizzically, Jemma received the envelope and opened it. Her eyes scanned the first few lines, and she paled. "Ednan?" she gasped, and then seemed to realise that everyone's eyes were on her. "Excuse me," Jemma said quietly, and left for the next room, shutting the door behind her.

Zeran watched her go, then turned to Ted. "Who'd you get that letter from?" ae asked softly.

"It was a ghost, dude," Ted replied. "His name was Eddie."

"Ednan," Zeran said. "He was my father. I never knew him; my mother said he went out into the woods one day shortly after I was born, and he never came back."

"He said he tried, but he can't," Ted said. "He's dead."

Zeran nodded, eyes on the ground. Then, without a word, ae went after aer mother in the next room, leaving the three to themselves.

"I never knew my father either," Luke said suddenly, breaking the silence. "He was killed by a man named Darth Vader. At least, that's what old Ben said," Luke mused, more to himself than anyone else.

Neo and Ted exchanged glances.

"Luke," Neo said hesitantly, "Darth Vader... *is* your father."

Luke looked up sharply. "What?"

"And Leia's your sister, so you *really* shouldn't kiss her, dude," Ted chipped in.

Luke gave them a stunned look. "No," he said. "No... no, it can't be. How'd you... how'd you even know about them?"

"It's a long story," Neo said. *Three movies' worth*, he thought. "I'm sorry, but you had to find out eventually."

"No..." Luke said. "Who *are* you people?"

"You were at Kenselton Hotel, weren't you?" Ted asked. "We saw your lightsaber mark on the wall, dude! We came from there too, just from different worlds..."

"They say I can't go back home," Luke said, "now that I'm in the Nexus."

"Maybe it's for the better," Neo said.

"Darth Vader isn't my father," Luke said resolutely. He swallowed. "It's... it's not possible. Darth Vader killed Ben. My father wouldn't have done such a thing to his own master..."

Search your feelings, Luke, you know it to be true, Neo thought, and withheld the urge to quote it.

A small noise behind them made them turn. The door to the next room opened, and Jemma came out, Zeran's arm around her shoulders.

"Thank you," Jemma said to Ted, her eyes red from crying. "When you get back... tell him I miss him, but other than that we're... we're both fine here."

“Sure.”

Jemma smiled wanly. “Maybe... maybe one day I'll get to see him again. The Nexus *is* infinite, after all. There are portals to every universe existing...”

That was when their time in the Nexus ran out, and Neo and Ted found themselves jerked back into Frank's universe.

They landed on the library floor, the tattered pieces of cloth no longer there, and floating in front of them a sheet of paper with the words: “**How did it go?**” written on it.

“We gave her the letter,” Ted said, and relayed Jemma's message to Eddie.

He wrote two more words: **Thank you.**

“You are most welcome, dude,” Ted said.

Then the paper floated down onto the floor and settled there.

Chapter Five

15th November 1998, Sunday
Christchurch, New Zealand

Bob didn't seem to be anywhere around, and it was with slight trepidation that Neo left the lighted library and re-entered the dark corridors.

“I borrowed your flashlight,” Neo said.

“Do you know the way back?” Ted asked.

“I think so,” came the hesitant reply.

They turned left out of the room and started walking, the torchlight dimly illuminating the way before them.

“Sure is dark here, dude,” Ted observed.

Neo didn't say anything to that. He wasn't too sure if he was going the right way; he knew that they had come from vaguely north-east of the library's main door, but the corridors were disturbingly leading in the opposite direction and more than once he started wondering if perhaps he'd missed an opening somewhere. He concentrated instead on getting down to the ground floor, and hoped this place didn't have basements.³

Ted yawned. “How much further do we have to go?” he asked when he was done yawning.

“I don't know.”

The torchlight flickered and Neo swore under his breath, desperately hoping that the battery would last.

Ten minutes went by and they were still walking.

“Whoa,” Ted said suddenly, glancing back at a hanging portrait they had just passed. “That dude there looks totally like my Uncle Maurice!”

Neo frowned slightly. The next corridor just went further in the wrong direction, and there had been a glaring absence of stairs for the previous five minutes or so.

He was starting to feel claustrophobic.

³ It did.

The torch flickered again.

The first hints of panic started creeping up on Neo, and he pushed them aside. Doubts about the quality of his sense of direction came in to replace them.

He turned right into a corridor, and was forced to go right again when it turned. The corridor split, and he turned right again, and then again, thankful to be back on the right track and trying to ignore the niggling feeling at the back of his mind that not all was right.

"Whoa," Ted said, looking at the portrait they were approaching. "That dude there looks totally like my Uncle Maurice!"

Neo suddenly had a very bad feeling about this. He stopped walking. Next to him, reality finally hit Ted.

"I think we're lost, dude," he concluded.

"Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Do me a favour and shut up."

Okay, Neo thought. We've been going in circles, so this isn't the right way; we'll have to backtrack through that corridor and try another path...

That was when the torch went out, plunging them into total darkness.

Neo swore.

"Whoa," Ted said.

In Neo's head, the second hints of panic shoved the doubts about the quality of his sense of direction out of the way and took their place.

Dark, he thought, trying unsuccessfully to see ahead.

Dark, he thought, checking to see if there was any difference between what he saw with his eyes open and what he saw with his eyes closed. There wasn't.

A fearful thought struck him – what if this particular part of the house couldn't be reached by daylight, and it was always dark? How would they know when it was light out?

"Should we just stop here and wait for the morning?" Neo asked nonetheless.

"Whatever you want, dude."

The teen's voice sounded a little far off.

"Where are you?" Neo asked.

"Here," Ted answered from somewhere down the corridor, and Neo waded through the darkness towards him.

"What're you doing?"

There was the sound of a door opening, and then a click – then glorious light spilled out into the corridor and revealed Ted standing in the doorway of a room, his hand on the light switch and a triumphant grin on his face.

**

Dust clouds billowed out as the glass door of the bookshelf was opened, and Neo waved them aside, coughing. When the dust had sufficiently cleared, he scanned the titles of the books inside, looking for any that might provide a map of this house. He wasn't too sure how old this place was – previous owners had renovated it to make it look newer – but if it was sufficiently old, he figured that there might have been books written about it.

Behind him in front of the empty fireplace, Ted sat in a comfortable armchair, fast asleep and dreaming of coffee. His hand hung over the edge of one armrest, the time on his watch 02:37a.m.. The door was closed to shut off the never-ending darkness: possibly a foolish move if they were hoping to be found, but probably enough light from the room seeped out the door to let others know they were in here.

Neo closed the shelf door. There didn't seem to be anything useful in there. He glanced at the sleeping Ted and thought that perhaps some rest wouldn't be such a bad idea after all, when a tall, covered object at the other end of the room caught his eye. Curious, he went over to it, and after some hesitation pulled at the cloth draped over its front.

It was a mirror; a fairly big one, with a shiny golden frame that had the words: '*Nisu oc d'nocess desi reforor rimeh't*' engraved on it near the top. Neo paid no attention to the words; he was too engrossed in the strange reflection of the room he saw in the mirror.

Mainly, it was pink.

Which was very strange, Neo thought, because the glass of the mirror was clear and not pink-tinted. But before he had time to wonder about this, his pink reflection winked at him, conjured a folded sheet of paper out of thin air, and stuck it in his pink pocket.

Neo jumped in shock as he felt something slide into his own pocket.

Heart beating fast, he gingerly reached in. His fingers closed over the sheet of paper and drew it out; apprehensively, he unfolded it.

It was a map of the house.

His pink reflection grinned at him in a disturbingly Ted-like manner. Neo draped the cloth back over the mirror after a muttered thanks, and then settled down in the empty armchair next to Ted to peruse the map.

It wasn't hard to figure out; for one, it had the words 'You Are Here' printed in neat, friendly letters next to an arrow that pointed to a red dot in the room he was apparently now in.

Neo decided that this merited at least one 'whoa'.

"Whoa," he said.

He realised that he should probably be feeling more weirded out than he currently was, but that looked like it would take quite some effort and so he chose the easier path of just calmly accepting everything.

Somewhere in the midst of plotting the shortest route back to the others, Neo fell asleep.

Chapter Six

Renaken region, The Nexus

It didn't take Luke too long to realise that the two guys who had just vanished were probably not going to be reappearing any time soon, and before long he had bid farewell to Jemma and Zeran Laivon, trudged through a flock of churkeys ("Suri," said one) and exited the farm.

Back on the road again. He'd been walking for about an hour, perhaps more – you do the maths. Aquintos lay ahead, but Luke had things other than his destination to occupy his mind as he re-entered the woods of the Nexus.

Darth Vader, his father? Luke was still not quite able to accept that fact, yet at the same time it seemed oddly fitting, somehow, as if he had subconsciously known that Vader was more than just another bad guy bent on galaxy domination.

Search your feelings, Luke, you know it to be true.

"Hey, noob!"

Luke turned, startled, towards the direction the voice had come from, and found himself looking at a group of about six Nexan teenagers, all grinning and closing in around him from all directions.

"New here?" the leader continued, still grinning.

Luke placed his hand on his lightsaber hilt. "What do you want with me?"

"What d'you think we want?"

Luke took out his lightsaber and ignited it. The gang backed off slightly, but remained in a circle around him.

The leader nodded appreciatively. "Impressive. Zaf?"

"Wha..." Luke started, then fell to the ground, paralysed, as Zaf shot him with a shiny gun. Luke's lightsaber fell out of his hand and rolled away from him, where it was deactivated and kicked safely away by another of the gang.

The leader was bending over him and fiddling about with a converter, which he proceeded to place on Luke's paralysed arm.

"Sorry, noob," he said as he activated the converter, transferring fifteen years out of Luke and into the empty discs, "but some of us need to eat."

"Nothing good in there, Shan," another teen reported to the leader, indicating Luke's bag.

The disc was filled, and Shan lifted the converter from Luke's arm. "You should be able to move again in a min," he informed Luke, now a very surprised four-year-old. "Sorry we had to 'lyse you, but you had that laser sword thing."

Their job done, the gang ran off into the trees with the stolen time. Lying on the ground, Luke finally felt some feeling coming back into his limbs.

Footsteps approached him, and then an unfamiliar girl's voice: "You're Luke, right?"

Slowly, Luke managed to turn his head to look at the speaker, a fifteen-year-old who was crouched down before him.

"Yeah..." he managed to say, noting how his voice was now that of a young child.

"I'm Tasel. Zeran told me to look out for you. Sorry I couldn't do anything about those guys, but I was sort of outnumbered."

Luke moved himself into a sitting position. His clothes didn't fit and he felt disturbingly small, but at least the effects of the paralysers seemed to have worn off.

Tasel was digging through her pockets, and finally her hand emerged with several filled discs. She counted out five big ones and put the rest back in.

"It's generally not a good idea to go 'round the woods looking like you're over sixteen," Tasel said. "It's safe in the towns, but not out here, 'cause it lets people know you're new and they'll try to steal your time. Here," she said, handing the discs to Luke. "Five years. It's not much, but I'm kind of broke at the moment."

"Thanks," Luke said gratefully, accepting the discs.

Tasel smiled and ruffled his hair.

Luke slotted the discs one by one into the converter and got his age up to nine.

"Least they were kind to you," Tasel observed. "Most of these gangs usually like to get their victims down to one year, which is the limit. They do it for kicks, mostly. It's always fun to see some originally big burly guy crawling around helplessly. Where're you going now?"

"Aquintos," Luke said.

"What're you going to do there?"

Luke shrugged.

"It's no fun up North," Tasel said, sitting down. "Everything's new and boring and explored. Whereas the southwest is mostly untrodden, just a few small towns here and there – uncivilised, but that's what's fun. If you go far enough, you might even find Babel."

"What's that?"

"A tower," Tasel replied. "Apparently it's very, very, very tall, and no one's seen it for hundreds of years. If they have, they never told anyone. Some people say it doesn't exist, but... who knows?"

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Nexus has this to say about Babel:

Babel is tall. Very tall. You just won't believe just how highly, loftily, mind-bogglingly tall it is.

Babel was built by The I⁴ and several of his followers, and was an attempt to get out of the Nexus in a vertical way, since all evidence seemed to point towards the fact that the Nexus went on to infinity horizontally.

During the construction of what would become its topmost floor, The I mysteriously vanished, never to be seen again. This was, however, not before he purportedly caused the disappearance of the Mastragath race by using the tower as a broadcasting point for the thirteen o'clock wind.⁵

"Wanna try and find Babel?" Tasel asked.

"Sure!"

Tasel grinned. "We can stop by Reskun and pick Zeran up; ae'll definitely want to come. The two of us tried to look for it several standard years ago, but we only got as far as Arden."

"What about Jemma?" Luke asked, getting up.

"Nah, she's not the exploring kind. She'll be fine. She's two hundred and thirty; she can take care of herself. She's used to Zeran leaving her every now and then."

Luke picked his lightsaber up from where it had been kicked, and returned it to its place in his utility belt, hanging loose around his nine-year-old waist. He adjusted the belt to fit better, then picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

"We'll cut through the woods after Reskun, pass Joe's, follow the road west through Ilmayen, stop by Vare and Ifla..." Tasel went on talking, as together they walked back to Reskun.

⁴ The I was supposedly the first person ever to step foot into the Nexus, though time being what it is there, this claim is therefore subjective. Not much is known about The I, except that he liked to sing and his name was Elvis.

⁵ Both Babel and The I were conceptualized by my brother.

Chapter Seven

15th November 1998, Sunday
Christchurch, New Zealand

Neo's fear hadn't come true; standing in the doorway of the room where he'd spent the night – or rather early morning, the area was dimly lighted by a shaft of daylight that came through a slitted window one corridor down.

He looked down at the map in his hands and wondered how he'd managed to get it the previous night, then decided that wasn't important; what was important was getting out of the maze of corridors.

Neo went back into the room and shook Ted awake. The teen made random protesting noises.

"It's morning," Neo said. "Let's get out of here."

Ted kept his eyes shut.

"Do I have to pull you out of there?" Neo asked threateningly.

Ted made several noncommittal noises, then his eyes flew open and he yelled as Neo lifted him bodily out of the armchair. "Put me down, dude!"

Neo heeded his request and dumped him by the doorway. "Let's go." Neo switched off the room's light.

Ted stumbled unsteadily to his feet and followed Neo down the corridor. "Where'd you get that map?" he asked, trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes.

"Good question."

Ted waited for an answer to the good question, but none came. He checked his watch. "It's only five-forty in the morning," he said, as they made their way past the portrait of the dude who looked totally like his Uncle Maurice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Neo asked.

"It's most heinously early, dude. I didn't have to wake up yet." Ted yawned.

They went down a spiral staircase and emerged on the third floor.

"I wonder what Luke Skywalker's doing now," Ted said.

They turned left into a corridor, then right, and walked through a large ballroom-like room to the door on the other end.

"Whoa," Ted said, marvelling happily at the room's shiny décor.

They came out of the other end of the room, turned right, and went down a flight of steps. Straight ahead, and then they arrived outside the room where Marty and Verne were, the table lamp still on.

Ted noticed that Marty and Verne were still fast asleep. Marty rolled over in bed and said something about asparagus. Neo folded up the map and stuck it in his pocket. Ted sat down on Eddie's sofa and sighed.

The doorbell rang downstairs, and he and Neo turned.

"Who's that?" Ted asked, and followed Neo out the door and down the stairs to the kitchen. Neo opened the door, and they found themselves staring down at two boxes of freshly made hot pizza, with a post-it note tacked to it saying:

"From Freddy the Pizza Dude," Ted read. "Whoa."

Neo regarded the pizza box with more suspicion and less hunger than Ted.

"Maybe it's poisoned."

"It's *pizza*, dude," Ted said. He lifted up the boxes and carried them in as Frank, awakened by the doorbell, came down the stairs.

"Freddy dropped by, huh?" Frank said.

"Who's he?" Ted asked.

"Apparently he used to work at a pizza joint, and one day he got killed in an accident there. Now and then he brings me a pizza... He brought two today. Phil probably told him you were here."

"Who's Phil?"

"He's the one who haunts my car. Help yourself to the food. I'll go wake the others."

Ted happily complied, as Verne came bounding jubilantly down the stairs past Frank. He'd heard something about pizza, and he was hungry. He saw the pizza laid out on the table, and his eyes lit up.

Upstairs, Marty was the only one left in the room; Doc was still asleep next door.

"Marty?" Frank asked.

Marty stirred. "Mom, s'that you?" he mumbled, eyes shut. "I just had a horrible nightmare..." Marty rolled over onto his back. "I dreamt I got sucked into another universe and they told me I was fictional..."

Frank felt as though he'd just been dumped into a *Back to the Future* movie. He realised that he now had the power to make Marty repeat out in loud horror whatever words he chose to say. Like '*1955?!*' or '*twenty-seventh floor?!*' or '*McFly farm?!*'

Frank decided to spare the teen and not mess around with his brain's pre-programmed reflex system.

"Sorry to break it to you, Marty, but uh, I'm not your mother," Frank said.

He wondered if Marty would nonetheless snap his eyes open and yell '*not your mother?!*', which he figured would be pretty funny.

Marty just opened his eyes, saw where he was, and looked disappointed.

"Come on down," Frank said. "There's pizza for breakfast. Better get there before Ted and Verne finish it all."

"Okay."

Doc was the last to come downstairs.

"Want some pizza?" Frank asked him.

Emmett shook his head. "I think we'd better be going soon."

"So what did you tell them happened to your arm?" Verne asked Frank.

"I said I was trying out stunts with my new gun and accidentally shot myself. Luckily they didn't ask too many questions."

"Oh."

Finishing his slice of pizza, Marty washed his hands and went over to the computer to check his e-mail.

From - hoedoeyoospeleethate@dictionary.com

To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com

Subject: Can you help me...

Eye wante 2 bye a shepe. A ded shepe. Do u thinke it'ss ghooste is stile aronde? Cann u aske Frank 4 mee?

Thankssie⁶

Marty blinked. "Uh... Frank? Look at this."

Frank came over and stared at the message. "No, I don't think I've seen the ghooste of any ded shepe aronde recently. You could tell the sender to come over to New Zealand though. There're lots of shepe to spare here. Some ded ones too, I bet."

"Uh-huh..."

From - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
To - hoedoeoyoospeleethate@dictionary.com
Subject: RE: Can you help me...

Frank says he hasn't seen any ghost of any dead sheep. He says you should come to New Zealand if you want to look for one.

- Marty.

**

"So I guess you'll be leaving now, huh?" Frank asked when everyone was done eating.

"Yes," Doc replied. "Thank you very much for letting us stay here."

"And for the pizza," Verne chipped in as the five visitors started towards the door.

Frank unlocked the door and opened it. "No problem." He tousled Marty's hair as the teen walked past. "Bye, kid."

Marty turned and smiled. "Bye."

Frank watched them from the doorway as they walked toward the time train, where Emmett did a double take when he saw the bloody mess on the locomotive. "What in the name of Sir Isaac H. Newton is *that*?" he muttered.

Oh, great, Neo thought as he recognised the remains of the poor bird whose death he had indirectly been responsible for. "I think it's a bird," he said lamely, walking up.

"What bird would be stupid enough to fly into a train?" Marty asked. "If this kind of thing happened all the time, animal lovers would've placed a ban on airplanes or something by now."

Neo decided that it would not be a good idea to mention that the bird had been attracted by his really cool sunglasses.

Emmett shook his head. "Whatever it is, it's too late to worry about now."

The trio headed into the train where Ted and Verne were waiting, and got ready to set off through the space-time continuum again.

Chapter Eight
The Nexus
Jonké, Atmena region, Nexus

⁶ Contributed by HyperCaz of FanFiction.Net

"And this," Zeran Laivon announced, "is *Joe's* – The Restaurant at the End of the Space-Time Continuum. Hungry?"

"Yeah," Luke said, gazing at the little building before them. The three of them had been walking ever since, and he wanted some place to rest his feet.

Joe's was a more friendly-looking place in the daytime than it was at night, not that Luke had ever seen it at night. Zeran pushed open the doors and they entered, to be hit at once by the cheery jukebox music.

Glass windows covered most of the walls, letting in on all sides the strange radiance of the Nexus. At night, the encompassing darkness gave the place a surreal feeling; those customers who didn't like it could make use of the wooden blinds that hung, rolled-up, at intervals along each large window.

The assortment of creatures that filled the restaurant reminded Luke of the Mos Eisley Cantina back home.

Joe's was located in several universes at the same time, as well as in the Nexus. It was to those other universes what other universes were to the Nexus; people would just walk in from either end of the street, enter the restaurant, and leave the same way, vanishing into the rest of their world once they left this stretch of road.

Faceless waiters with bowties moved soundlessly through the restaurant, serving patrons. They were the height of an average human being, and realising this reminded Luke with a jolt that he was now physically a child. They looked so tall to him; in fact, a lot of things did now.

There was something darkly nostalgic about that. Either way, it put things into a new perspective.

Zeran led the way through the crowd and went up to the bar-cum-register. "Hi, Tom," he greeted.

Tom the bartender grunted. "What d'you want?"

"Uh, give me a Pepsi. And..." Zeran turned to Luke. "Ever tasted churkey?"

"No," Luke said.

"Okay, and he'll have the roast churkey set, and..."

Tom planted the Pepsi can on the counter. "2 PH for the drink, and you know you're not supposed to order food here. The waiters are there for a reason."

"Those things are freaky," Zeran said. "I mean, what's with the bowties?"

Tom glared. "They do their job."

Zeran shrugged, paid up, took the Pepsi, and they went off in search of an empty table.

One of the faceless bowtie-wearing waiters came up to them when they were seated, and waited silently for their order.

"Okay, we'll have one roast churkey set for Luke here, one grilled rayfish for me, and a small Portman pizza and one glass of Beatlejuice for her," Zeran said, averting his eyes from the waiter's bowtie.

< We're out of Beatles, > telepathised the waiter.

Tasel looked disappointed. "All four of them?"

< Yes. >

"Oh, all right then," she said. "Replace that with a dinkberry smoothie."

The waiter glided off silently.

Zeran dug in aer pockets and slid a disc over the table to Luke. "Five years for you," ae said. "And there's lots more where that came from."

"Thanks."

"NP."

Luke was five years older by the time the food arrived.

His meal consisted of one churkey roasted to golden-brown perfection, a dollop of dark purple smulberi sauce by its side, and a sprig of achewst on top with a dash of some unidentified Nexan herb. He also got a bowl of cream of nimal soup, and a Pan Dimensional Plaque Destroyer drink.

"Save that drink for last," Zeran advised, digging into aer raynfish. "It'll make you happy, make you pass out, and give you wonderful dental hygiene."

Luke took a bite of churkey and decided he like it.

Chapter Nine

15th November 1998, Sunday
Christchurch, New Zealand

It was Verne who first pointed out the problem of how they were going to get into Zion, considering that it was an underground city and thus not really very accessible by a flying, time-travelling train. Doc, Marty and Ted had not known enough about the *Matrix* universe to anticipate any trouble in sending Neo home. As for Neo, he had been too busy wondering what he would do if the ghost of the bird he killed came back to haunt him to think much about the matter either.

"What?" he said instead.

"How're we gonna get into Zion?" Verne repeated.

Neo realised that that was a rather good question.

"Aren't there any entrances from the surface?" Marty asked Verne.

"Yeah, we could go through the sewers and electrical lines and stuff, but the whole place is filled with sentinels and it won't be easy to fly through the lines." Verne paused, thinking.

Neo found it a little unsettling that a seven-year-old from another universe knew more about his world than Neo did himself, and all by just watching movies.

An idea suddenly struck Verne, and his eyes lit up. "Unless..."

"What?" Neo asked. His vocabulary was deteriorating, and he blamed it on Ted.

"In *Matrix Revolutions*, the sentinels drilled a tunnel from the surface that went through an old sewer pipe into Zion," Verne said. "It went right down all the way to the dock, and that's how the sentinels entered and blew things up."

"*What?*" Neo asked, suitably stunned.

Doc powered up the time circuits. "When did this happen?"

"Uh... about six months after Part One, I think... it's the bit before Neo and Trinity died...."

Neo just stared at Verne, his mouth open in silent horror.

"How long after Neo was taken?" Doc asked.

Verne shrugged.

Neo was still staring at the boy, oblivious to the fact that everyone else was looking expectantly at him.

"Neo?" Ted asked.

Neo blinked. "What... what do you mean, I die? Six months... that's... that's four months from now..."

"It was in the movie," Verne said.

Neo swore and dropped down onto the seat, face in his hands.

"...Are you okay, dude?" Ted asked.

"No."

And Neo remained not okay as the hover circuits powered up and the train lifted off into the sky, hit eighty-eight miles per hour and vanished into another part of the space-time continuum.

Down below, Frank waved goodbye. He sighed and shut the door.

Back to normal life again, he thought dully, as Eddie zoomed down the stairs, nearly bowling him over as the ghost asked where everyone had gone.

"I wish I knew, Eddie," Frank murmured, staring wistfully out the window at the empty sky. "I wish I knew."

**

Zion
Six months after *The Matrix*

The train bucked violently as it entered the blackened sky above Zion, throwing most of its passengers off balance and effectively shutting Neo up. Struggling back to his feet, Emmett activated the train's cloaking shield and grabbed the navigation controls in time to avoid crashing into a swarm of sentinels ahead. More of the machines surrounded them on all sides, pushing them relentlessly onward towards Zion.

"Is this the correct time?" Doc shouted.

Verne stared around in awe. "Yeah... perfect... how'd you do that?"

"You mean this was exactly when you meant? I just sent us four months into the future from the time Neo was taken. It wouldn't have been very accurate. We can't have landed so perfectly where we intended. That's impossible."

"Not impossible," Neo said quietly, looking out the front window. "Improbable."

Back in the days when he'd been a trapped human in the Matrix, there had been a series of books – fictional books – known as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In them was a device known as the Improbability Drive, a wholly remarkable invention that ran on a cup of tea and made improbable things happen.

At present, what was fictional and what was real wasn't exactly very clear. And Neo wondered if perhaps Douglas Adams' fictional contraption was currently playing a larger part in their lives than they'd have ever imagined. Judging from the events of the past few days or so, he was prepared to believe almost anything.

Verne was starting to think that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all, wincing as the train swerved almost ninety degrees to the side to dodge a mechanical tentacle.

"Dad?" he called out.

"What is it, Verne?"

"Maybe we should go a little further into the future, when the sentinels have left and we can..."

Another sentinel flew into them and the train trembled. Doc strained to look for a clear passage out into the open, but they were surrounded on all sides. "I don't think we can!" he shouted back. "There's not enough space for us to get up to eighty-eight. We're stuck where we are for the moment. We'll have to go in now and hope for the best."

"We're going through *this*?" Marty asked in disbelief.

"I'm afraid we have no choice, Marty."

The train swerved again, and Verne dropped into a sitting position on the cabin floor between the legs of the two teenagers. It was probably the safest position to be in, he thought, grabbing hold of Marty's leg for support as the train executed yet more acrobatic manoeuvres. Marty yelled in shock and almost kicked Verne squarely in the face.

There was a glow of light up ahead that marked the position of the tunnel. Sentinels poured in through it, several to meet their end moments later at the guns of the human-operated Armoured Personal Units below.

It was kind of ironic, Verne thought. He knew dozens of *Matrix* fans who would die to have the opportunity he currently had, and here he was cowering in the back of the train.

The train bucked again, and Verne grabbed wildly at Ted's leg for support. Startled, the teen glanced down to see what was clutching him, then looked up to see Marty with both legs up on the seat, unavailable for use as safety railings.

"Hey..." Ted protested, trying to shake his leg free of the boy's grip.

"Verne, why don't you just tell your father to install seatbelts in here?" Marty asked.

"What?"

"Never mind."

There was a jolt, and from up front came Doc's shout: "We're going in!"

The place got more crowded as they entered the tunnel. A sentinel slammed into the side of the cloaked train, suffered critical damages to its internal circuitry and started flying around in small circles making beep beep noises. Intrigued, Ted got off his seat and went over to the side for a better look.

"Doc!" Marty yelled, trying to regain his balance as more sentinels bashed into the train, "deactivate the cloak! Then maybe they'll stop crashing into us!"

The inventor didn't seem to have heard, so Neo reached over to do him the honours as they exited the tunnel and entered Zion. The air below was thick with swarms of sentinels and gunfire, and Neo was starting to have a very bad feeling about all of it, especially since several of the sentinels were starting to notice them.

The machine's objective had been to destroy the humans. And here were five such humans, packaged nicely in this colourful flying train...

A mechanical tentacle lashed out at the time vehicle, puncturing the train and damaging the door mechanism. The gull-wing doors opened, and too late, Ted realised that the door he'd been standing in front of had just been replaced with empty space. The train jerked... and he yelled as he felt the floor suddenly slide away from his feet.

Kicking wildly in midair trying to secure a foothold, he grabbed futilely at the hanging bottom step on the door of the train as it slowly slipped away from his grasp...

Cursing under his breath, Neo threw himself forward and grabbed hold of the teen's hand just before it disappeared below. Marty rushed forward to help, when he froze at the sight of a sentinel heading straight at them, tentacles poised to attack and its sensor-like eyes glowing a evil red.

"Marty! Get the gun!" Neo shouted.

Marty stood stunned for several moments, when Verne dumped the Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster in his hands.

"SHOOT IT!"

Realising the presence of the gun, Marty stared down at the futuristic weapon and wondered vaguely where the trigger was. It looked like that greenish thingy over there, so he decided that it probably was. Aiming the gun uncertainly at the incoming machine, he squeezed the greenish thingy.

A stream of crackling blue lanced out and hit the sentinel as the kickback slammed Marty against the cabin wall. The sentinel attempted to rip a piece of the train off, when a wave of glowing purple swept through it and its sensors blinked off. Dead, it paused for a moment in midair... and then it fell down into the mass of APU's and squashed several unfortunate bacteria.⁷

"Thanks," Neo said. Then he yelled at Ted to stop kicking because it was making the train shake.

Ted continued kicking nonetheless. It's the natural, human instinctive thing to do when you're dangling out of a flying time machine surrounded by sentinels.

Lying almost flat on the floor clutching the doorframe with his free hand, it occurred to Neo that he wasn't exactly in the best of positions to pull someone up.

Crouched next to Neo, Marty was blasting away with the Neutrino Quartz 3000 Laser Blaster at nearby sentinels, wincing at the powerful recoils. He wondered why future technology hadn't been able to reduce them.

"Ted, I said STOP KICKING!" Neo repeated.

"I can't..." came the panicked response. Ted shot a glance at the vertiginous drop to the ground below, and he paled.

"Look, you got to trust me on this, okay?" Neo said. "I don't know how much longer I can hold on, and it would help a lot if you stop moving so much..."

The sentinel that had been going around in circles had somehow or other managed to make its way out of the tunnel and was now doing a rather cool version of the Macarena. In its frenzied dancing, it slammed into the train again. Dazedly, it made its way off to find a partner to do the tango with.

"Dad!" Verne shouted over the noise. "Can you possibly try not to hit every single one of them?"

Emmett muttered darkly under his breath, his eyes searching for a clear path ahead. He glanced back to see the activity behind and next to him, and his eyes widened. This had not been such a good idea after all...

Behind him, Neo tried to shift into a more comfortable position.

"Ted, listen to me. When I say go, I'll pull you up, and you try to grab the bottom step here with your other hand, okay?" Neo paused, wondering if he had heard. "Ted? Are you listening to me?"

The teen's frightened eyes came up to meet his, and Neo felt a chill run down his spine. They'd never had such intense direct eye contact before... not like this...

This is not normal, he thought feverishly. *This is not, not, not normal...*

Neo blinked several times and tried to ignore it. He swallowed.

"Okay," Neo said. "Go!"

⁷ My brother wrote this paragraph, but the bacteria bit was mine.

He pulled Ted up, but the teen's hand missed the step and went down again.

Neo grimaced. "Marty, stop shooting for a while and help me here!"

Putting down the Neutrino Quar – sod it – gun, Marty dropped to the floor and reached out of the train. The sentinels noticed that the firing had ceased, and several cautiously approached the time vehicle.

"Let's try that again," Neo said. "G-"

A tentacle darted forward, and Ted screamed as most of his right leg was sliced open.

Neo swore. Releasing his hold on the doorframe and hoping he wouldn't fall out as a result, he used his free hand to grab the teen and yank him up, yelling at Marty for assistance as the attacking sentinel got ready for a second strike.

Between the two of them, they pulled Ted back into the cabin, where he lay hyperventilating on the floor and dripping blood. Marty grabbed the lever for the doors and yanked them shut.

"DOC!" he yelled. "He's in! Let's go!"

One hand on the steering, Emmett keyed in the destination date into the time circuits. Then, spotting a clear way ahead, he hit the accelerator.

"Right," he shouted to his passengers. "Prepare for temporal displacement!"

Eighty-eight miles per hour. The familiar blue light flooded the cabin, and the chaos around dissolved into nothingness.

Chapter Ten

Zion

Two months after *The Matrix*

Half-sitting-half-lying face-up on the floor of the train with his pulse racing, all Ted Logan could think about was the pain. His right leg felt as though it had been ripped apart; which it more or less had. Strips of torn flesh dangled, and at one point the bone was visible. Blood streamed down to pool on the floor, seeping into his sock that then clung to his foot in a sickening manner.

Neo crouched on the cabin floor next to him. "Ted? Look at me, kid. Say something... Ted?"

The teen's voice was barely audible through his crying. "*Hurts.*" Ted brought up a hand to wipe the tears away as red started flooding his vision.

Neo looked at Marty. "D'you know first aid?"

"Not for this," Marty replied softly.

"Isn't there anything you can..."

"I thought *you're* the one who lives here," Marty said.

Neo shook his head. "I've never been here before. I don't know the place; I live on a hovercraft in the old sewer systems. I don't know where's the nearest place to get medical help, and how'm I going to explain... Maybe if I got back to my ship, they could help, but I've no idea where they are now..."

Standing up, he gazed out of the train's windows. *So this is Zion*, he thought. *The last human city...* He had heard so much about this place, but he'd never actually been here before. And he never thought that he would be arriving in a flying train; it wasn't exactly the most common form of transportation around.

Verne got up from the bench and headed to the front of the cabin. “Dad, we can go...”

“What?” Emmett asked. “We haven’t even dropped Neo off...”

“He doesn’t live in the city, he’s from a hovercraft, and he doesn’t know where it is now... it’ll take a while to find it, and we gotta get Ted to a hospital and everything...”

Emmett sighed. “How much further into the future from our last departed time do we need to go to get out of here *safely*?”

“About two hours, I think.”

“Is Neo fine with this?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Doc set the new coordinates, and he hit the accelerator. Verne remained at the front of the cabin with his father as they approached eighty-eight and the electricity started to crackle around the train again.

At the back, Marty looked around in bewilderment as the train started to pick up speed. “We’re leaving?”

“Yep!” Verne said brightly.

Neo crouched back down and reached out a hand to the injured teenager. Ted grasped hold of it, their fingers interlocking in an eerily perfect fit.

And they held on, as the four sonic booms filled the air and the train vanished through space and time.

Entering the future, they found the now-deserted sentinel-created tunnel and made their way out with less problems than before. Doc keyed in the destination for a future year in his own universe, and they left again.

**

8th November 2030, Sunday
Hill Valley, California

Last day. This was his last day to be free. The last day before returning to life as he knew it, the last day before the fate of mankind would once again rest in his hands. Neo wanted to enjoy this day.

This was Hill Valley, year 2030. Nobody knew who he was here. In this place, he was no different from anyone else. This was freedom.

It was a strange but welcome change to no longer have people’s eyes on him wherever he went. It was back to his life before learning of the Matrix; a time when he had just been an ordinary citizen known as Thomas A. Anderson living on an ordinary planet known as The Earth that revolved around an ordinary star known as The Sun.

It felt almost nostalgic.

He liked it. This way, he could pretend that everything was normal and that nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened to him. It was strange how he had, for so long, taken ordinary life for granted – now that was one thing he cherished more than any other.

Keith had been right in some areas. It was because of the scientist that Neo had had the opportunity to experience, however briefly, a life which those of his world could only dream about. They would never get to see the sky, or the sun, or the trees, and so many other things. He had received that chance, and for that he was grateful.

It would be nice, he reflected, if he could just bring Trinity over and have the two of them start life over in this world. They could get married, buy a house, have kids, get a dog, and never again have to worry about the end of humankind.

It would be irresponsibility at its peak, but it never hurt to dream.

**

They followed the road west past *Joe's*, out of the Atmena region and through the woods because Zeran wanted to stop by somewhere. Ae glanced around at the trees, did some calculations in aer head, then pointed decisively at one of the trees. "That one," ae said. "Come on."

Luke scarce had time to wonder what was going on, when Tasel pulled him by the arm and the next thing he knew he was walking right through the tree and out into a pale-blue-lit air-conditioned room filled with bowls and bowls of...

"Free blueberry ice cream," Zeran said cheerfully. "This room is full of it. It's not a very big universe, just about four rooms, and it gets restocked every now and then by the ice cream men. Help yourself." Zeran pulled out aer converter and waved it at Luke. "How young d'you want to be? Two? Three? There's a whole lot of really great toys in the next room, and you can't really enjoy them if you're too old."

Several minutes later, three toddlers were sitting down in little plastic chairs helping themselves to bowls of free blueberry ice cream with little metal teaspoons. This was followed by a very enjoyable playtime in the next room, after which they fell asleep, full and contented, on nice soft mattresses spread out in the third room.

Chapter Eleven

8th November 2030, Sunday
Room 926A, Hill Valley General Hospital
Hill Valley, California

The evening light filtered through the gap in the curtains, filling the dim hospital room with a cool radiance – the only light there was. Neo stood silently by the window, one hand pushing the curtain aside for a better view, the other hand resting on the window sill as he looked out on the futuristic city below. Hovercrafts swooped along the skylanes that weaved around the tall buildings, each one lit up brightly with welcoming warmth.

On the bed behind Neo, Ted Logan stirred. Neo released his hold on the curtain and turned his attention to the teenager, eyes now open and trying to remember where he was and how he'd got there. He must have blacked out somewhere along the way...

"You're up," Neo said, more a statement than a question.

Ted's eyes flicked towards him, as though just noticing his presence. Then recognition dawned, and the teen broke into his usual grin.

"Neo!" he greeted, getting up into a sitting position.

"How's your leg?"

Ted pulled the covers aside and examined his right leg. It was almost completely healed now, thanks to the advanced medical technology of the future. Just a slight pain and several thin scars running down it were all that remained of the sentinel attack.

"Whoa," Ted said happily, which didn't particularly answer Neo's question but nonetheless got the general idea across.

"Can you walk?" Neo asked.

"I think so."

Ted swung his legs over to the side of the bed. He tested his weight on his right foot, decided it could take it, then stood up fully and changed his mind. Wincing, he hobbled around a bit then gave up and dropped back down onto the bed.

Bogus, he thought mournfully.

Neo moved to the side of the room and carried the pair of crutches there over to Ted. "Do you want these, or would you prefer to stuff yourself with painkillers?" he offered. "It doesn't really matter either way because the doctor said you should be able to walk by tomorrow."

Ted looked doubtfully at the crutches.

Neo pulled out a drawer on the bedside table to reveal it to be stocked with cool-looking little futuristic syringe-thingies filled with some futuristic painkiller. Neo wasn't particularly concerned with what the syringe thingies contained; he was more concerned with the fact that they looked like something out of *Star Trek* and he longed to operate one of them.

"The painkillers are cheaper," Neo said pointedly.

"You mean the hospital just lets you take as many as you want?" Ted asked, staring at the open drawer.

"Usually they don't, but Dr. Brown knows someone here and got us a special deal usually reserved for certain customers. They don't ask any questions other than what's necessary, and they let you do whatever you want, but if you die or anything bad happens as a result they're not responsible."

"Did they ask what happened?"

"Yeah."

"What did you tell them?"

"Dr. Brown told them the truth. But these guys are used to this sort of thing. They occasionally get people in here who claim that little green men operated on them in their spaceships and didn't finish the job properly." Neo took the fact that Ted hadn't answered his question to mean that he agreed to the painkiller option. He poked around the drawer, looking for the most shiny syringe-thingy. "And at least two nurses asked me how I was related to you. I told them to mind their own business. Give me your leg." Neo held up the syringe-thing in a way that unsuccessfully hid his eagerness to emulate a certain Dr. McCoy.

"Dude, are you sure that's a good idea?" Ted asked, looking at the syringe-thing. Being from an enlightened era of scientific advancement, the syringe had no needle and relied instead on the forceful expulsion of its contents to drive said contents into the patient's vein, sort of like in *Star Trek*.

Neo raised an eyebrow, then pressed the syringe-thing against Ted's leg and happily shot the painkillers in.

Ted felt the vague pain in his leg slowly ebb away into nothing. He stood up and felt no pain. It unnerved him.

"Come on," Neo said, chucking the empty syringe-thing into a dustbin and shutting the drawer. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"We checked into a hotel room for the night because we weren't sure how long you'd take. It's just a block away."

The two of them exited the room and left the hospital, Ted walking with a purposeful limp knowing that just because he couldn't feel any pain didn't mean it wasn't there.

**

8th November 2030, Sunday
Room 31-02B, Lone Pine Hotel
Hill Valley, California

Neo realised that this was the first real shower he had ever taken in his life: in an actual bathroom, with actual soap and shampoo and actual hot water. Washing facilities on the *Nebuchadnezzar* were limited; you sort of just splashed about under pitiful excuses for showerheads until you got clean. And the water was never warm enough.

Whereas now... this was heaven. Neo figured that he could just stand there under the shower for another hour or so. He'd never get the chance to do so again.

After a while, though, common sense kicked in and he regretfully turned off the water. Pushing aside the shower curtain, Neo got out and grabbed one of the most massively useful things in the universe off the rack to dry himself off with.

It may have been the future, but nothing can ever replace a good towel: neither hairdryers nor the blow-dry machine thingies like the one that dried Marty off in *Back to the Future II*. Towels will forever remain an important part of life, whether on Earth or anywhere else in the galaxy. This is a fact.

The bathroom door made a beeping sound, and a small green light flashed by the lock. The door slid open and Ted came in. "Hey, Neo... Doc asked Marty to ask me to ask you if..."

Neo yelped and covered himself with the massively useful towel. "I LOCKED THAT DOOR!" he yelled.

Ted glanced at the sophisticated fingerprint recognition lock by the doorway with instructions on its usage and programming. "Oh," he said. "Sorry, dude. I just stuck my thumb there and the thing opened, so... Anyway, Doc asked..."

"Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you go out and let me change?"

"Nah, you can go ahead, dude. There's nothing I haven't seen bef..."

"Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Go out."

The teen shrugged and complied. Minutes later, Neo came out with a towel draped over his shoulder like a froody hitchhiker. Next to the door that led to the adjoining room where Doc, Marty and Verne were was a television screen set into the wall, which, by a wholly remarkable coincidence, was currently showing the opening credits of the 2005 movie *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

The view on screen was that of an underwater scene, with a bunch of dolphins swimming about. The sound of percussion and trumpets reached a crescendo, and the invisible band and choir launched into the opening song:

*"So long, and thanks for all the fish
So sad that it should come to this
We tried to warn you all but oh dear..."*

Neo glanced over at Ted sitting on the bed, eyes glued to the movie. "What did you want?" he asked.

"...which might explain your disrespect..."

"Doc wanted to talk to you. Something about how you will be getting home tomorrow."

"So long, so long, and thanks for all the fish."

"Right," Neo said. He dried off his hair, threw his towel onto the other bed, then went through the adjoining door into the other room. The lights were mostly off that side, and from the small extra bed came the gentle sounds of Verne breathing in his sleep.

At the other end of the room, Doc and Marty were sitting at a table talking, a single lamp lighting up the area with a warm glow. They looked up as he arrived.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Doc said. "We've got to discuss how you're going to go home."

Neo pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Verne told me you lived on a hovercraft, and you don't know where it may be."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Do you know any way to contact it?"

Neo shook his head. "Someone at Zion should be able to," he said after some hesitation. "But there would definitely be a lot of questions..."

"That doesn't matter," Doc said. He took out a small device from his pocket that bore some resemblance to the sleep-inducing alpha rhythm generator he had used on his first trip to the future. "I got this just now from the hospital. It can erase the recent memory of any individual by identifying and destroying any neural connections made in the selected timeframe. They use it in hospitals here to help some patients forget traumatic incidents. Usually it's not available to outsiders, but I know someone at the hospital and she sold me one. If people have to know the whole story in order to help us, we'll tell them everything then wipe their memories when it's over."

"Does it work?" Neo asked.

Emmett looked faintly offended. "Of course!"

"We can test it on you if you want," Marty said. He grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and passed them over to Neo. Marty glanced at his watch. "Write something," he said. "Something only you would know."

Warily, Neo picked up the pen, thought a moment, then scribbled down his parents' names: John Anderson and Michelle McGahey.

Marty took the paper and glanced at his watch again. "Ten sec... make it fifteen seconds, Doc."

Emmett set the timer on his device, and then brought it up and flashed it in Neo's eyes.

Neo's first thought was that something was off in the movie music coming faintly through the adjoining door. One moment there had been something about wanting a tasty fish, then all of a sudden the words had come back in mid-sentence:

"...ome one and all... man and mammal..."

Neo blinked, then remembered the question he had been going to ask. "Does it work?"

Marty grinned. "We just showed you."

"What?"

Marty pushed the paper over to him, and Neo stared down at his own handwriting. For a brief moment he thought that Ted might have written it, but he realised that wasn't possible; he doubted that the teen knew what his parents' names were.

"Are you convinced now?"

Neo just continued staring at the paper, feeling strangely disoriented and, for some reason, vulnerable. "Okay," he said. "So what's the plan?"

"Tomorrow after breakfast, we go back to 1985 and drop Ted off," Doc said. "Then I'm sending Marty home, and..."

"No," Marty interrupted quietly. "I'm coming with you, Doc. You never know what might happen."

Doc looked at his young friend, who just hours ago had been so keen to get home. "Are you sure?"

Marty nodded. "Yeah."

"All right. So after that I'll send Verne home, then we'll head back to Zion and get in the same way we got out. We travel four months back to the time you were taken, find someone who can contact your ship, erase memories where necessary, and you'll be back where you originally were."

There was a moment's silence as the other two took this in.

"Sounds too easy," Neo said softly.

"It won't be."

Behind the door, the music reached its final crescendo.

*"So long, so long, so long, so long, so long
So long, so long, so long, so long, so long
So long, so long and thanks! for all the fish."*

**

"Give me your hand," Neo said.

Uncomprehendingly, Ted passed it over. Neo took it and examined the tips of the teen's fingers, eyes darting from them to his own. After about a minute or so had passed, he released Ted's hand.

"They're not the same," he concluded.

"What?"

"We don't have the same fingerprints. They're about 80% similar, tops, but that's it." Neo paused. "Stupid fingerprint lock thing," he muttered.

They watched *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for about five minutes, and then a commercial came on for some wonderful new brand of shampoo-cum-hair dye.

"What are those black things all over you?" Ted asked. "I saw them just now."

Neo pulled up his sleeve to reveal the black plugs imbedded in his skin. "These?"

"Yeah."

"It's a long story."

"Do they hurt?"

"No," Neo said.

Ted fingered the plugs in wonder. "Whoa."

**

8th November 2030, Sunday

10:31 pm
Room 31-02A, Lone Pine Hotel

It felt good to be home, Marty thought as he lay in bed. Well, maybe he wasn't technically at home yet, but he was at least in the correct universe and correct town. It was just like another one of the many time travelling adventures he'd gone on with Doc. He was on familiar ground once more, and the feeling was a comforting one.

Tomorrow he'd be home again, if all went well – which he hoped it would. Home... Keith and all that *Back to the Future* stuff seemed so far away. He missed Frank, but even *he* might have never happened. The past few days felt sort of surreal; memories that were already starting to fade with time.

Doc had fallen asleep, and was snoring slightly on his bed. Next to him on the extra bed, Verne rolled over, murmured something, and was silent again.

For the first time in a long while, Marty felt safe.

He'd be home tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

9th November 2030, Monday
12:27 a.m.
Room 31-02B, Lone Pine Hotel
Hill Valley, California

"I don't want to go back," Neo said quietly to no one in particular as he lay in the darkness.

In the other bed, Ted rolled over to face him. "What?"

Silence for a while. Through the walls came the sound of someone flushing the toilet in some other room.

"I want to stay here," Neo continued. "I don't want to go back underground. I'll never see the sun again if I go back. I never saw it before, not really, until Keith took me..."

Ted sincerely hoped that Neo wasn't going to start angsty away. The teen had enough problems of his own at the moment, the largest of which at present was the song 'So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish' running in his head.

"But don't you want to go home, dude?"

"It doesn't feel like home," came the barely audible reply.

Ted tried to ignore the sound of dolphins singing their final farewell song in his head. "Then what does?"

Neo hesitated. "I don't know," he said after a while.

Your world's about to be destroyed; there's no point getting all annoyed... "Where were you born?"

"In a computer simulation," Neo replied distantly. "It's called the Matrix."

"Whoa," Ted remarked. "Sounds like some movie." *Lie back and watch your planet dissolve around you...*

"It is," came the dry reply.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry, dude."

There was a moment's silence.

"People say Keanu Reeves can't act," Neo said. "So what's that make us... less than human?"

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence.

"So what happened after you were born?" Ted asked, changing the subject.

"How much do you want to know?"

"Tell me everything, dude." Ted wasn't exactly in the mood for sleep at the moment, especially considering that if things continued the way they were going, any dream he might have would very likely include singing dolphins flying off into space.

And so they talked on through the night.

This is never a good thing to do.

**

Luke, Zeran and Tasel spent much of the rest of the day exploring various universes that Zeran suggested as they made their way through the Ilmayen woods. There was one that consisted solely of a large room filled with long metal poles that reached from the floor to the ceiling; there was one filled with nothing but peach ice cream; there was one whose only inhabitant was a medieval knight who stood in a shrubbery and said "Ni" to them; there was one with a ground made up of nothing but duct tape that stretched all the way to the horizon; there was one in which several men ran around a field chasing a little white-and-black ball and seemed pretty mad when Luke picked it up.

That night, they hunted down a nimal to eat, having tracked it down by its distinct kerrupping call. They found a nice spot between some tree-universes, and Zeran started a fire with aer firebox.

Fireboxes are a wholly ingenious invention. A firebox is basically a rectangular container filled with a flammable liquid, and which has a tube coming out one end. By holding the firebox upside down and pressing a button, a spark would be created in the tube at the same time as a large drop of fuel passes through it, catching fire before falling down straight into whatever you wanted to set fire to.⁸

They roasted the nimal and ate their fill, then sat talking on the grass by the dying embers of the fire as the constellations of Nexan stars overhead winked into view.

"No one's ever been to those stars," Zeran said. "There was some space program at Aquintos that sent some guys up, but after a certain height they just vanished off radar and couldn't be contacted. No one ever saw 'em again. One day I wanna go up and see what's there."

"It's suicide," Tasel said.

"I've lived long enough. And it'll be the best way to die, if I do."

The idle conversation soon turned to other topics. Luke learnt of the Mysterious Old Man (MOM) of the Nexus, the only person who dared to go around the Nexan woods looking so old. In fact, it was because of this that the gangs were afraid to rob him, thinking that if he'd survived for so long that way, he had to have some kind of superpower protection.

No one knew much else of the Mysterious Old Man, him being mysterious and all, though rumours went that he was trying to destroy the stability of the Nexus through disseminating confidential Nexan research information to the Otherlands, allowing Otherlanders to play around with things they shouldn't.

But those were just rumours, Zeran reiterated. The only things anyone knew for sure about the MOM was that he was mysterious, old, and a man.

Luke looked at the stars and a wave of homesickness came over him. He wondered what Han and Leia and everyone else were doing back home, and if they knew he couldn't return. His hand reached for his lightsaber, and he held its hilt in a comforting grip; it was his last real reminder of home.

⁸ Concept of the firebox was by my brother.

The final glow of the fire faded away, and soon all three were asleep.

**

9th November 2030, Monday
7:42 am
Room 31-02B, Lone Pine Hotel
Hill Valley, California

"Am I the only one who's ever awake?" Marty asked, staring at Neo fast asleep under the pillow that Ted had chucked at him in an unsuccessful attempt to wake The One from his beauty sleep.

"Honestly," Marty muttered, shaking his head and walking out of the room. "First Frank, now Neo..."

An oxygen molecule near him bobbed up and down in agreement. Being an oxygen molecule, it hadn't realised that Marty was, in fact, not talking to it, and that the teen wasn't particularly concerned about what the molecular masses thought of his musings.

Back in the room, Ted exited the bathroom to find that Neo still hadn't budged. Picking up a pillow from his bed, he prepared to throw it. "Are you going to wake up, dude?"

Neo mumbled something unintelligible from under the first pillow and was silent again. Ted threw the second pillow at him, but all it did was bounce off the first and fall to the ground. The pillow on top of Neo's head extended its warm sympathy to its fallen comrade.

"Neo?" Ted asked, only to be greeted with more incoherent mutterings.

"You've been asleep for over four hours, dude."

"Fehh," Neo said.

"I can pull you off the bed if you want."

"Don' you dar'."

"Doctor Brown says that if we don't leave the room in an hour, the hotel people are going to do most heinous things to the bill."

"Go 'way."

Ted yanked the covers off Neo.

"Stop 'at."

Verne sauntered into the room and was watching the scene with considerable interest. "Try prodding him with a stick," he suggested. "It works with Jules."

Neo contemplated making a certain gesture with his middle finger on the hand that was not currently buried under the pillow, but decided against it when he realised that Doc might not be too pleased if his seven-year-old son started emulating him.

"M'grofle," he said instead, which roughly translates as, "Go away, you little brat, or I'll separate your head from your body. When I'm out of bed, that is."

"Do you know where to find a stick?" Ted asked Verne.

"Yeah, there's this area near the back of my house which has lots of twigs and dead branches and stuff."

"Um, anything nearer?"

Verne thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, but you could just try poking him."

"Touch me an' that han' will never touch an'thing 'gain," Neo mumbled in an unsuccessful attempt at sounding sinister.

Ted pulled the pillow off Neo's head, dumping it on top of the other pillow on the ground. The pillows greeted each other floopily.

Doc walked in. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Neo won't get up," Verne said helpfully.

"I see." Emmett looked at Neo, who grudgingly pulled himself up into a sitting position and tried to look reasonably awake.

"That's settled then," Doc said. "We better get moving. I only booked the rooms until eight-thirty." He left the room, Verne following after. When they had gone, Neo rested his head against the wall and shut his eyes.

"I don't think it's a good idea to go back to sleep, dude," Ted informed him.

"Just give me five minutes, okay?" came the annoyed reply.

Ted glanced at the clock, which read 7:45. "That's what you said ten minutes ago."

"I mean it this time."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

Ted shrugged. "Whatever you say, dude." He went over to see what was going on next door. Next to him, the time on the digital clock shifted to 7:46.

**

Five minutes later.

"Neo?"

"Mff."

"It's been five minutes, dude," Ted said, munching on a sausage.

"Ngh."

"Are you going to get up, dude?"

"Bleagh," Neo replied.

"Here," Verne said, having returned from breakfast with baked beans dripping down his shirt. "Try this," he said, offering Ted a large, sticky, mouldy-looking piece of toast.

"No thanks, dude, I'm not hungry," Ted said.

Verne shook his head. "Not you, him." He indicated the half-asleep Neo. "Just put this near his nose and stand back. You can put a bit into his mouth if you want," Verne added.

Ted reached out and took the mouldy bread from Verne, holding it between his index finger and thumb.

"You found this on the breakfast table?" he asked.

"Nah, I found it in the dumpster behind the hotel," Verne said, smiling. "I've liked to forage in dumpsters since I was four. I do it whenever we go to the future. Dad told me to stop that disgusting habit, but I always thought it was fun, 'cause you never know what you'll find in a dumpster. I found this bread yesterday, and I thought it looked interesting, so I kept it."

"Okay, dude."

Neo appeared to have fallen asleep again. Ted stuck the toast in front of his nose.

Neo sniffed it and mumbled something about an Aunt Beatrice.

Ted stifled a giggle as he slowly dipped a mouldy corner into Neo's partly-open mouth.

Neo mumbled something. He began chewing on the bread, and Verne gave an explosive snort of laughter.⁹

Then the taste of the rotting toast travelled from Neo's taste buds to his brain, and he woke up with a startled shout, causing Ted to drop the toast onto the unfortunate pillows on the ground.

"*What the **** was that?*" Neo demanded. He caught sight of the partly-chewed mouldy toast, looked about to puke, then jumped out of bed and dashed over to the bathroom to wash out his mouth.

Ted and Verne grinned at each other. Verne rescued the toast from the pillows and carried it out to the next room just as Neo re-emerged from the bathroom, water dripping from his face. He went through the interconnecting door, where everyone was having breakfast.

Neo glared at Verne. The boy just smiled back innocently and helped himself to more eggs.

"Are you hungry, dude?" Ted asked.

Neo glared at him. "How did *you* get up so early?" he asked.

"I don't know, dude. Maybe 'cause I spent most of yesterday sleeping in the hospital."

Neo grudgingly decided that Ted had a point there.

**

9th November 2030, Monday
9:24 am
Time train
Hill Valley, California

"Why can't you send him back to the exact time he was taken from?" Marty asked Doc, watching as he set the time circuits on the train.

"It's too risky, Marty. As you know, the device that allowed me in 1895 to communicate with you in 1985 set the two computers in sync with each other, such that when one day passed for me in 1895, one day passed for you in 1985."

"Yeah, I know that, Doc, but why..."

"I'm not finished, Marty! So you see, when you were e-mailing me from Kenselton Hotel, time was passing for me, and therefore time was also passing in 1985. If I were to send you or Ted back to the time you were taken, and if you were to access your e-mail account, there is the risk that you might be doing so at the same time that your counterpart of two days ago was accessing it to send me that message regarding your predicament. If our exchange gets accidentally interfered with in any way, the consequences could be disastrous!"

⁹ This whole section from after "Ngh" to 'explosive snort' was written by my brother, with some edits by me.

"Yeah, but I don't think I'll be going onto the Internet when I get back..."

"Marty! You're not thinking eleventh-dimensionally! The e-mails are just one occurrence – many more things could have happened while you were away. Every action influences the space-time continuum in ways that might seem insignificant but which have much more far-reaching effects than you might suppose. Rips were forming in the space-time continuum before you were taken, they were still forming after you were taken, and they are still forming now. Where the fabric of space-time is concerned, time... is not an issue. If you were to go back to the time right after you were taken, you would, in effect, be travelling into the past, where anything you do has the potential to change what happened as you know it."

Marty looked more bewildered than anything. "How long has it been since I left?"

"From what I've calculated last night, as of now – 9:26 am, you have been away from your home for a grand total of fifty-eight hours and fifteen minutes."

Marty gave a soft whistle. "Wow. But... what would I tell my parents when they ask me where I've been? What if they've called up the police or... or something..."

For a moment, Doc stared out of the open train door, where several metres away Neo and Verne argued over three ice cream cones as Ted watched them in amusement. Doc then turned his gaze back to Marty and fixed his eyes on the teen. "Marty," he said. "I think that it may be time for your parents to learn the truth."

Marty stared at his friend, a look of absolute flabbergastation on his face as Doc's words slowly sank in. "What?" he asked, as the author glared at the red squiggly line under the word 'flabbergastation' and decided that the Microsoft Word spell check was evil.

Emmett nodded. "You can't hide it from them forever, Marty. And I think they have a right to know. You owe them your existence, after all."

Marty took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"Well..." he said. "You're the doc, Doc."

Chapter Thirteen

22nd December 1985, Sunday, 9:30 am
Hill Valley, California

Police officer Michael R. Gale shook his head in despair as he entered the police car. His colleague entered the side seat, and Gale started the engine.

Kids these days, he thought, as the car moved down the street towards the main road. *They're always going missing... 'Disappeared'. Yeah, right. The way that blonde kid said it, it was as though Ted Logan just vanished into thin air...*

Gale gave a dry chuckle. *I bet they'll find him tomorrow, wandering around some field and claiming that aliens abducted him... It'll probably go into one of those kooky UFO newsletters. SpaceWatch, or something like that...*

Then three sonic booms broke the air and Gale nearly sent the car careening into a bush. Slamming on his brakes, he yanked the door open and leapt out just in time to see a colourful train fly out of nowhere.

Mouth hanging open, he stared transfixed at it as the other policeman came out to see what had happened.

"It's the aliens," Gale mumbled. "They've come to get me..."

Then he fainted, and Gale knew no more.

Several metres away, the train came to land and its five passengers got out. "What am I going to tell them if they ask where I've been, dude?" Ted asked.

Marty shrugged. "Anything. If you mess it up, we'll just wipe their memory and you can start over..."

"Just tell them the truth," Doc interrupted. "There's no point in making it any more complicated than necessary."

Neo walked over and pointed down the road. "There's a police car over there," he said. "I think they saw us coming, because it looks like one of the policemen has fainted..."

"Cool!" Verne yelled, and was about to run over and take a look when Doc held him back.

"Don't go there, Verne. Hopefully they'll think we were just a hallucination and forget about us."

"Which one's the house?" Marty asked Ted.

The other teen gestured towards the one on the left, and they started walking. "That one," he said, then fell silent again, wondering if his father had been called up, and if so, just how he was going to tell him that he'd just spent the past two days in a universe where he was fictional. It would probably be more believable to say that the little – or big – green men had zapped him up into their spaceship and told him that the Earth was about to be bulldozed to make way for an interstellar bypass.

Neo came up to the teen's side as the group entered the driveway. "They'll believe you," he said quietly. "You've got three witnesses, excluding Verne. And if they don't believe you... they'll have to explain me." Neo paused. "And yeah... we've always got that memory-wiping thing."

Ted slowed to a stop in front of the locked door and hesitated, then rang the doorbell. Neo stepped back to join the other four.

Seven seconds passed, then the sound of the door being hurriedly unlocked reached their ears. It opened, and a sleep-derived man stood in the doorway, staring in stunned astonishment at his missing son.

"Dad..." the teen began, when his father came to his senses, loudly.

"*Where the h*** have you been, young man?*"

"Uh..."

From inside the house, Bill Preston ran to the doorway, and his face broke into a grin as he saw his best friend. "TED!" he yelled. "Dude, where'd you go? ...Did the aliens get you? That would've been most triumphant..."

Captain Logan looked faintly miffed at having his conversation interrupted.

Ted just grinned. "Nah, it wasn't the aliens, dude. Some totally bodacious dude from another universe had this most egregious machine that could transport things from other dimensions, so he grabbed me over and..."

"Ted, this is serious!" his father cut in. "There are *police* out there now, searching for y..."

"It's true," Neo said suddenly.

For the first time, Ted's father and Bill noticed the other four humans standing in the driveway.

It didn't take very long for Neo to realise that there were suddenly a whole lot of people – inclusive of Lewis, who had come to see what all the commotion was about – staring at him.

Uncomfortable, Neo turned his gaze to the ground and started being fascinated with the gravel. It made interesting swooshy sounds when he moved his shoe in it. They didn't have gravel in his world.

Neo's eyes flicked up momentarily. Everyone was still staring at him. *Who'd they think I am, Elvis?* he thought. It freaked him out, so he turned his attention back to the nice friendly gravel and wondered if it would be friends with him.

There was a moment of silence. Then...

"I think... you should all come in," Captain Logan said slowly.

Neo wished they would all stop staring at him.

**

Captain Logan called up the police, and explained that there was no more need to go searching for Ted because he had just arrived. This call took longer than expected, because for some reason the police officer on the other end kept babbling on about aliens coming down from the sky. He got the message in the end, however, and that was settled.

"Right," Ted's father said, putting down the phone and sitting down. "Now tell me everything."

The travellers glanced at each other.

"It's a long story," Marty said.

"We have a lot of time."

"Well..." Marty began. "It all started with this device that Doc here built..."

They took it in turns to contribute bits to the story, filling in the gaps that each other missed, or telling what the events had been in the different universes. Now and then Marty had to backtrack and explain about the time machine and why Doc had been living in the late nineteenth century in the first place.

There were several interruptions, several laughs, several traumatised looks, and time crawled slowly towards lunch. Marty occasionally glanced nervously at his out-of-sync watch, realised it was pointless, and looked at the wall clock instead. Every minute that passed meant another minute of George and Lorraine McFly wondering about his whereabouts. He didn't want to call them up on the phone; they would probably make him go home right away and forbid him from going with Doc to send Neo home, and Marty didn't want that.

"...so they sent me back," Ted finished.

There was silence for a while.

"But what about the green bottles, dude?" Bill asked.

His friend blinked. "What?"

"Apparently someone sent several cartons of empty green bottles to Bill and told him to pass them to you," Captain Logan said. "A hundred of them, from some company called Special Bottle Deliveries."

Ted just looked more bewildered. "Never heard of 'em."

"Seems like they've heard of you."

"What am I supposed to do with a hundred green bottles?" Ted asked.

Bill grinned. "You could line them up on a wall and make them accidentally fall..."

Neo muttered something and buried his face in his hands. Bill glanced at him and his eyes narrowed. "What's that thing at the back of your head, dude?"

Neo looked up in exasperation. "Look..."

"Can I stick my finger in it?"

"NO!"

Marty cleared his throat. "Ah... I think we'd better get going," he said. "I want to be home by lunch, and we've still got to send Neo back..."

"Yeah."

They stood up and exchanged various goodbyes and good luck wishes. Neo shot a look at the clock. It was past eleven; pity they couldn't stay for lunch. After this, it would be back to subsisting on gooey white stuff on the ol' *Nebuchadnezzar*... no more pizza, no more ice cream...

"Neo?"

He turned. "Yeah?"

Ted hugged him, then pulled back and smiled. "Bye, Neo."

A thought struck Neo, and he reached into his pocket. Taking out the really cool sunglasses case, he handed it to Ted. "You can have this," he said. "I won't need them any more."

With awe, Ted received the case and opened it. The pair of really cool sunglasses looked up at him, the really cool sunglasses cloth folded neatly under them.

"Thanks, dude!" he said earnestly.

Neo gave a wan smile. "Goodbye."

And the travellers left the house and walked out to the time train, one member less.

**

It is perhaps enough to say that things all went well on that second trip to Zion. The time train entered the underground city at the same time they had previously left it, when the sentinels were gone but the hole still there. They went back in time to slightly over sixty hours from when Neo was taken, and got hold of someone who helped them contact the *Nebuchadnezzar* and inform the ship of Neo's whereabouts.

Everyone involved was sworn to secrecy. The need for memory-wiping never arose.

Marty, Doc and Verne left Neo at Zion to wait for the *Neb* to arrive, and they took off in the train for Hill Valley, 1985, landing outside Marty's home at 9303 Lyon Estates.

The hiss of depressurised air filled the cabin as Marty stared wistfully out of the windows. Doc slid open the door of the locomotive, and they got off.

The teen turned to face his house, where it stood beneath the bright afternoon sky. The car was in the driveway. His family was in the house, waiting for him. Slowly, he walked up the driveway, Doc and Verne following behind.

He was home. After so long, he was finally home, but for some reason he didn't feel as happy as he thought he should have been. Too many things had happened in the last two or three days, and Marty didn't know if he would ever be able to continue his life the way he had lived it before everything started.

Maybe out there, somewhere, all this was just some movie and there were people watching him even now as he made his way to the door and rang the doorbell, watching as Dave McFly answered the door and yelled for his parents to come.

"Marty!" Lorraine gasped. "Where have you been?"

The teenager took a deep breath. "Mom... Dad... there's something I gotta tell you. Oh, and here's Doctor Brown, and that's his younger son, Verne..."

He told them everything, from Doc's construction of the time machine to his latest dimensional travels. The less necessary parts were summarised or skipped over. Doc verified anything that needed verifying, and Marty kind of enjoyed the looks of jealousy on his sibling's faces at several points of the long story. As for his mother, Lorraine looked considerably aghast when it was revealed that the 'Calvin Marty Klein' she had kissed in 1955 was actually her own son.

"So you're saying that this is all a movie?" Dave asked incredulously when Marty finished his tale.

"Yeah," his younger brother replied. "In another universe."

Dave's eyes darted around the ceiling, suddenly overcome with the feeling that he was being watched. George and Lorraine just looked mostly stunned, and continued looking mostly stunned after Doc had shown them the time train and got in with Verne to leave for their home.

"Doc... will I ever see you again?" Marty asked softly, looking up at his friend for what might be the last time in a long while.

Emmett smiled. "Probably."

The door closed, the train lifted off, and Marty watched as it accelerated to eighty-eight miles per hour and vanished in a burst of electricity, leaving behind it a pair of fire trails that dissipated after several seconds.

Back in the house, Lorraine finally broke the uneasy silence. "... think it's time for dinner," she said, and headed off to the kitchen as she tried to digest all that Marty had told her.

"You were Darth Vader?" George asked Marty, when Dave and Linda had gone.

"Yeah."

"That... always puzzled me for a long time," George admitted. "When *Star Wars* came out, I thought I had somehow managed to predict the future." He gave a nervous laugh.

Marty smiled.

Just like that, it was all over. All that remained to hint at the strange events of the past month or so were a missing towel, scraps of wool on his bedroom floor, broken guitar strings and an uncertain promise of return from Doc.

And that's about where it all ends. In Neo's universe, the *Nebuchadnezzar* finally arrived some time in the middle of the night to pick him up. As promised, no record was made of its arrival, and no record was made of its departure. It was as though it had never happened.

Neo and Trinity were reunited on the ship. He didn't say much about what had happened, giving minimal details, until Trinity mentioned the green bottles.

"What green bottles?" Neo asked.

"A hundred of them were delivered to the ship, addressed to you," Trinity said. "They were from some company called Special Bottle Deliveries."

"What... Ted got that too."

"Who's Ted?"

"My evil twin," Neo replied, rushing off to his cabin to see just what the green bottles Trinity had been talking about were.

He saw them, lying innocently in their cartons by his bed. "What am I supposed to do with a hundred green bottles?" he asked no one in particular.

"You could try stacking them up on a wall," Trinity suggested, looking very serious.

"Yeah, and watch them accidentally fall," Neo muttered darkly. "If I ever hear that infernal song again, I swear I'll..."

"You'll what?" Trinity asked, sounding faintly amused.

"Never mind."

Neo didn't want to admit it, but he missed Ted. And Marty, and Doc, and Frank, and even Verne and Keith. He missed lounging around a hotel room, missed Liz falling on his head, missed impersonating an actor and getting fourteen ice creams in return, missed the sound of the sonic booms that accompanied each trip in the time train, missed the way that for a moment in his life, there had been something different from what he was used to, something to break apart the bleakness of his existence.

But it was all over now.

It was time for him to face the future. A future written out by two brothers in another universe. A future in which, according to Verne, Neo was to die.

But the future was always changing. The future was what you made of it.

There was always hope.

...Besides, Neo thought, fingering the sugar packets still in his pocket, *mealtimes are looking up.*

EPILOGUE

From - i_see_dead_people@yahoo.com
To - futureboy85@hillvalley-online.com
Subject: Hey.

Hi Marty.

I'm not sure if this e-mail will reach you, but I'm there's no harm trying.

Just wanted to say that it's been nice knowing you. I guess we'll never get to meet again, because if we do, it means there's something wrong with the space-time continuum and that wouldn't be a good thing.

I hope the rest of you got back safely. Now we can just forget the whole thing ever happened, huh? You can just delete this when you're done reading it and pretend none of it ever happened. Maybe it might be a good idea to do that. It's not healthy to keep questioning reality. But it's been an interesting past few days which kind of put everything in a whole new perspective. It's strange to think that perhaps, somewhere out there, all those movie characters are real people. I'll never be able to watch another movie the same way ever again.

I'll miss you, kid. I'll miss all of you. Give my regards to Ted if you ever see him around.

Yours truly,
- Frank Bannister

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

Marty,

This will be the last e-mail I'm sending to you before I leave the space-time continuum alone to heal itself as best as it can.

DO NOT e-mail anybody from my family or another universe from now on. It will interrupt and possibly undo that healing process.

If you want to contact me or my family, wait until Saturday next week.

We're moving back to the future. See you then.

- Your friend in time,
Dr. Emmett L. Brown

**

If there's one thing about interdimensional friendships, it's that they are usually not a good idea. It's not that there's anything wrong with them, specifically, but more that such friendships can never last. There will come a time, usually too soon, when you have to say the final farewell and depart with the knowledge that you are never, ever, ever going to see those friends again. Ever. They may as well have never existed, no more than characters you see on a movie screen.

In normal circumstances, even if a good friend of yours is going off to stay permanently on the other side of the world, there is still always the chance, however slim, that you might meet each other again some time in the future.

In less normal circumstances, even if your best friend decides to go live his life, say, in the late nineteenth century, you can still get together now and then and go save the universe or something like that.

But where the fabric of space-time is concerned, some things are final.

With the exception of Marty and Ted, who lived in the same state in the same country on the same planet in the same time in the same universe, the four of them never saw each other again.

Unless I decide to write a sequel, whereupon you can forget that last sentence.

There's nothing much left to be said, really.

Luke Skywalker, Zeran Laivon and Tasel Seryt would spend quite a while together wandering the woods of the Nexus in search of the elusive Babel, occasionally departing from their quest to embark on adventures in other worlds.

Frank Bannister would spend his life subsisting mostly on free pizzas. While out walking one day, he stumbled across a dead shepe and took its ghooste as a pet. He named it Mike. Eddie never took too kindly to it, and was often seen sulking on his Chesterfield sofa.

The sheep that left Marty's room finally wandered off and fell into Eastwood Ravine. A few hundred years later, several archaeologists were very surprised to discover a sheep skeleton there, along with what looked like the remnants of a towel.

Dem could now and then be spotted popping up in various universes to help people out when it seemed that there was no hope left. Slowly but surely, he is still tearing the space-time continuum up.

Bill and Ted lived happily ever after. Due to the events of the past few days, however, history changed such that in their universe, the Wyld Stallyns never became anything more than a regular band whose members couldn't play too well. But they were fine with that. In the future, Marty would occasionally come visit them, or vice versa, and they would talk, and they would remember the events of early December 1985.

As for Marty, it didn't take him long to get over the whole issue of being fictional in another universe. He decided that whenever he had the feeling he was being watched, he would just go and do something that no film producer in his or her right mind would ever think of filming; such as spending long minutes huddled in a dark closet and singing about green bottles.

And everything appeared to be fine, everything appeared to be normal.

Until Christmas morning three days later, when there was a knock on the door.

Marty answered it to find a young deliveryman standing there.

"Hi, are you Marty McFly?"

"Yeah."

"I've got a delivery for you... if you'd just sign here..."

Marty picked up the pen on the clipboard and scribbled his signature, then took the light rectangular package from the man. "Thanks."

The delivery guy smiled. "Merry Christmas."

The teen smiled back. "Yeah, you too. Have a nice day."

"Will do."

The man turned and left for his van, and it was only as Marty watched him enter it that he noticed the words printed at the side of the vehicle:

SPECIAL BOOK DELIVERIES (We do bottles, too!)

Marty felt a sudden chill run down his spine. He stared at the package in his hand, as though expecting it to blow up any moment... but it just stayed put, looking innocently up at him. Distantly, he heard Dave yelling at him to shut the door and quit letting all the heat out.

Marty closed the door, then ran to his room, filled suddenly with a strange feeling of dread. Locking his bedroom door, he sat on his bed and fingered the package. It felt normal, felt booky, nothing out of the ordinary.

Marty tore away the brown packaging to reveal a paperback book. He glanced at the title, and his blood ran cold.

'Lucky Man: A Memoir by Michael J. Fox'.

If the teen had been in the right state of mind to do so, he might have rushed to the window to see if he could catch a glimpse of the delivery van.

If he had, he would have seen the van reach the end of the road and vanish in a colourful ripple of light, back to the universe from whence it came.

Some things are never meant to be explained.

It took Marty some time to recover from the shock of his Christmas present. He checked the back of the book and the first few pages, but it was clean, with no message whatsoever that might have given a clue as to who had sent it to him.

So Marty did the only thing he could.

He opened the book.

And he read.

**

If you were to look several years into the future, you might see a young man named Marty McFly graduating from high school. A few years later he would marry his girlfriend, Jennifer Parker, have two kids named Marty Jr. and Marlene, lead a career as a successful rock star and retire one day, rich and happy.

Maybe that would happen. Maybe not. Always in motion, the future is.

For now, Martin Seamus McFly is just another teenager approaching his eighteenth year of life. He sits on his bed in his locked bedroom in 9303 Lyon Estates, reading a book that he should never have come by. Soon his parents will call him to get out of there and join the rest of the family, and when the Christmas celebrations are over, he would go back to his room, and he would continue reading the memoir of an actor from another universe. Several days later, when he's done, he will store the book at the bottom of a locked drawer, next to a framed picture of him and his best friend standing by a huge clock with the words 'Partners in Time' written below the photograph next to a date from the nineteenth century. And he will go on with life as usual, only now with the knowledge that he and his story are famous.

Cut to New Zealand, where Frank Bannister munches on his dinner of free pizza by the dim glow of his kitchen lamp. His pet shepe ghooste wanders over to him, baaing softly, and Frank reaches out a clean hand to stroke its ectoplasm. Outside the kitchen and down the hallway stretches out a staircase leading to the labyrinthine upper floors, which not that long ago had been the place of two guys' lost wanderings. Frank stays alone. He likes it best that way; just him and his dead pals.

Several realities away and several miles down, a dark-haired man sits on his bed, flipping through a sheaf of papers in his hand. Next to him on the bed lies an opened package with another stack of bound papers inside. The title on the topmost sheet reads 'Matrix: Reloaded' and on the torn brown paper wrapping is printed an address next to the words *'Special Script Deliveries: We do books and bottles too!'*

His name is Neo, and he doesn't intend to die just yet. He will, eventually, finish reading both scripts, which appeared mysteriously in his cabin one day. Reading, planning, hoping. He has to read them, because he has to know.

He knows there has to be a way to give the story a different ending. Because there always is a choice.

"Do you believe in fate, Neo?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life."

And that's why he keeps on reading.

Somewhere near Marty, in cosmic terms, another teenager rolls over in bed. He looks almost identical to Neo, just twenty years younger, in need of a haircut, and with what seems to be a perpetual look of amusement on his face. Ted sleeps now, in the silence of the night... dreaming perhaps of the other worlds he had visited, once upon a space-time continuum.

Liz lives.

*Then the wheels of time stop turning
All you know just fades away
Just a dream, a passing shadow
Is what's left of yesterday.*

*Your whole world slips out beneath you
Truth and fiction both the same
But in the darkness where none wander
Someone's telling you your name.*

*It's a road not often travelled
Every bend holds things anew
Keep your eyes fixed on the future
For its eyes are fixed on you.*

*Do not tarry, do not stumble
Though unknowns lie straight ahead
There's a place out there that's hidden
Where all destinies are made.*

*At the ending, home is waiting
How the stars shine bright tonight
Soon the journey will be over
Everything will be all right.*

*Still you lie in bed and wonder
How the final story ends
Yet the future is a mystery
Only no one understands.*

THE END

The story, characters and events depicted in this story are fictitious.

...Believe what you will.

Afterword

This story was started in the year when Michael J. Fox was forty-two years old; it was finished on the exact day when Keanu Reeves turned forty-two years old. I don't know if there's any cosmic significance in that, but there's something oddly fitting and satisfying about it nonetheless.

This novel is dedicated to the memory of the late Douglas Noel Adams (11th March 1952 – 11th May 2001), the late creator of the only five-part trilogy in the world – *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. May he rest in peace.

In the third and last year of writing this novel, I found out that the idea of the Nexus apparently already existed, and that quite a few people knew about it. I would like to say that the Nexus featured in this story is fully the creation of my brother and I, and it is in no way affiliated with that other Nexus.

As I have no other way of knowing whether or not anyone will read this fic, I would really appreciate it if you could e-mail me at starwarsisnotdead@gmail.com, whether or not you loved it or hated it, just to let me know that at least this novel is being read and is not stagnating away on the Internet on a free web host that refuses to give free members site traffic reports for individual files. Thanks.

May the Force be with you.

- The Author
2nd September 2006

Afterword Reloaded

Strangely enough, the word 'afterword' doesn't seem to officially exist in the English language, although it's listed on Dictionary.Com.

Either way, here's my second afterword for this novel, three months after the previous one, because this is the real end of it – after going through beta-reading and countless edits and minor changes – and I need closure before I print this out in Adobe Acrobat and cannot make any more changes.

It's been more than three years since I first started writing this. It started out as a story entitled 'They've Got Mail' in the *Back to the Future* fandom, composed entirely of e-mails with the intention to get it up to only five chapters. It was published on FanFiction.Net one day in May 2003, with the novelisation started some months after. I was thirteen then; as of now, I've recently passed my seventeenth birthday.

So this story has been with me throughout my teenage years, and has since become an integral part of it. I spent many days and nights thinking up new chapters while I was supposed to be paying attention in class, or before falling asleep, agonising over plot holes, having long discussions with my brother on various aspects of the fic, and so on. Mood swings and different phases of my life got reflected in the chapters I was writing at that time, the novel in its entirety a metaphorical memoir of those years. I still have the original handwritten copy of most of it, scribbled on all sorts of paper surfaces from old worksheets to torn out pages of notebook paper to the back of classmates' school EduSave forms (by accident).

My life has changed a lot since then. In the course of writing this novel I left secondary school and entered junior college; went through the 'O' Level examinations; made new friends, lost contact with others; got sent to hospital several times for various reasons; and became a fan of Keanu Reeves and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

This story has also changed a lot since then – some 54,000 words worth of deleted scenes. The chapters of the novel itself were written and rewritten out of order and arranged into proper sequence when they were done; kind of like a movie, actually.

And now it's all over, and it's hard to move on, because writing and editing this novel has been such a staple in my life. I'll miss the story, I'll miss the characters, both those whom I created and those whom I borrowed.

I'll miss the people I met through writing this novel and *They've Got Mail*, with all your support and reviews that kept me writing.

This novel will never win a literary prize or anything; it was written for the Internet and will in all likelihood stay on the Internet. It's more of a personal accomplishment, being my first novel, and maybe one day in future I'll look back on it as this weird thing I wrote when I was young and obsessed with science-fiction trilogies. Maybe it wouldn't seem that great any more after several years have passed, and maybe it'll embarrass me and make me pretend that I never wrote it.

But meanwhile there are still other stories to be told, there are still other ideas waiting to come. So here ends this novel and this part of my life, because it's time to move on to start another.

- The Author
19th December 2006

Acknowledgments

This story is written with thanks to the following:

1) The original creators of all the fandoms included in this fic: Robert Zemeckis & Bob Gale, Chris Matheson & Ed Solomon, Larry & Andy Wachowski, George Lucas, Peter Jackson & Fran Walsh, and Douglas Adams. A million thanks for just allowing fan fiction writers to play in your worlds.

2) All my readers and reviewers on FanFiction.Net for support, encouragement, ideas and contributions for *They've Got Mail*. You were what kept me going the many times I felt like giving up. Thanks for everything.

3) My brother, for, well, a lot of things: including giving me ideas, writing the occasional paragraph or *Guide* entry, the long conversations we have about our Nexus multi-verse, and much more. This fic would never turned out the way it did if not for you.

4) My beta reader, Rachel, aka Kleenexwoman of fanfiction.net for beta-reading, making suggestions, and generally being a good friend. Thanks.

5) My second beta-reader, discord-harmony from LiveJournal, who test read the final draft of this fic, but whose feedback I couldn't get in time due to time constraints. (Sorry.)

6) The members of the *Back to the Future* forums at BTTF.com, from where I gained most of my knowledge of the BTTF universe. Thanks also to the LiveJournal community little_details, which helped me out on things such as what coftea might taste like.

7) Also thanks to Eternal Density, Scap, Kackie L. Saunders and HyperCaz of fanfiction.net for support and help – fic related or otherwise –, among other things.

8) All the actors whose performances I based the characters in this story on.

9) Mary Jean Holmes and Kristen Sheley – probably the two best *Back to the Future* fan fiction writers out there – whose stories inspired me to write.

10) A second thanks to the late Douglas Adams for inventing the Improbability Drive in the *Hitchhiker's* series – the device that made this whole story possible.

11) And last but not least, to Liz, the lizard that fell off my bedroom ceiling and landed on my head – this fic would be a whole lot different if that never happened.

Apologies

This story is also written with the author's sincere apologies to:

1) Michael Andrew Fox, Keanu Charles Reeves, Mark Richard Hamill, Douglas Noel Adams and McDonald's.

2) *They've Got Mail* readers on FanFiction.Net whose e-mail contributions did not make it into the final cut of this fic. I initially tried to include as many e-mails as possible, but they made the story choppy, sidetracked from the plot and occasionally contradicted each other. In the end, I only included those essential to the plot development in some way or other, and some others just for fun. As it is, this fic only has at most one e-mail from any one reviewer; some of you were not represented at all, but I equally appreciate all your contributions.

3) Creators and general staff of The Internet Movie Database. IMDB.com is still, and has always been, one of my favourite websites. (Though I still think it would be nice if you got faster servers, although there has been an improvement.)

4) Liz. Sorry for screaming at you.

