

# Paige out of Time

## A Case Study

### Kronosis Management Case Study

Paige Jenkins — Traveler Active from the Year 2019 (in this timeline)

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#### Introduction

This case study was first developed in the year 2100 for a local CHRONOS management course. Our purpose was to educate employees around the onboarding of travelers and to outline our company mission in response to public concern regarding the safety of time travel, particularly time travel for a profit. We hope to outline here a case that depicts early problems in the time travel industry, and how we've come to fix them. New employees are encouraged to engage with this material in order to more fully understand how our company has developed, and why it matters that we protect our travelers and honor our clientele.

This case has been organized using general time terms (the present, before, a while back, etc.) to clarify its arc through the timeline. The commercial environment described was very typical of what existed for travelers in the year 2019. The problems are not difficult to spot, but can you see why they happened? And what was done to fix them?

The case study will be followed by a set of questions organized by education management. You may use the case study and questions as you wish, subject to copyright limitations.

#### The Present

Occasionally, Paige fell through time. She didn't like to disclose her condition. It was a bit embarrassing that she couldn't stick to one timeline without help, and took such effort to explain. So she'd never told Nick. They had only been friends for a year, and besides, they had better things to talk about, like the terms of their newly sexual relationship, and the way that sex

<sup>1</sup> Timeslip is a common symptom of Kronosis, an umbrella term covering several types of chronic time conditions, including but not limited to: ability to time travel, ability to sense people through time, and (in one most notable case) the ability to see into other timelines entirely. It is uncertain whether there are more variations on the disease.  
felt.

“Nick, oh my God,” Paige gasped. She leaned back to dig her fingers into his thighs as he moved.

“Yeah? That good?”

Paige grinned up at the ceiling, then looked down at Nick. He was grinning back, red in the face with his hands on her hips. “Yeah,” she said. She arched forward, pressed her fingers against his jawline. “Yeah,” she whispered. Her breath was warm on his lips. And then she was gone. Not gone to passion, just gone. Out of thin air. Out of Nick’s lap. Fifty years back into 1969. It was a familiar night. When Paige slipped, this was almost always when she ended up.<sup>2</sup> Her first designated time travel had been to the day of the moon landing. She could remember that trip with stark clarity. The way things looked, felt, smelled. No wonder she kept falling back to it.

She was standing in someone’s backyard. A house loomed over the patchy lawn, with sliding doors that opened onto a living room full of people, all jostling and murmuring. Paige heard the staticky drone of an old TV. Well, a new TV for this time. Paige took in her surroundings. Beyond a picket fence, a drying line sagged with laundry. As Paige clambered to her feet and made her way across the wet grass, she heard a collective gasp, but she didn’t look

<sup>2</sup> Many travelers say that when navigating the folds of timespace, the time is much more difficult to get a hold of than the space. We all know time is tricky. Every human is bound to complain about it at some point: it either moves too fast or too slow or doesn't seem to move at all. That's why we write these case studies, to better understand what we're dealing with.

up. It wasn't about her. Paige couldn't always control her trips but she did have a superb sense of time. She knew it was 3:56 AM on July 20th, 1969. <sup>3</sup>

She listened carefully as she stepped up to the fence. It was relatively low. She placed her hands between its spikes and began to hoist herself over. As she went, Paige murmured along with Neil Armstrong on the television: "One small step for man..."

She missed the next line in a sudden tumble over the fence and found herself sprawled on the neighbor's lawn. This one was pretty and green. Less brown patches. The house was dark, probably because the family had gone next door to watch the moon landing with their friends. Paige made her way over to the clothesline. She couldn't hear the television from this distance. She took her time picking out a dress from an array of damp options and picked the one that felt the least starched. It hung too wide on her frame, but that would have to do. This wasn't the first time Paige had fallen through time unprepared. Not even the first time she'd done it naked. But it still left her exhausted. Paige looked up at the moon and took a deep breath.

She hadn't looked up the first fifty or so times she slipped. It had seemed appropriate to stand at the back of a crowd and watch alongside everyone else as the moon's surface played out in grainy black and white. Eventually she realized that once she got back to the future, she could

watch it remastered, and perhaps it was more interesting to stare at the actual moon while the men were still up there. At least it would give her something to do until she got her strength

<sup>3</sup>Another side effect of any form of Kronosis is an incredibly keen sense of time. As you might imagine, this can be excruciating. To notice each moment as it passes, recognize every tick of the clock. back. So she watched the sky, and listened to make sure no one would come outside and notice her, and wondered about Nick. He would probably be worried.



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**A While Back**

Paige Jenkins sat in the lobby of her place of work, reading over the familiar poster on <sup>4</sup> the wall.

She read it once, and again, and again. Then she let her mind wander as her eyes drifted

<sup>4</sup> Many companies have capitalized on the existence of Kronosis patients. In exchange for regular treatment and assistance in managing their conditions, travelers are asked to complete research for those wealthy enough to pay.

off to trace the familiar blue trim along the wall. She tugged on her necklace. The bench she sat

<sup>5</sup> on was usually reserved for customers waiting on appraisals, not employees. But she wasn't going to be an employee for much longer. She was trying to get used to the idea.

“Paige!” Lacey called. She had only recently taken up the receptionist position, and she was good at it. She kept things well organized and her smile was almost as disarming as her wide, observant eyes. “The boss will see you now.”

Paige stood up and dusted off her pants. They were new. It felt strange to walk around CHRONOS in clothes she owned rather than something the agency had provided her. As she made her way past the front desk she quirked her lips in an awkward smile at her friend. Lacey offered an encouraging look. Paige made her way over to the elevator bank and used her key card to get in the employee car.

An hour later, Paige had retired from her work with CHRONOS. She lost her pay, her agency-assigned housing, and any assists for travel through time. This included clothes, language and history education, and access to spotters . She was sent back to the lobby in the guest <sup>6</sup> elevator. She paused long enough to give Lacey a hug. Outside, her hand went to her throat to

<sup>5</sup> One perk of working for time travel agencies is called a “tether.” These are objects that anchor time travelers to their home era. Personal tethers were very expensive in the early days of our industry, and most travelers relied on company-provided supplies.

<sup>6</sup> Along with tethers, travelers work with agency-trained spotters. These are people with a minor case of Kronosis that does not allow them to move through time, but rather to sense other people as they do. With proper mindfulness training, spotters can reach out through time and draw travelers back to their home era as needed.

feel for her necklace, but she’d handed that over too. She stuffed her fists into the pockets of her coat.

## **The Present**

As Paige made her way up the street in her own era, she knew it had been exactly seven hours since she left. She hadn’t been able to land quite where she intended, so she walked on sore feet, under the weak rays of early morning sun. She paused to retrieve the spare key she left taped to the bottom of a birdhouse and flexed her toes against the cement sidewalk. Mud was caked from the soles of her feet to her calves. When she got into her apartment, a man was sitting on her couch, dressed in slacks and a smart sweater, with one leg crossed over the other.

“Dalton?”

His perfect posture tilted on a relieved sigh. “Oh, good. You’re back.”

She opened her mouth to respond but was cut off by another, incredibly enthusiastic,

“Paige!”

Paige blinked and waved her fingers feebly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Nathan in this century.

Nathan Reedy was a visitor from the future, but he always carried a pocket watch. He <sup>7</sup> didn't need it, and Paige had never seen him take the thing out. She thought he did it to try and throw people off. To seem anachronistic, or silly, or confused. Not that it worked. He sparkled as

<sup>7</sup> There are some rules and regulations surrounding time travel. For example, travelers visiting from the future are not permitted to speak of the time they come from, as it may be shocking to those in the current era. This is because there is no known ability to travel forward through time, only back.

he sat atop her kitchen counter, jiggling his feet in their over-shined dress shoes, twirling his watch's chain. He was older than Paige, closer to Dalton's age, but he had the energy of a child.

When she was still very young and confused, Paige had sometimes thought Nathan was a figment of her imagination.

She turned back to Dalton. "Where's Nick?"

Dalton waved his hand. "He was a bit shaken up when we arrived, but we had some tea and conversation while we waited for you. It got late, so I sent him home to rest." Paige sighed. She pulled herself together by pulling the fluffiest sweater off the hanger on the back of the door and wrapping her body up. This effectively hid her stolen out-of-time clothes, which made her feel a bit better. "Conversation about what exactly?" "He was quite startled when you disappeared. It didn't help when we came bursting in unannounced. I am sorry for that, by the way."

Paige took in the scene. Her kettle sat on the stovetop. There was an abandoned mug on

the coffee table. Dalton balanced one on his thigh, and Nathan held a third. Her favorite. Nick had given it to her after a trip to Chicago a few months back. She sighed. “Not sorry enough not to do it. Make yourself at home.”

Dalton smiled. “Thank you, Paige. It’s good to see you.”

And the thing that bothered Paige was that she agreed. It was always good to see Dalton. His presence eased her. Instead of admitting that she said, “Wish it were under better circumstances,” and sat down on the couch. She wanted to tuck her feet up underneath herself but didn’t want to smear decades-old mud on her cushions. She picked the extra mug up off the table, still half-full of cold tea. God she was thirsty. She took a sip. “What did you tell Nick?” Dalton shrugged. “Only the truth. He already knew the basics of time travel. He just didn’t know you could do it, or that it could happen so casually.” Dalton was watching Paige now, gentle and searching. She resisted the urge to defend not having warned Nick.

Nathan added, “We told him that he shouldn’t worry too much, your being an incredibly powerful Kronosis patient, second only to one.” Paige rolled her eyes. Nathan leapt up off the counter, sending a stack of books sprawling across the floor in the process. “Don’t sell yourself short!”

Dalton got up to help Nathan collect the books. As he went he said, “He’s right. You always make it back here, to this time and place, without any help. Rare.” Paige frowned. She used to love the way these two moved together. It was impressive, she’d thought, a romance across eras. Still was. But it hurt too. Sure, they were separated by years, but Nathan could move through time freely with the agency’s help. He never had to worry about not making it exactly

where he wanted to go. Paige didn't have that. She thought it must be obvious how difficult it was becoming to find her way back.

“Look, you can go,” Paige said. “You’ve checked up on me. I’m fine.”

“We’re worried about you,” Dalton said.

He had always been sincere, since the first time she met him, when she was a child freshly out of time. One second she was playing in the grass, the next she was on her butt in the middle of a city she didn't recognize, in an era not her own. He had helped her to her feet and dusted off her shoulders. He had told her that even if they couldn't find out when she'd come from, they would make her a place here and now. Back then time travel hadn't exhausted her so much.

She stretched her toes and wondered if Dalton could sense the strain in her body. “Like you said, I made it back safe and sound.”

“I'd like you to come in for a checkup.”

“You want me to or CHRONOS does?”

Dalton's expression was suddenly very tired. He tried to hide it, but Paige could see the stress between his brows, and some part of her took delight in putting it there. “Paige. I understand your reluctance, I do. But I've felt you slip three times this month. It's getting worse. You need a spotter if you want to stay here.”

Paige levelled him with her firmest stare. “Can't you spot me anyway? Then I wouldn't have to go in.”

Dalton shook his head. “Not off the record.” He had the audacity to look apologetic about it. “I know that’s not what you want to hear. I’m sorry.”

Paige sighed. She took another sip of lukewarm tea and muttered, “Not sorry enough to do it.” She got up off the couch. “Give me half an hour to shower and get changed.”

## **Before**

When Paige was young, she wanted to go back home. Back to *when* was the problem. Her mind had been frazzled by that first timeslip. She could hardly remember her parents’ faces, but she remembered having had them. She remembered playing with them. She remembered her name. She tugged on Dalton’s hand and asked him if he could find her family. At the time, he was only nineteen years old. He wasn’t a ward of the agency like Paige, but he had the abilities of a spotter, and his parents had signed him up to volunteer with young travelers in exchange for treatment of his condition. He shook his head, “I’m sorry Paige, that’s not how my ability works.”

She frowned. “But you can feel me, right? My or--or...my aura. Wouldn’t theirs feel like mine?”

Dalton knelt down. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I can feel the auras of travelers, that’s true. But my ability works like yours. You can only move backwards, I can only feel backwards.” Paige understood this rule well enough. Time travelers could only move backwards, so she must have fallen out of the future. And no spotter could help her find her way forward. Her lip began to wobble. “You said our job is to help people learn their stories. What about mine?”

Dalton sighed. “Paige. You’re here now. Your story is here too.”

“I wanna know how it started!”

“I know. But sometimes, we have to start where we are. You get to fill in your own future. How’s that sound?” Dalton had a reputation for being a good spotter. He was calm, well-studied, careful. Most of all he was empathetic, and never asked questions he wasn’t meant to know the answers to. That was what Nathan liked most about him. They loved each other, and Dalton didn’t ask about his partner’s life outside of their interactions in this time. Paige never understood it.

### **The Present**

Actually falling through time never shocked Paige quite as much as the feeling of time falling all over itself in her memories, like it was doing now. Everything in the Agency brought something back. The blue walls were familiar. So was the scent, the sound of the tiles beneath her boots, the way it felt to walk across their polished surface and approach the front desk, which was the same as it had always been. Behind it sat Lacey. Paige blinked hard against the prickle of tears behind her eyes.

Lacey’s face split into a painfully familiar grin. “Paige!” God, Lacey was so bright. She rushed around the desk to pull Paige into a hug. She smelled like gardenia. Paige knew the perfume came out of a special pink bottle, kept in Lacey’s purse and reapplied throughout the day. She had once told Paige that she wanted a signature scent, a scent to evoke memories. Paige breathed in deep. “Hey Lace. It’s good to see you.”

When she pulled back, Nathan was standing a few feet away, smiling wide. Dalton leaned against the desk and scrolled through his emails. Just as he opened his mouth the desk phone rang.

Lacey leaned over to glance at the caller ID. “Oops, one sec. Boss is calling.” She grabbed the phone. “Hello? Of course, I can check. Can I put you on hold? Okay, just a minute.”<sup>8</sup> She settled her shoulders, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

When Dalton called Paige powerful second only to one, what he meant was that she was powerful second only to Lacey. Lacey, with her carefully curated outfits and perfume. Lacey, who could see through all the timestreams at once and hadn’t yet cracked under the knowledge. After a moment with only the sound of the lobby music floating around them, Lacey opened her eyes. She put her hand over the receiver and whispered, “I’m sorry guys, this will take awhile. The information he needs is far away today.”

Dalton nodded as if he could understand timespace the way she did. “We’ll leave you to it.” He stepped away from the desk and Nathan bounded after him. Paige paused to wave goodbye. Lacey blew her kisses and whispered, “Come back later! We’ll catch up!” Lacey knew almost everything, but not what Paige had been up to, or would be up to tomorrow. She could look out sideways into timespace, but not up and down within her own timeline.<sup>9</sup>

As a child, Paige hadn’t been very impressed by this. Sure, Lacey was wise beyond understanding. But at age ten Paige wanted only one question answered. She cornered Lacey and begged her to help, to just think a little bit harder and look. But apparently that wasn’t the way

things worked. Lacey couldn't find Paige's time any better than Dalton. She didn't apologize, not even as Paige sobbed. Lacey processed her emotions just as quickly as everything else her mind

<sup>8</sup>It's important to note that here Lacey is making use of colloquial time expressions rather than referencing her internal Kronosis clock.

<sup>9</sup>Hers was a rare and unique ability across all the timelines, as far as we know. had to handle. It was just another condition of her existence, that sometimes she would disappoint people, make them feel existential and scared. Paige felt bad for her, even as she felt bad for herself.

### **Once,**

Paige asked Lacey, "Do I exist in every timeline?"

Lacey shook her head. "No. But I don't either. Not as myself, not in a way that I can perceive." Lacey's eyes darted over Paige's face, and maybe she could see the existential distress, because she tacked on, "But our matter always exists. The chemicals holding us together. So I guess there are two answers to your question."

That made Paige shiver. She put on a smile anyway. She *had* asked, and sometimes Lacey gave answers that she just had to try not to think about.

### **After That**

Paige was eleven years old and the shine had worn off of time travel. She sat at a conference room table, a young girl with hundreds of missions under her belt and a sizable

amount of money in the bank from completing them.<sup>10</sup>

Take Nathan Reedy. He was in his early twenties, and an absolute stress case. Paige had heard Dalton say so. You couldn't tell by looking at Nathan's face. He was from the shiny future,

<sup>10</sup> It wasn't illegal to pay children to time travel. It was encouraged, considering that controlled travel seemed to lessen the strain of Kronosis on the body. It can be hard to resist the pull of time. and he looked it. But he carried a certain unease. He seemed constantly nervous about saying something he shouldn't. Paige wanted to make him.

She'd had a long week, perhaps a long life. She took on as many missions as Dalton would allow. As her spotter, he was in charge of telling the Agency when she seemed overworked. He had insisted she take this week off. Even her tether couldn't keep her from timeslip if she worked too hard, and did she really want to end up lost in timespace again? So while he was off spotting an adult traveler who only came in occasionally and needed less vigilance, he'd left her with Nathan.

“Do you know the story?”

Nathan blinked at her, owlish. He looked like a person who ought to wear glasses, but he didn't need them. Paige wondered if anyone needed them in the future. He wouldn't be allowed to tell her.

“What story?”

“You know. My story. How I got here.”

Nathan always watched Paige with wide eyes. It was like he didn't know how to talk with

a child.

“You’re from the future,” Paige told him, as if he didn’t know. “I fell out of the future. Maybe you could find out when I’m from.”

Nathan opened his mouth, started to shake his head. Paige knew the rules, but she would make him disappoint her himself, and if he couldn’t, maybe he’d break them for her. When Lacey came through the door, Nathan looked relieved.

### **Sometimes,**

when Paige was feeling down, she’d ask Lacey to tell her a story. They both grew up in CHRONOS. They sat on the roof and she asked. Lacey breathed in nice and deep. <sup>11</sup>

“Okay. Real story or fake?”

Paige stared up at the moon. It was yellowish tonight. “Real.”

Lacey smiled mischievously. “Alright. Real in this timeline, or another?” “Another,”

Paige whispered. That question always made her breath catch. Lacey spun a story about a king with a chariot drawn by mechanical horses being pulled through a nation that billowed steam. She said he was actually benevolent. This was something Paige had begun to understand over the years. In some timelines, power didn’t seem to corrupt. In those timelines there was almost never an Agency. No need, and no desire. Time travelers stayed put. Not all timelines had timeslip either. In some, travelers never got lost.

<sup>11</sup> When Lacey was very young, she required near-constant attention as her mind adjusted to all the timestreams. After that, her family couldn't quite handle some of the things she blurted out, so she remained a ward of CHRONOS alongside Paige.

### **Before**

After being brought into CHRONOS, Paige went years without slipping. Her necklace stayed clasped around her throat, and even if someone had run up to her and pulled it free, her travel was regulated enough that she should have the energy to hold herself still in timespace. And if she didn't, she was sure Dalton would reach out, show her the way back.

At age eighteen, Paige spent a lot of weekends wandering around the city. She would go out, find a nice park or a library or a shop, and then make her way back to CHRONOS. Their building looked like any other office, and was about as fascinating to passersby. Time travel agencies had been around for a while now. Dalton could remember the excitement people had felt when they first started advertising their services. The billboards, the stock prices, the travel packages sold in conjunction with ancestry DNA test kits. But Paige hadn't fallen into this era until a few years after the initial craze.

She stepped through the sliding glass doors, out of balmy summer air and into a wall of air conditioning. She raised her hand to wave to the receptionist, but he was preoccupied. <sup>12</sup>  
“Please.” A woman stood with her hands on the desk. She was leaning forward, looking down

at Greg in his rolling chair. “I just want a meeting with a traveler. Someone will take me on. I can’t pay the fees, but it will be important work. Please.”

Paige made her way across the lobby. Her footsteps echoed on the tile, but the woman’s attention didn’t falter.

<sup>12</sup> At this time the receptionist was a man named Greg Cohen, who went on to have a fascinating career as a traveler. If you’d like to read more about him, we recommend checking out his files from the central database.

Greg looked distressed. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’ve done what I can. We’ll call you if a meeting can be arranged, but company policy states that we can’t take jobs of this scale without proof of future payment.”

Paige was at the elevator now. She didn’t press the button. If she did, it would come within thirty seconds, as always. The woman sighed and Paige felt it in her bones. She heard footsteps and turned around. The woman was leaving. Greg watched her go with a frown on his face. Paige waited ten more excruciating seconds and turned on her heel. “I left something in the coffee shop, I’ll be right back!” She rushed back out into the heat. The woman had made her way down the sidewalk, but she was moving slowly. She had her arms crossed over her chest.

“Excuse me!” Paige called.

The woman kept going.

“Excuse me,” Paige said. “I’m sorry to bother you, I’m with CHRONOS—” The woman whirled around. She looked angry. Paige wasn’t quite sure how to react. She didn’t usually deal with clients, but she had heard from Dalton that people looked into the past for a lot of reasons,

almost all of them having to do with emotions or money. Paige squared her shoulders. “There was a mistake. A miscommunication between the office and the desk. You need a traveler to appraise your case. I can do that.” The woman stared. Her whole face softened. “Oh, thank you. Just one second, thank you.” She rummaged in her purse while Paige waited and tried to look professional, as if this was the part of the job she was used to, as if they trusted her to do more than research. The woman handed her a file. It contained her contact information, her request, and what she could pay. “It’s not much, I’m afraid, but it’s what we could come up with.”

Paige smiled and nodded. “Of course.”

She took the file to her favorite park and read in the shade of a tree. It was incredible. A story with so many unanswered questions. A family whose ancestral home had been ransacked during a wartime raid. They wanted to know what had happened to their great-grandfather, and what had been done with his journals. They wondered if those journals could be recreated through the observation of a traveler. Paige knew they could. She’d spent months on her last case, days of going back to the same room, at the same hour, to copy down a lost piece of music for the collection at a university conservatory.

If she was going to do this, she couldn’t do it with the agency. Paige reached for the clasp of her necklace. When she took it off, the chain felt warm in her hand. She glanced both ways and tucked it underneath a bit of dirt beside a pretty purple flower. She started her work. The job took approximately a month. She did it in between missions, on the weekends, when she wasn’t meant to be traveling. While she had the energy to maintain control, no one noticed.

One day, when she took the necklace off, she fell. She couldn't feel Dalton. He felt her go, but he didn't know when she'd gone. He couldn't draw her back. It took Paige a week to return to 2019, and she felt every fraction of a second tick by on her internal clock. She saw dinosaurs. She saw the black plague. She saw the moon landing, briefly, as always. She was gasping and crying, and she had never felt so free.

Once they got her cleaned up, settled, and seen by a company psychologist, CHRONOS levelled a clear ultimatum: no more freelancing, or she'd lose her job and her benefits. She quit <sup>13</sup> before they could fire her. Before she left, she downloaded as many rejected inquiries as she could.



(Image taken from CHRONOS archives)<sup>14</sup>

## The Present

Paige sat at a conference table with Nathan and Dalton on either side. She felt like a child being chaperoned. She remembered the last time she'd been here. Just her, alone, staring across the table at Mr. Simons. Today, the boss had more grey at his temples, and the same smile as

always.

“It’s good to see your face around here again, Paige.”

<sup>13</sup> A particularly stark issue of the time was to create conditions in which travelers were unable to choose their own missions without jeopardizing their role in the company.

<sup>14</sup> An actual newspaper! On paper! You must be prepared to work with such anachronistic materials during your work with CHRONOS.

He used to come down at lunch time and check on the wards. Paige had always liked him, even as she tendered her resignation.

“Thanks for meeting with me.”

Mr. Simons waved her gratitude away. “Not a problem. Dalton tells me you’re here to discuss your options.”

Paige gripped the seat of her chair. The way she saw it, there weren’t a lot of options.

“She needs a tether,” Dalton said, “Or a regular spotter.”

“Of course, of course, all of us do.” Mr. Simons had gotten his start as a traveler with the agency. He didn’t take many trips these days. “We would be happy to provide you with those basic assists, alongside reinstatement in the research department. You could work part-time. You’re welcome to return to CHRONOS housing. How does that sound?”

It sounded amazing. It sounded safe. She would feel healthy, get her energy back. “Are the benefits dependent on my working exclusively for CHRONOS?”

Mr. Simons tilted his head. “Well, I’m not sure why you’d need our help if you’ve taken on a job with another company.”

Paige wasn't sure what to say. She had remained anonymous in the newspapers for a reason.

And if she admitted what she'd been up to, they would know she stole files. "Thank you.

It's a great offer. Can I take a few days to think about it?"

Mr. Simons hit her with a megawatt smile. "Of course, dear. Take all the time you need!

You know you're always welcome." He swiveled in his chair. "Dalton, can you stay back a moment? I need to discuss your new assignment."

Paige felt her heart twist. She wondered who Dalton spotted for these days. As she left the room, Nathan loped behind her, long and lean, hands stuffed into his pockets. Paige was counting the seconds. It helped her focus. Nathan jingled his watch chain.

"Paige," he said. He had a particular way of speaking. An accent from whatever era he was from. "I don't think you should take the job."

Paige stopped counting. "What?"

"I don't think you should take it."

"Why not?" she asked. She wasn't really expecting him to answer. But she would have thought he would be on Dalton's side here.

"You're doing good work," he said. "You shouldn't come back until they acknowledge that."

"You know?"

"I pieced it together from the articles. Dalton knows too." Nathan shifted from foot to foot, like an agitated tree swaying in the wind. "I'm sure Mr. Simons has some idea." Paige felt the pull of time in her bones.

Nathan reached out and patted her on the shoulder. “Like you said, take a few days, think about it. Let me walk you out.”

**Once,**

Paige asked Lacey, “Do you understand how it all works? Time travel? How you know the things you do?”

Lacey smiled. “I understand as much as I can. I don’t think I could explain it. Time is tricky.”

Paige blew out a breath. “You can say that again.”

“Time is tricky,” Lacey said, “But we need it. It keeps us busy. It structures our lives, the way we conceptualize ourselves. If we didn’t have time, how could we have history? How could we have any stories? They all follow an arc.”

Paige raised an eyebrow. Sometimes she thought Lacey sounded a little high. But believing her always made Paige feel better.

**The Present**

Paige stood outside Nick’s apartment with a potted succulent cradled in her palms. She had uprooted it from her own window box, tucked the little green sprouts into new dirt, and marched next door. The plan ended there. She was beginning to rethink the entire idea when the door swung open.

“Paige,” Nick said. People had been saying her name like that a lot in the last twenty-four

hours. Was everyone so surprised to see her alive and well?

She held out the plant. “This for you. As an apology. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Nick kept staring. Paige felt her cheeks flush. Then he smiled softly and reached out for the plant. He held it up to his eyes and observed its waxy green leaves, taking a step back into his apartment. “Would you like to come in? We can find a place for this.”

The plant took up residence on Nick’s dining table. It sat proud and stout right in the middle, between the tattered woven placemats he had bought for his first apartment back in college. Paige knew this because she had spent plenty of nights at this table, trading off who ordered the take out. Now she sat across from Nick again. There were two major differences. One: he leaned back in his chair to stretch his leg out and hook his ankle around hers. Two: he knew about the Kronosis.

“I really am sorry,” Paige said. “That was just...the worst possible timing.” Nick smiled and huffed a small laugh. He looked off out the window. The sun was starting to dip below the neighboring buildings. “You don’t have to apologize. Not like you did it on purpose.”

Paige frowned. “Still. I should’ve warned you. It happens more when I’m not focused, and you—well, you had me pretty distracted.”

Nick’s smile tilted up. “Yeah?”

Paige found herself smiling back. She nodded.

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Later, they lay next to each other in Nick’s bed. Paige was on her back, staring up at the ceiling, breathing slowly and trying to focus on the seconds instead of her nerves. Nick was on

his side, watching her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Paige sighed. “I’m frustrated with myself.”

“Why?”

“I want to have sex with you. But I don’t want to disappear on you again.”

“We don’t have to have sex.”

“I like having sex.”

Nick sat up. “Me too,” he said. “How can we keep you present?”

Paige turned to look at him. Her hair made soft sounds against the pillow. “What do you mean?”

“You said it doesn’t happen when you’re able to keep present. How can I do that for you?”

Paige raised her eyebrows. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me,” he said. He moved towards her across the bed.

“I don’t know. No one’s ever tried.”

Nick’s expression scrunched up. He moved again, threw one long leg over her hips. He knelt there, looked her in the eyes, and held her face between his palms. “Is this okay?” He waited until she nodded, then said, “I want to try for you.”

It had only been a day, but Paige had missed the way he felt. And she had missed out on the finale. She wanted to be part of it. She wanted him. “Okay,” she breathed, reaching up to wind her arms around his neck. “Let’s try.”

This time, Paige didn't slip during sex. The sex was absolutely amazing. Instead, she slipped on her way out the door the next morning. At least Nick didn't have to see it happen. She had left him with a kiss and sent him into the shower, and she was glad not to worry him.

She found herself on a dusty dirt road. The hour was familiar, and so was the glow of the moon. After her first few slips, she had started buying clothes that blended over time periods. The dress she wore today was inoffensive enough that she didn't need to steal off anyone's clothesline. She just started walking. At the end of the road, she found a familiar row of houses. She followed the sound of murmuring voices to the one with flowers in the front yard. They were much nicer than the patchy grass out back. The front door was propped open, so Paige slipped inside. There was a crowd of people gathered around a small television. None of them noticed her at the back of the room. The sliding glass doors were open so she could feel the wind on her back. She watched the people instead of the screen. The women all wore their hair with bangs and bouffants. People were smoking inside, and the open door did nothing to help the smell. Paige kept scanning. She startled. Nathan stood across the room, staring back.

This had happened once before. The first time she traveled on purpose, Nathan was sent to watch over her. She had hardly noticed him with the distraction of her first mission. This time she began to push through the crowd. Nathan shook his head and pointed towards the front hall.

They met on the porch, underneath the light of the moon and in the scent of flowers. Nathan was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Paige, I want you to have this.” He pulled his pocket watch out. Its gold chain looked so delicate wound between his long fingers. “It will help.”

Paige felt something click into place. “It’s your tether. I can’t take your tether.” Nathan grabbed her hand and pressed the watch into her palm. His hands were clammy. “I’ll be fine.”

He stepped back and reached into his pocket, producing another watch. “They’re easy to come by in my time.” His brow furrowed. “Don’t tell anyone I said that. Anyways, Paige, this one is for you. It’s programmed, see. It’ll help you, and then it will take you home, and you can keep it.”

Paige opened her mouth to respond, but things were already moving. She felt her mind bend, the press of memories newly made, or that never existed, she wasn’t sure. She was seven, standing in a crowd of her parents’ friends, watching Neil Armstrong step out into the vacuum of space. She turned her head and saw a young man in pinstripe pants winding a golden chain through his fingers. He smiled at her, gentle. She fell.

Now again, she was seven, standing in a crowd of her parents’ friends. She looked for the man and he was gone. She pressed through the adult’s legs and into the night air. A woman was scrambling over their fence.

Now again, she was seven, waiting outside. The man was back. The woman had come and gone a few times, always in a hurry, always before Paige could stop her. The man knelt down. His smile was still gentle, and though he was a stranger, Paige wasn’t afraid of him. He said, “She’ll be back, don’t you worry.”

On the porch steps, where Nathan had left her, Paige took a deep breath. She remembered the way it felt to move through time on purpose. The brush of eternity against her arms, like fingers stroking, gentle. The tug of the timestream on her hair, which sometimes made her want to chop it all off.

She found herself sitting on wet grass, face to face with a child. The child had keen eyes and two smart braids. She didn't seem startled by the appearance of a stranger. Then again, Paige wasn't a stranger at all.

"Hello," she breathed.

The little girl smiled. "The man said you'd come before I had to go!"

Paige felt tears rush to her eyes. "Yes. Can you tell me the story?"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> That is, this story. Of the first traveler to ever move forward through time. That's why we helped her, see. Our rules have to change when the game does. It's only fair. Time is tricky.