

One Last Zoom at the Buzz Bar

I don't think I'll hang out at Lenny Porchino's Buzz Bar & Grill anymore. The booth next to the bar used to be one of my safe places, and Porchi often took a break from his drug deals to listen to my stories. He doesn't usually welcome Academy people into his bar. He kicks under-agers out too, so I was out on both counts. However, Porchi is crazy about history. He loves to hear about time-jumping. So he began letting me into the bar when I started my second year at the Academy for Neo-Historical Studies – the year cadets start to jump. I think he has read every article ever written on time-jumping and the Academy. I used to lend him my studidisks and he would read them while he rolled old-time cigarettes. He never smoked them, just rolled them, then put them away in a plastic pouch. There must be a room at the back of that bar which is full of rolled cigarettes.

A while back a newcomer came into the bar and asked Porchi why he let an Academy brat in. Porchi said, 'Joss may be Academy, but she's one of my best customers.'

I suppose he meant that I bought a lot of zoomers – Porchi talk for hydra-stretatinic acid. He's one of the biggest suppliers around. But I've finished with all that now.

Was it really only yesterday that I was sitting in my booth looking for a bit of comfort from one of Porchi's roving dealers? I'd just failed the dreaded DeCarlo time-jumping exam, and Cowman had used it as the perfect excuse to chuck me out of the Academy. All I wanted to do was crawl under my booth seat and forget about the world. Then Porchi slid into the seat opposite me and pushed a warm sake across the table.

‘What’s up, history-girl? You look like you’ve cold-cut someone.’

I shrugged. How could I explain to a guy like Porchi that I’d just wrecked the only thing in my life I liked doing? All he understood were bars, drugs and cold-cutting people. I knew I was stupid to have tried to do the toughest exam of the program high on zoomers. I knew the time-jumping principles and the equations, I just didn’t make much sense when Professor Hartpury asked the questions. I crashed badly, even after she’d given me every possible break.

Hartpury’s been on my side since my first day at the Academy. Once she even forced Cowman to apologise to me. Now, that was a moment to savour. Afterwards I took her to the Buzz Bar, and we drank sake and toasted Cowman’s health. I asked her once why she put herself out for me, and she quoted something about talent making its own rules. I suppose that’s why I couldn’t believe it when she gave up on me in the DeCarlo exam. I think that spooked me more than failing the exam. Hartpury had never given up on me before and I had come to rely on her. I mean, you have to rely on someone or you go crazy.

‘You want a zoomer?’ Porchi asked, as he motioned to Joey.

Joey Kanawa is hooked on zoomers, so he has to be careful with his bones. He kind of glided to the table and gave me a gummy smile as he pushed a zoomer wad at me. He’s already lost all of his teeth and now his bones are going brittle. When zoousers get to that stage, they can never come back.

I looked at the tiny bubble pack. One side of me knew it was getting way past the time to stop taking this crap. The other side of me, I call her Joss the Boss, wanted that wad more than air. The Boss was whispering in my mind. One more won’t hurt, she said. One more and I wouldn’t care about the Academy. One more to get me through. It was getting harder to know which side of me I should trust.

Five years I had been at the Academy, and then yesterday, wham, I was thrown out in about five minutes.

I hunched my shoulders against a sudden shiver and took the wad from Joey. Joss the Boss was right. The zoomer would help me forget for a while. I swallowed the tiny pill with a mouthful of the smooth sake.

Zoomers don't kick in for a few minutes, so I kept on torturing myself about the stupid exam and the mess I'd made of it.

Just before the exam I had logged into the Mission room for a bit of quiet time. The Mission Room and the booth at the Buzz both get four stars in my book of safe places, but nothing beats the Mission Room for chilling out. One-to-one exams always make me jumpy, and I wanted to calm down before it was my turn. I also wanted to pass with honours because it was Hartpury's class. I sat down at the override panel and was working hard at meditating when Joss the Boss marched into my brain and started persuading me to have a zoomer. I put up a bit of a fight, but in the end I took one just to shut her up. So there I was, sitting in the Mission Room and feeling zoomy-fine, but I couldn't remember a damn thing about the DeCarlo principle.

Eventually Hartpury came barging into the Mission Room and tore strips off me for being late. I'd never seen her so mad. She practically pushed me back to the examination room. I was really zooming by then and I stuffed up the prac and nearly every question as well. Cowman must have been monitoring the exam, because as soon as I messed up the last question, he walked in with his little posse of professors and threw me out.

I remember exactly how he savoured the moment.

'Cadet Aaronson, it is unusual for a fifth-year cadet to be dismissed. Even more unusual for one of your talent. Until now, the fact that you are so much younger than your peers has been your excuse for the constant lack of discipline you have exhibited. However, your failure of the DeCarlo exam and your dependence on ability-destroying substances have forced us to take this unusual action. You will have until nine o'clock tonight to collect your belongings. If you are found on Academy property after that time, you will be arrested. Is that clear?'

What was really clear was that Cowman was enjoying his little moment to the max. I felt like reaching over and twisting his gools off, but training and the expression on Hartpury's face stopped me. She stayed back when all the other professors left the room.

'I'm sorry, Joss, I couldn't do anything this time,' she said.

She walked over to me, and I saw lines on her face I'd never noticed before.

'Cowman's been after your hide since you messed up that jump last year. Failing the DeCarlo was exactly the excuse he needed to get rid of you.'

'But I *know* the DeCarlo principle,' I said.

Hartpury put her hands on my shoulders. The weight felt strangely reassuring.

'I know, and that's the stupid part of it. Look, Joss, you're finished here, but do yourself a favour and get off whatever crap you're on. You have so much talent that it would be a pity to feed it all to some drug. You know my private number. If you need anything, give me a call and I'll see what I can do.'

'But everything's under control,' I said. 'I can stop taking them whenever I want to.'

Hartpury looked away.

Let me tell you what happens when the only person in the world who takes you seriously suddenly stops believing in you. Your stomach drops out and you want to throw up, that's what happens.

'Good luck.' She gave me a quick hug, pushed a piece of paper into my hand and walked out of the room. I unfolded the paper. Hartpury had written her number on a pamphlet for the Doringdale Centre, the best zoouser rehab place in the city. I wanted to call her back, but I didn't. The picture of the phoney counsellor hugging her grateful ex-addict on the front of the pamphlet blurred.

I really did know that damned DeCarlo principle. It was named after Bernard DeCarlo, who died about fifty years ago. He time-jumped back over two hundred years to observe the cure for ancient typhoid. However, he accidentally changed the Mission room re-entry time on his control panel by 1.67 seconds. That was enough of a change for the atoms in his time-jumping self to misalign with his original self.

It has always fascinated me that we are actually a collection of constantly moving atoms and sub-atomic matter that changes formation from millisecond to millisecond. We are never really the same person we were a millisecond ago. Anyway, when DeCarlo re-emerged, he

didn't fit back perfectly into his own time-frame because his atoms had moved by 1.67 seconds. Each set of Bernard DeCarlo atoms collided. Hartpury showed us the Mission Room recording of the explosion. It was gruesome.

'Hey Joss, you sure you're all right? If you gonna puke you go to the crapper 'cause I don't want no mess.' Porchi's words jerked me out of my horror re-run and back into the Buzz Bar.

'Thanks for your concern,' I said.

Porchi laughed and leaned over the table to stroke my cheek. 'Hey, neichan, you know you can have my concern whenever you want it. My concern and all the zoomers you want.'

I pulled away from him. I could feel the zoomer massaging my brain and blocking out my misery, but I still had enough taste to push his arm away.

'Sure, Porchi. When I want to shack up with a loser you'll be the first to know.'

Porchi laughed again and sat back in his seat. He was staring at me and I could see he was going to wreck my peace and quiet. I badly needed some think-time, and if the Buzz was a no-go there was only one other safe place: the Mission Room.

I stood up and dropped a real-coin on the table. 'I gotta go,' I said.

I slid out of the booth and walked down the stairs to the kitchen.

'You got nowhere else to go anymore,' Porchi called after me. 'But you'll come back to Porchi soon. When you get the shakes, you'll be back.'

He started laughing again. He had probably found out about my expulsion almost as soon as it happened.

I could still hear him laughing as I pushed open the staff door that led into the side alley.

Getting on to the Academy campus was simple. There are lots of sneaky ways on and off campus that I'd learned during the last five years. However, it was only by blind luck that I got into the Mission building. The Academy bureaucracy must have been behind in its data entry, because my entry scans were still in the central net.

Saturday night is the traditional time for the techno staff to recalibrate the time-jumpers. No one is supposed to enter the Mission Room until calibration is complete, so the corridors were empty. I strolled up to Room C and looked through the door viewing panel. Raymond Beeson was working on T-2. Finding Beeson on duty was another lucky break. I stepped into the entry sensor.

‘Cadet Joss Aaronson, calibration is in progress. Entry is prohibited,’ the comvoice said.

Beeson looked up. He frowned, and mouthed, ‘What do you want?’ I had been ready to bolt if he went for the security monitor, but he just looked annoyed.

I gave the standard sign for Hartpury and he walked grudgingly to the door. He punched a security code on the inside pad and the door slid open.

‘Jesus, Joss. You know I’ll have to recalibrate the whole bloody thing now,’ he said.

‘Hey, don’t blame me. Hartpury’s jumping up and down about some bloody stolen equipment and wants all the techs in her office, pronto,’ I said.

It was handy knowing that the little slime-ball had been ferreting cables away and selling them. Porchi had let me in on that little gem.

Beeson’s eyes widened. He looked back into the room and ran his hands through his spiky hair.

‘Hey, don’t sweat it,’ I said, all buddy-buddy. ‘I’ve got security clearance. I’ll stop anyone going in until you come back.’

‘Thanks. I owe you one.’ He wiped his sweaty hands down the front of his trousers, straightened his shirt, and scurried down the corridor like a khaki weasel.

I walked into the Mission Room and shut the door behind me. I was home.

Beeson had not reconnected the fixer-beam on either of the time-jumpers. The fixer-beam held the jumpers securely in place to stop them moving away from the jump base in the Mission Room. It looked as though he had finished recalibrating T-1, because it was shut down.

T-2 was still open. I stepped inside.

The inside of a time-jumper is beautiful in a cramped kind of way. As soon as the seals are in place you are sitting in a non-time, and the whole of the time-jumper becomes you. I remember one of my lecturers trying to describe the sensation of the moving non-movement: a jump through a dimension in which you don't move in the normal mechanical way, but you end up somewhere else. I didn't really understand what he meant until I had experienced it myself.

I pressed the T-2 control panel to seal the machine, and instantly all sound was cut out.

The only way I could fix the mess I was in would be to jump back to yesterday and stop myself from zooming before the exam. That would be great, except you can scramble your brains in jumps that are less than six months back. What was the old first-year chant? *Jump half a year and you're in the clear, Jump anything less and you'll end up a mess.* A stupid rhyme. I'd heard about a few lucky idiots who survived short-time jumps, but I was no longer zooming high enough to try it.

I worked out the equations for yesterday and punched in the co-ordinates. T-2 asked for voice verification. I verified, even though I didn't intend to jump. The whole procedure was comforting and it would be the last time I'd hear it. A beep sounded, and T-2 gave the standard warning for time-jumps under six months. I sat back in the moulded seat, and as T-2 repeatedly warned Cadet Aaronson about short-time jumps, Cadet Aaronson cried for the first time since she had arrived at the Academy five years before.

I've always found crying more exhausting than one of Cowman's six-hour punishment hikes. When I'd finished, I slept.

I don't know what woke me up. It certainly wasn't sound, because I was sealed up in T-2. It was probably the four pairs of eyes staring down at me: Cowman, Hartpury, and two enormous sixth-year students on guard duty.

On the Richter scale of panic, I think I hit a 10.5. I jabbed T-2's jump button almost out of reflex. I found out quickly that Beeson hadn't finished recalibrating it, because it made a dreadful whining noise as the

jump-pressure built up. I saw Hartpury run towards the override panel but she was too late. I jumped before she was even halfway there.

I am probably the first person ever to have jumped in a half-calibrated time-jumper, and I don't recommend it. Although I had set the destination for yesterday, the setting control was going crazy and running through thousands of options. T-2 seemed to hit some kind of invisible field and started grinding and bouncing around. It was the grinding that got to me. Grinding means hardware hitting hardware, and that means big hard-to-fix trouble. I wrapped a cargo strap around my hand and tried to eject the emergency harness, but the whole control panel was jammed. I was chanting the three emergency system checks: jumper atmosphere; base communication; jumper settings. We used to call them the panic points: air, comm, set. I couldn't do anything about comm and set, since the panel was jammed. Air, however, has its own controls, and I twisted around to see what was happening.

A time-jumper has its own artificially controlled atmosphere to get through The Nothing: the void between your own time and your destination time. I once read somewhere that they strapped a mouse in a cage to the outside of an elderly jumper to see what happened to it in The Nothing. Apparently it imploded very neatly.

The atmosphere level in T-2 was falling fast, and the timer was beeping urgently at me and counting down thirty seconds of breathable air. The emergency oxygen mask popped out from the ceiling and swung in front of me. I grabbed at it, but then I was thrown backwards and pulled the tubing out of its fitting. I had the wonderful choice of suffocating in T-2 or bailing out into The Nothing and doing a mouse.

Suddenly T-2 hit the ground and skidded. Dirt and dust showered all over the windows, and then the jumper collided with something and I was slammed against the control panel. The atmospheric system opened the door to allow air into the cabin. I climbed out and fell face first into the dirt.

I lay there for a long while, trying to breathe. Considering what could have happened, this was my lucky day. T-2 had bounced out of its normal co-ordinates and ended up against a tree in Coffman Valley,

about a klick from the Academy. It was amazing how far off the base a half-calibrated jumper with no fixer-beam could go. No doubt the big-wig scientists at the Academy would love to hear about it, but I sure as hell wasn't going to go back and explain.

I stood up slowly and shut the jumper's door. I ached all over. I could see from my reflection in the chrome shell of T-2 that blood was working its way down the right side of my face from cuts on my forehead. I wiped at the blood and smeared it down my cheek. I needed to clean up, calm down and get as far away from the Academy as I could. Porchi was my best bet,

No one takes much notice of another bloodstained, dirty punter in south central Melbourne. Especially not around Lenny Porchino's Buzz Bar. I limped up the side alley and carefully opened the staff door. Donny, the kitchenhand and emergency bouncer, was at the dishwasher, punching buttons and swearing. I slid in around the door and tapped him on the shoulder. He swung around the door and nearly took my head off with a nasty forearm sweep. I ducked and jumped back. Street fighting was always my best subject.

'Donny, it's me, you stupid kuso.'

'What the hell are you doing wandering around? I thought Mr P told you to stay low while he sorted things out. Christ, you look awful. Did they already get you?' he said. He pushed me into the dark storeroom and shut the door. 'I'll get Mr P. You stay put.'

I heard him running up the stairs to the main bar. I stood in the dark and tried to sort out what he'd said. How could Porchi already know what had happened? I knew he had a pretty good information network, but not that good. Maybe Cowman had started a search for me already. I leaned against a metal container full of dried noodles to keep myself upright. But Donny had said that Porchi was already sorting things out, and had told me to stay low. I certainly didn't remember any of that happening. I heard footsteps on the stairs and I ducked behind a huge crate of Coke.

'Joss? You okay? Donny tells me you been out. You wanna get yourself killed or something?' Porchi said.

I stepped out from behind the crate. Porchi took my arm and steered me into the kitchen.

‘Look, I’m trying my best to sort something out.’

He turned me around to face him. ‘Holy shit, you look like you been done over good. Don’t you know you can’t go sight-seeing when you’ve cold-cut some Academy big-wig? Every toe-tagger in town will try and get you for the bucks. You ain’t thinking.’

Cold-cut some Academy big-wig? My gut froze. Had I killed someone? Had I defied all natural laws and jumped forward to a time after I had killed someone, and then had the memory knocked out of my head? But all the theories said it was impossible to jump to the future.

‘Killed who?’ I asked. I held on to the table.

Porchi looked at me and frowned. ‘They must have broke your head. Don’t you remember doing Cowman? Donny, go get Doc Tarito. I think Joss has got big head trouble.’

I had killed Cowman? That wasn’t possible. None of this was possible. Porchi took my arm and led me over to the sink. He wet his handkerchief and gently wiped the blood out of the cuts on my forehead.

‘Come on, you come down to the cellar again and wait for the doc. He’ll fix you up proper.’

He pulled me towards the cellar and held on to me as we climbed down the steep steps. There was another explanation for all this, but it was just as crazy as future jumping. Could I have jumped sideways, into a parallel time? I had read some theories about it, but most of them had logic holes as big as the Coonawarra Canyon. Porchi opened the cellar door. The light was already on. As my eyes got accustomed to the light I saw myself sitting at the table staring at me with a hamburger halfway to my mouth. Except it wasn’t me exactly. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t work out what. This other me dropped the hamburger and stood up.

‘Who the hell is that?’ she said, and her voice even had my northern drawl.

Porchi slammed the door shut and looked from me to the other me.

‘Don’t you get it? She must be you from the future. Hey, have you jumped back?’

I nodded. There was no other sane explanation. I wasn't really freaked by seeing myself, and apparently neither was this other me. You learn about doubling up on yourself in second year, and everyone has to go through it at least once during the course. I personally liked last century's idea that you blow up the universe if you meet yourself, but nothing exciting like that happens. You just see yourself how everyone else does, and of course you 'know' what the past you is going to do because it's happened before. Nevertheless, I had never realised that my chin was so pointy or that I chewed with my mouth open.

'When from?' the other me snapped. What a bitch. Did I ever sound as bossy as that?

'The eighteenth of August, 2230,' I said.

Bossy frowned. 'That's today, ain't it, Len?'

Porchi nodded.

'Then you can't have jumped back. No one can jump back a day and survive. Who the hell are you? Porchi, get her. I don't like this at all.'

Porchi jumped me, and both of them wrestled me down to the floor. I got in a few nasty hits – Porchi always did have a glass belly – but I was still knocked about from the landing and eventually they had me down.

Bossy looked excited. 'Where's the machine? Is the machine at the Academy? You better tell us when you're from and how you got here,' she demanded.

She pulled my head up off the ground by my hair. I could have refused to talk, or tried to stall, but this version of me was not fooling around and I couldn't afford to end up totally out of action. I told them the whole story, with Bossy yanking my head back whenever I paused. As I spoke I became certain that I had jumped sideways, and Bossy was obviously coming to the same conclusion. The question was, could I get back?

'Seems a bit way out to me,' Porchi said. He pulled a narcorette from his pocket. 'According to all my reading, a sideways jump is only the idea of a couple of crackpots.' He lit the narco and sucked hard on it.

'Shut up,' Bossy said. 'Let me think.' She sat on my back, pushing my face against the floor with her hand.

‘This could be my way out,’ she said finally. ‘If she’s only been chucked out of the Academy, and her Cowman’s still alive, I can jump over to her time and take her place. No death warrant. No worries. Then when I’ve gone you can cold her and everyone will think Cowman’s killer is dead. Everyone’s happy.’

I didn’t think it was the right time to point out that I wasn’t happy. Porchi didn’t seem very happy either.

‘But I can get you to somewhere safe. We can go together,’ he whined.

‘Yeah, and then I’ll have to be holed up for the rest of my life. No thanks. This is the way to go. A new life in a parallel time. Hey you, do ya have zoomers in your time? I sure as hell ain’t going if there ain’t any zoomers,’ Bossy said.

She pulled up my head again. This constant yanking around of my head was seriously annoying me. I nodded slightly. She smiled, and I could see that she had lost two teeth, probably from zoomers.

‘Lenny, you organise everything. And remember to get me plenty of wads to see me through. We’ll get going when it’s dark, and dear Jossie here can show us where the jumper is. You got something to tie her up with?’

Porchi found some handcuffs, probably from his dead-cop collection, and I was cuffed to the table. Bossy sat in front of me and smiled.

‘Tell me all about yourself. I want to know as much as possible.’

I told her a load of crap while I tried to think of a way out of this. When I stopped talking I still didn’t have a plan.

‘Me, I got chucked out of the Academy in the second year,’ Bossy said. ‘Cowman shafted me, but I didn’t kill him for a payback or for any bucks either. The stupid manuke was trying to muscle in on my Academy deals. I was just gonna scare him, but things got a bit out of hand. I’m not a cutter, you know. Haven’t got the stomach for it. But you gotta look after yourself, ’cause no one else gives a damn.’

I could remember saying the same thing to Joey Kanawa only a few days ago. It was creepy hearing your own words in your voice from a person you wouldn’t like if you met them at a party.

Porchi opened the door. 'It's just gone dark. You sure you wanna go through with this? It sounds too risky to me.'

Bossy nodded. 'You got me a wad.'

Porchi held out the bubble pack and Bossy snatched it and dry swallowed it in one gulp. Donny came into the room and held me while Porchi unlocked the cuff around the table and then recuffed my hands behind my back.

The only plan I could come up with on the ride to Coffman Valley was to try and get into T-2 before Bossy did. It was pretty long odds, but I figured it was either fight and die or stand around and die. I preferred to fight. My arms were aching from being behind my back and I wriggled my hands to keep the blood circulating.

Porchi manoeuvred his clapped-out OZ8-Hover over the treetops towards T-2, and turned the lights on. I had time to really check Bossy out. I'd finally figured out what was wrong with her. She was coming apart, like Joey Kanawa. She had the same black hair as I did, but it was lank and thin. I saw the pointy cheekbones that had been the bane of my life, but her face was kind of collapsing in on itself. She was probably missing more than the two teeth I'd noticed. I ran my tongue over my own teeth. One back tooth was definitely moving. I felt a shiver crawl up my spine and tingle along my shoulders.

'There it is,' Bossy said.

Porchi stopped near T-2 and trained all the Hover's front lights on to it. In the bright light, the jumper looked like a heap of junk, with a nice chrome finish.

'Looks in bad shape, Joss,' Porchi said. 'I don't think you should try it. You'll probably get killed.'

'I like the odds,' Bossy said.

It was time for me to play the odds. I put on my best fifth-year sneer.

'You're not going anywhere if you only got to second year. You won't have a clue how to use that jumper.'

I used to hate supercilious fifth years. If my guess was right, Bossy would hate them too. She did.

‘It seems to me that our friend here has overstayed her welcome. Get rid of her, Porchi.’

Well, that backfired in a big way. I tensed up, waiting for the right tie to make a fight of it. Help came from a strange place.

‘I think we oughta let her get it going, Joss. You know you don’t know how to use it proper,’ Porchi said.

Bossy’s eyes thinned. ‘Konoyaro,’ she spat, and hit Porchi’s hand off her arm.

Porchi grabbed her shoulder. ‘Please, let her do it. You might get hurt or something. We can keep her covered.’

Bossy stopped and looked back at him. He touched her arm again. She shrugged irritably, then walked towards T-2. Porchi pushed me after her.

T-2 was trashed on the outside, and the inner seals needed a bit of attention. However, it looked like the control panel was okay, and the setting was still on my yesterday.

‘I’ll need my hands to repair it,’ I said. Bossy was suspicious, but Porchi uncuffed me. Phase one of my make-it-up-as-you-go-along plan was complete.

I sat in the control seat and punched through a few diagnostics. Bossy half knelt on the second seat, bracing her other leg against the side of the control panel. She aimed a nasty-looking painer at my head and watched me run the diags. Phase two was going to be a bit tricky. I wished I knew what it was.

I let my hand fall near the emergency harness button and waited for Bossy to give me a lash. It didn’t come, so I slipped my hand further towards the button. Porchi suddenly appeared at the hatch and Bossy’s eyes flickered to him for just a second. That was the second I was waiting for. I triggered the harness. It hit Bossy in the face and as she reeled backwards I hit the hatch button, praying the seals would hold. Then I slammed on the jump controls. We were heading for either my yesterday or deadsville.

Bossy recovered quickly and lunged for the emergency shut-down switch as T-2 wound up to jump. I grabbed Bossy around the throat, trying to get her away from the switch. As we jumped, she was trying

to rip off my ear. The last thing I saw was Bossy collapsing. Then I lost consciousness.

When I woke up in T-2, my head was pounding and Bossy was slumped over me. It was an effort even for me to move my hand to see if she was alive. She was breathing, but still out cold. Slowly I rolled her into the control chair and looked around. We were back in the Mission Room, but there was no seriously annoyed Cowman or worried Hartpury or even power-happy sixth years. There was only another me sitting at the override panel looking very surprised and very high. I glanced down at the controls. They were still at my yesterday setting, so this me must be yesterday's me. We sat staring at each other, and then Yesterday started coming towards our T-2. Bossy groaned and lifted her head.

'We made it to your time?' she asked?

I ignored her. Yesterday peered in through the window and Bossy smiled a crocodile smile. It was a smile that said 'I've got everything under control'. This worried me, because I didn't have anything under control. I hit the door button and Yesterday pulled it open.

'You guys look like meat,' she said.

She grabbed me under my arm and helped me struggle out of T-2.

'Watch out for her,' I managed to say before I hit the floor and passed out.

When I came to, all hell had let loose. Bossy was on top of Yesterday and choking her with the bar of the painer. Yesterday was fading fast. I got to my feet and ran over to them. I grabbed Bossy by the back of her jacket and hit her in the face as hard as I could. She went down heavily and didn't move. I knelt down beside Yesterday and gently pulled her on to her back.

That second year double-up lesson doesn't prepare you for seeing yourself dead. I saw Yesterday's staring eyes and bluish face and the painer welts on her throat, and I threw up.

I didn't see Bossy move until the last minute. She came at me with the painer aimed between my eyes. I ducked, and it caught me on the shoulder. I ground my teeth against the pain and grabbed her arm, and we stood there, eye to eye, as she tried to bring the painer down.

When I looked into her crazy eyes and saw myself in her dilated pupils. I knew that for the last three years my life had slowly been aligning with hers. Now one of us had a chance to live those three years again. Bossy was intent on killing me for that chance. I was intent on staying alive. She slid her fingers along my shoulder to the deep slash where the painer had hit.

‘You should have finished me off instead of puking your guts up over her,’ she said.

She smiled and dug her fingers into the cut. I screamed and my arm gave way. I grabbed at her shoulder with my other hand and slammed my knee into her groin. Bossy fell heavily. I lost balance and landed on my knees. I rolled away from her, waiting for her to attack again. But she didn’t. She started screaming and writhing around on the floor, smearing a pattern of blood wherever she moved. She had fallen straight on to the painer, and it had gone through her guts.

She stopped moving and the Mission Room was strangely quiet. I crawled warily over to her and touched her face. She was dead.

Yesterday was nearby. Her face was turned away, but I could remember every detail and I knew I always would. Maybe I had been pulled through by luck, or fate, or even one of those gods the vid-evanges scream about. When I thought about how close I had come to dying, I was sick all over again. I was a mess of relief and hope and hate, and all I could do was sit and shake for a while.

I looked at the timer on the wall. I would have to wait until later to sort out my head because I had big problems I had two dead versions of me and an extra time-machine to worry about. If I was right about this being the yesterday on my original time-line, then I also had a very irate Professor Hartpury about to come into the Mission Room to hassle me about an exam. The bloody exam that had started all this mess. The exam that, according to this time, I hadn’t yet taken. If I could get rid of Bossy and Yesterday and the extra T-2, then I had my second chance.

I looked at the still form of Bossy. I might have seen myself in her, but no way was I going to end up like her. I had zoomed for the last time.

I cleaned up the blood and tried to think. Hiding two bodies is hard at the best of times, but getting rid of a time-jumper is like hiding a bright orange elephant. I looked at T-2 and wished it would just disappear into nothing. Now, that was an interesting idea.

I swung into action.

I dragged Bossy and Yesterday into T-2 and strapped them into the seats. Then I cleared the controls and slammed the hatch shut. I walked over to the override panel and sat at the large console. It was possible that this wouldn't work. It was also possible that one day another neo-historian team would see T-2 in The Nothing and a myth like the Flying Dutchman would be born. Then again, maybe T-2 would eventually implode like that little mouse. I hoped, for Yesterday's sake, that T-2 would become a myth.

I adjusted the controls and punched the external jump button. T-2 jumped as Hartpury opened the door.

'Joss, if you don't get off your arse and into that examination room, I'll personally boot you into The Nothing,' she said.

'I'm on my way.' I pressed the erase button on the Mission Room recorder and smiled at her.