

ONE

The entity was close. Closing in. Hunting Isaac.

He could feel it in his mind. Its presence growing stronger with each passing moment—a ‘Cleaner’. They were powerful, fast.

Leaning forward on his couch, he braced himself, ready. His apartment was silent, lights off. Only the distant murmurs of tourists below and the whispers of the sea breeze drifting through the open window broke the quiet and stirred the curtains in a ghostly dance.

With little to lose these days, Isaac’s risks had grown bolder and more careless in recent months. Six years had passed since discovering his time-travel abilities, and with each passing day, he grew more adept and confident. Now, the tables were turned—it was their turn to be the hunted.

The Cleaner would know it was close too, tracking Isaac’s travels through Time, feeling his presence the way Isaac felt its. He remained as still as possible, slowed his breathing, and attempted to ignore the pounding of his heartbeat.

The sensation grew, and he swiftly turned, finding nothing.

He slowly stood and carefully backed up against the shadowed wall and listened. He was safer within the flow of time than outside of it. Here, in time, they were slower, though still fast, but not fast enough for Isaac.

Isaac closed his eyes, feeling the silence, reaching out with his mind through time. One minute away, then five seconds... He could almost smell it; its energy crawled through his mind, stronger the closer it came.

His eyes snapped open just as the Cleaner materialised right in front

of him. Cloaked in shadow, wisps of ethereal white hair cascaded from its oversized hood, concealing all but a hint of a porcelain-esque face. With a snap of movement, it extended a hand towards Isaac with an eerie hiss that pierced the stillness of the room.

Isaac recalled the warnings he'd heard. A Cleaner can paralyse, holding its victim in place and preventing any escape through time. There were tales of some who could even trap their prey within time bubbles from afar, though such a skill was rare. One touch to the forehead, and all would go dark.

The Cleaner's hand darted forward, but Isaac expected the move and disappeared from that moment. He jumped a day forward, knowing it was just enough to tempt the Cleaner into pursuit but not too distant for it to lose track of him. Sure enough, the Cleaner emerged again, its fingers almost grazing Isaac. Without missing a beat, Isaac leapt a minute forward. The Cleaner appeared almost instantaneously, closer this time, as if it was learning. Their dance continued as Isaac made shorter jumps, backwards and forwards in time, from seconds to mere milliseconds, but always keeping ahead of it. Every jump used micro-wormholes, manipulating them beyond the boundaries of time and space with mere thought.

The Cleaner's relentless chase heated and expanded the wormholes, shaping them into a loop. Right before the loop closed, Isaac made a leap several milliseconds ahead, positioning himself just at the edge of time's fabric, but outside of time's flow. He paused, catching his breath, and observed. The wormholes joined, and the Cleaner, failing to anticipate Isaac's final move found itself trapped in an infinite loop, stranded beyond time.

Isaac felt the subtle energy disturbances ripple through the surrounding slices of reality. A confident smirk formed on his face. 'Bye,' he whispered.

With a brief distortion of air, Isaac returned to the exact moment in time he'd left, finding himself back in his stark living room. The setting sun hinted the lights would soon come on. His apartment, with its bare essentials, and little effort spent decorating, reflected his hope of one day returning to his own timeline.

Isaac sighed and slumped onto his couch, the fabric cold and unwelcoming against his skin. Adrenaline was replaced by the emptiness

that seeped back in; a Chel-shaped void. He missed her laugh, her voice, her eyes—he missed her. In this timeline, she never existed, leaving him trapped in a world without her laughter, her voice, or her gaze. Every memory of Chel was a double-edged sword; it provided comfort but intensified his longing.

Isaac closed his eyes and saw her smiling face as they strolled together, the summer breeze tickling her face with stray strands of hair glinting in the late afternoon sun.

This particular memory of Chel teased his mind—a moment from their beach walks he revisited often. This was when he usually reached for the wine bottle, but today, the urge wasn't there. Everything had changed in the last twenty-four hours, which reminded him he needed to update his blog. He reached for the tablet on the table, ready to update.

Blog Date: April 4 2052

Time: 18:12

This is in case something happens to me before I get to pass my little trick on to other Slicers, if there are any of us left. If you don't know what a Time Slicer is, you're about to.

My name is Isaac, and I'm a 'Time Slicer'. Time Slicers have an inherited ability, a thought-energy connection to time. It means I can jump to a different time just by thinking it. Sounds like fun, right? It can be. There's just one problem: When a time traveller messes with the past, it doesn't change that future. Instead, it creates an alternate one. If it isn't a huge change, the two timelines should eventually rejoin, leaving just one. And then all is well in the universe.

Well, apparently, 'errors' like me existing in a timeline make that impossible; it remains alternate forever. We interfere with the natural order. So, there are... "entities", I guess you'd call them, roaming the universes, skipping through time and timelines. They're hazy looking, but then I've only ever had a quick glimpse of them before I run. They're like supernatural 'cleaners', and it's their job to clean up 'errors' like me. So, we run from them through time. They're fast too. "You can't beat the Cleaners once they find you, so run when you feel them near". But I don't know; I've never had a problem losing them, even when they do find me.

But now I have a new trick to trap them. They drop into my time right in front of me, so I let them chase me through milliseconds. The wormholes stretch and join into a loop. Just before it closes, I jump out and stop. It's faint but I can see it. I can watch the holes close into a loop trapping the hapless Cleaner.

I guess they're like bots, programmed to follow the spill and clean it up. But they look like people, sort of. Or they're trying to, which is weird.

Before last night, it had been six months since I encountered any Cleaners, but now, everything has changed. Ten days ago, I was chased and found someone doing exactly the same trick! I felt him nearby, which is kinda weird in itself. Anyway, I followed him back to his time and said 'hello'.

He's from my future, like 80 years ahead. His name is Thomas and looks to be in his late 40s. Thomas was happy to meet me. I mean, really happy. It was a little weird just how happy he was until I found out why. We chatted, conversation turned to family and relatives, and here's the kicker: It turns out he's my future grandson!

But that's not all. It gets way better.

When he was twenty-nine, he used to hang out a lot in the early 2000s. He preferred that time. In 2009, he met someone, and they married in 2011. Four years later, he went back to his own time for something, but when he tried to go back to 2015, he couldn't. He couldn't go backwards in time to any point before his birth anymore.

He did some research into his wife to find out what happened to her. They'd been trying IVF but had given up on that. But then five years after he'd vanished, she tried again with the last remaining embryo, and it worked—she became pregnant with his child. After more investigation, he discovered that the kid she had ended up also being a Slicer.

And are you ready? That Slicer kid his wife had five years after he left... is me, Isaac Harris! Are you following? My grandson... is also my father! I'll let that sink in.

He got a Cleaner to chase him a while ago, then while outside of time, he somehow froze time! The Cleaner was stuck with nowhere to go. Seems it can't pause or restart time, so needed Thomas to do it. So, it talked. It turns out, Cleaners don't try to 'get rid' of or kill people;

they simply 'adjust' them. They absorb their ability to slice and return the Slicer to their own time. That sounds fine, except the ex-Slicer gets some brain damage.

The Cleaner didn't care what happened to the Slicer. They just had a job to do, and it, "wasn't their problem if people are so fragile".

Thomas knew who I was before I met him and had been waiting for me to pop up near him. Turns out, he needs my help.

But first, I should explain something: I'm not from here. I'm from a different timeline. And that's messed up, because in this version, there's no Chel.

Chel is my wife, and I have been trying to get back to the timeline she's in for the last two years. I just don't know how to find it or even when I branched off. It was after a lot of time travel, and when I got back, no Chel. No trace of her. There were strangers at our address. Her friends didn't know either of us. That's when I knew I was in the wrong timeline. And there is no other 'me' here because in this timeline, I found out my mother died while pregnant with me.

But this is a bigger problem than just me missing Chel. No Chel here and me being gone from my timeline means No 'us' anywhere. And that means no children, which means no grandchildren and weirdly it might mean 'no Thomas'. Unless I get back to my original timeline by the time Thomas' mother (my future daughter) is due to be conceived, I might stop existing too.

Tonight, we're going to work out what to do. Hopefully come up with an actual plan.

TWO

Isaac read his last few sentences, and with a sigh, submitted the entry, and turned off the tablet. After stuffing some clothes into a bag, he left his apartment, ducked into the stairwell and sliced forwards seventy-two years to 2124 as he double stepped his way down to the ground level.

Thomas's time was hotter than his own; it was February, and the summer heat hit him as he left the building and walked the few blocks towards his father's apartment. Reality outside of time had no smell, no background noise, and no temperature, making the salty tang of the ocean and the hum of cars and tourists back in time particularly noticeable, especially if he spent more than a few minutes out of it.

It was a typically humid day in Brisbane and the northern suburbs—he felt it but didn't mind. Isaac liked to wear long-sleeved t-shirts, usually black with the sleeves pushed up, and blue distressed jeans. Nothing loud or fancy, nothing to make him stand out. He ran a hand through his thick, almost black hair. It was just wavy enough to annoy him. He had his father's large brown eyes, but everything else about his looks reminded him of his mother when she was younger, as did his slow, thoughtful manner, which was often mistaken for apathy.

Turning the corner, Thomas' building came into view, its silhouette set against the brilliant blue sky. It was a high-rise apartment building overlooking the beach in the middle of the tourist area of the Redcliffe peninsula.

Isaac tapped in a passcode and entered the building, his clothes uncomfortably sticking to his skin after the hot walk, the lobby only marginally cooler. He took the lift to the third floor and let himself into

the apartment, immediately greeted by a welcome blast of cold air from the air conditioning. Pictures of coastal scenes decorated the walls, and at the far end, a glass door led to a balcony with a stunning view of the beach.

The sound of running water told him Thomas was in the shower. Isaac went to the fridge, opened it, and leaned into the coolness for a few seconds before grabbing a cold beer.

He gulped half of his beer before placing the bottle on the glass dining table, went to the balcony door, and gazed out to the ocean two storeys below. The view could have been borrowed from a postcard, the water mirroring the infinite blue of the sky and the frothy lace beaded its way along the shoreline. The sand was a perfect shade of gold dotted with colourful umbrellas and towels, but not too many.

As Isaac stood in the breeze from the air conditioning, his gaze moved to the few drifting wisps of clouds as they twisted slowly through the summer air. He watched their movement intently, his thoughts turning to home.

His mother, Philippa, was a physicist at the University in Riverton, in the southernmost state. It was where Isaac grew up, and it was much colder. She'd made headlines before Isaac was born, when she demonstrated time manipulation at her lab. She was pregnant with Isaac at the time, and although the tests were successful, they stopped development. The government stepped in and classified it as too dangerous and confiscated the equipment. Most of the equipment, that is—there was one test device Philippa had kept hidden at her home.

With her major project scrapped, Philippa put most of her time into raising Isaac. With his father gone, it meant little time left for her work and she never found another passion project. Isaac shared her love of science and enjoyed solving problems and coming up with out-of-the-box solutions. Like his mother, he was also a risk-taker, and it often landed him in trouble on more than one occasion throughout his school years. Although he enjoyed physics, he didn't continue his mother's work but studied Genomics at Uni.

Isaac mostly worked from home, which allowed him to suddenly vanish when he needed to escape a Cleaner without people seeing. Usually, a Slicer had to jump a few times before attracting a Cleaner's attention, so there was some control over when they might appear, but lately, they'd been showing up for no apparent reason.

He'd sliced in front of someone, once. It wasn't deliberate; it had just happened. It was back in the early days of discovering he was a Slicer; before he'd learned to control it. He was twenty-three, had just completed university, and still living in Riverton. One day, he was walking into town to meet up with friends, and as usual, someone was walking their dog towards him. Isaac was always a little annoyed by this; sometimes, he would choose to cross the road if someone was approaching so that he wouldn't have to talk to them. It was a small town and people did that.

It wasn't that he didn't like people, but the introvert in him just found it awkward saying hello to a stranger. It required a lot of effort; waiting until they were the perfect distance away. And should he say it first? Or let them? What if—like him—they didn't want to say anything? And then what if they didn't reply? He often messed it up, too; they would say 'hello' or 'good morning', and Isaac would blurt out 'good thanks'.

But on that occasion, it turned out to be a little more than just awkward, although now it amused him whenever he thought back on it. Just as they were about to pass each other, the dog walker said 'hello', and Isaac vanished. He'd simply sliced ahead to the future by a few seconds. When he reappeared, the guy was just standing looking around to see if anyone else had noticed, and his dog was barking non-stop. The poor guy probably thought he was going insane. Isaac figured it was a subconscious effort to escape the encounter, but after that, he tried to stay inside as much as possible, at least until he had it under control.

Now stuck in the alternate timeline, he rented an apartment not far from where he'd lived with his wife, Chel. It was right across from the beach, and he enjoyed waking to the gentle crash of the waves every morning.

He first met Chel at university when she insulted what he was reading one day without even a 'hello'. He enjoyed their first salty encounter so much that they were pretty much instant friends. Her love of science and never being too shy to argue with him cemented his attraction to her, but when he came to know her more, it was her dry humour that most other people missed, the childlike wonderment in which she perceived the world, and her natural fascination with anything in it, that made him realise he never wanted to be without her. That and a smile which lit her entire face and warmed his heart the first time he saw it.

Having an Indian father gave her a light-brown complexion, and she

kept her dark brown hair long but usually in a ponytail where it was “less annoying”. Her father also made the best Indian food Isaac had ever had, but despite this, Chel’s favourite food was pizza. It was a bit of an annoyance to her father, and a source of amusement to Isaac.

But in this timeline, Isaac was living alone, so he was happy to escape the bitter loneliness of his time in the 2050s and hang out as much as possible with his father, Thomas, in 2124. He’d never known his father growing up, so it was interesting—and a little weird—to get to know him now. He just had to block out that he was also his grandson and only about 12 years older.

Isaac was still staring trance-like at the clouds and feeling like he could control their movement when Thomas appeared behind him.

‘Any luck?’ Thomas’ voice dropped to a hushed tone, deeper than usual, and a little muffled.

‘Nope, and I still think it’s wasting time.’ Isaac was still staring out the window. ‘We have no idea when the timelines separated.’

Isaac suspected his father used to be a bit of a hippie. His flowery shirts with white or tan cargo shorts hinted at it, and his hair was longish and a little unruly, unlike his relaxed demeanour. He didn’t smoke or do any hard drugs but vaped a lot, and Isaac found his choice of vape flavours questionable. Thomas was also messy, and it showed in his apartment, pretty much the complete opposite of Isaac’s mother. Thomas insisted he was merely ‘relaxed’. Isaac wondered how his parents ever managed to get along. He’d always missed having a father and partly blamed his mother for it, as irrational as that may be.

‘Well, you won’t find it by staring out the window! What are you looking at exactly?’

There was no bite to his comment, he was just trying to be funny. Isaac’s reply was calm, still mesmerised by the clouds. ‘I know, but as I said, I’ve been looking for the last two years. Without knowing what caused it and when, how am I supposed to find one specific point where I skipped to a different reality? And how would I even do that, anyway?’

Isaac broke his gaze away from the window, and the cloud movement seemed to relax and continue its gentle swirling. He turned to Thomas, ‘I’m starting to think it was done *to* me.’ There was a mix of desperation and resignation in his voice.

‘I hear you, I kind of feel the same way. Spending the last few years without your mother, well, it’s been difficult. And to think now that I might never see her again... I’m not ready to think that. Not ready to give up hope just yet. The universe has a plan. And I can’t help feeling things will work out, for both of us.’

He sat on the black leather couch, took his vape out, and started stinking up the room with the odour of cheesecake. ‘There is... one thing we can do...’ Thomas said between puffs.

‘Quit vaping?’ Isaac sat down on the couch opposite Thomas and finished his beer.

Thomas didn’t answer, only stared Isaac squarely in the eyes, knowing Isaac knew what he was intimating.

‘No.’ Isaac shook his head. ‘If you do that, and it fails, then there’s no you and no me, and that’s the whole thing we’re trying to fix. Look, we’ve talked about this. Besides, we still have time.’

‘Well... now hold on,’ Thomas raised both palms in front of him, ‘wait a second. I’ve been thinking.’

‘Hold that thought.’ Isaac got up and went to the kitchen as Thomas watched. He returned with two large glasses of red wine and placed them on the low white table between them before sitting back opposite Thomas on the warm leather.

‘Thanks.’ Thomas took a slow sip after swirling and smelling it, savouring the taste and texture.

Isaac took a gulp of his and put his glass on the table. To him, wine was for drinking, not sniffing. He shrugged, ‘You said you’ve been thinking, so I thought I’d better get a drink...’ Isaac smirked as he waited for Thomas’ reaction to his attempt at a jibe, but it didn’t come. They’d only known each other for about ten days, but had hit it off quickly, and often teased each other. For Isaac, his father’s vaping was his usual go-to, or his loud clothing choice.

‘You told me—’ Thomas paused to take a puff of his vape, ‘—you’re now aware of Cleaners in the timeline, and can feel how far to go to find them. That’s impressive. I don’t know of anyone else who can do that. I can’t. I can do the millisecond slicing, and yes, and I froze time once, but that was by accident. To be aware of Cleaners, hundreds of years in the past or future, right down to their exact second—’

‘I didn’t say it was a second. Sometimes, I’d get to where I thought

they were, and then they'd appear a minute or two later, probably after detecting me close to *them*.'

'Still, that's some weird... sixth sense or something you have going on there.' Thomas sat forwards on the couch. 'That's way outside of what any Slicer I've ever met can do. My point is, if you're still discovering new abilities, then who knows what you might be capable of? You might even have a way of locating the correct timeline buried inside you for all we know.'

'Okay...' Isaac chewed his lip as he processed this.

'So, I was thinking... we should test you! We can start with trying what I did; get out of time and try to stop it. Maybe when it's stopped, you'll be able to feel other timelines or something.'

'I don't—'

'—I know I said it was dangerous.' Thomas held his hands up again in a placating gesture. 'But if we're together, both trying, I'm pretty sure we could restart time if there is a problem.'

'And what if we can't?'

Thomas Shrugged, 'it's not impossible, I did it already. We need to do something, if we can't find a way to see other timelines, then we're both goners. We don't really have much to lose!'

Isaac finished his glass and thought for a minute, biting his bottom lip. He gazed out to the sky beyond the balcony and felt the eternity of the view before turning back to Thomas. 'It's a risk. But when has that ever stopped me? Sure, let's try it. Let's stop time!'

'Well, that was easy. I thought you'd put up more of an argument.'

Isaac shook his head defeatedly. 'You know, I'm tired of searching and failing, I'm getting... It's depressing. I'm over it. Some days I think maybe it's better if we do just stop existing one day. Let the universe have its way, it's probably what it wan—' Isaac stopped in thought for a few seconds. '—wants.'

'What?' Thomas gave him a quizzical look.

'Nothing.' Isaac jumped to his feet and rubbed his hands together. 'Okay, let's do it! Wait, how will we know if it works?'

Thomas nodded as he put his vape down on the table. 'I've been thinking about that. I don't want to re-enter time if it is stopped for obvious reasons. The last time it happened, the cleaner told me. So this time, if we think it worked, we skip forwards a minute's worth of slices

but stay outside of time. If it *did* work, everything would look the same as it did in the previous time, everything un-moved. Thomas nodded towards the kitchen wall, 'and the clock on the control screen will show the same time, because time is no longer running.'

Isaac was eager to start. It had been a long time since he'd felt this level of excitement, and he welcomed it. The possibility of finding a way home to Chel was a powerful motivator.

Thomas got up, and together they went to the centre of the room. 'Grab my hand and I'll take us out.' He extended his hand.

Isaac reached out, took his hand, and nodded to indicate he was ready. With a soft thud of imploding air, they both vanished.