

The Aurore Reset

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Episode 1: Future Treats

I know this is strange. And shouldn't have happened. But, before I explain, promise me you will try to remember a few things. I regret what I did thinking back. Maybe wait to judge stuff? Also, remember you would have taken off your clothes for that much money too.

Everything started back on October 16th, 2002.

Long story short, my mom sometimes tried to save money on beer by buying a 12 pack. Intending to drink a can a night. Then the beer would be gone by morning. It had been a 12 pack night. After slamming the glass sliding door in front of my mom laying on the sofa, I left home. With anything I had important left stuffed in my emotional support hoodie pocket and a side saddle bag. And my math book. I couldn't afford to pay the fine if I didn't return it.

Yes. I have an emotional support hoodie. Leave me alone. The point is, when I left I decided I wasn't going back.

The issue was I had nowhere to go. Not after ruining everything over a stupid argument.

Do you have places you go to when you get stuck? When the world feels like it is closing in on me, I end up in the park or Neonopolis. Usually, I went to Mia's. Unless her mom was home, which is like almost never right? Well, that night I walked to the park in the dark. Hoping I could hide out behind a bush or something until I could figure out what to do. I have a bush I like. But anywhere there works. I needed a moment to breathe and to feel safe.

To my surprise, I saw a giant raised stage full of colorful lights. A crowd of partying teenagers and adults danced around, soaked in paint. The hand thingy reached 10:30 on my plastic watch. I wondered who would allow a party on a Tuesday night? The crowd cheered and held up their arms as the paint-spattered. I sighed. I thought about heading to my second spot but I figured wandering around Las Vegas at night wasn't a great idea.

A voice I can only describe as a ditzy tree beard who focused on weird words, came from behind me. I jumped. I faced a woman a little older than me wearing giant swim goggles. Spattered with so much pigment I'm not sure how she could see.

"Azami, I presume." She said, adjusting her shower cap wet with paint. "Or. Aurore Chandler it looks like is your other name."

Not knowing what to say to this I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm Aurore Chandler?"

“This is yours.” From inside her multi-color plastic coat pocket, she handed me a small flat white package. It had a strange ice cream cone logo on the front.

“I don’t think this is mine.” I tried to hand it back.

“Oh no. I can’t take it back. Make sure you watch the video when you turn 18 at midnight. You can go in. You’re an employee now, you’re on the list. Good luck. And don’t forget to wash your hands.” She said looking at the box.

“Watch the video?” I asked. The box in my hand didn’t weigh as much as a video tape. “How did you know-”

She ran into the crowd, past the entrance, not bothered by the flying paint from the super soakers on stage. The ticket woman with all the tattoo’s didn’t stop me from going into the event so I ran after the goggled lady.

As I made my way through the people after her, a familiar face popped into view. She danced, kind of, wearing an orange tank top and ripped jeans.

“Oh no. Mia’s here.” I said.

You see, I had decided she and I shouldn’t be friends anymore. Not after our last fight. Like, when the world feels like it’s going to explode, she’s the one who helps out. But, I suck and can’t keep friends. Of course, she would be there that night too. I looked at my knuckles, which had finally started kinda looking normal again. Not so purple and swollen. The colors fell on the white package before I could jam it in my hoodie pocket. I turned from the stage to walk to the back of the park past the concession stands. From there I could take the sidewalk with the working street lights. Until I could figure something out. I also have a fear of confrontation, which I’m sure didn’t factor into anything.

Then she saw me. With a clear view, no head or body part obstructed. Her eyes narrowed at me. I felt like there should have been western showdown theme playing or something.

I turned around, pretending to look at whatever else. I picked a fried sweet potato stand in the corner of the park and did not look away for as long as I could. My head turned back in the direction of where she had been standing. She stared at me. I bet she never looked away.

Too many people touched me as I pushed my way through the crowd to her. My nose bumped up against hers. She stood back, with that dirty blond, mid-length, side-parted, curly hair. The

orange tank top glowed in the neon lights. Her eyes gave me the wild bear look. Blue eyes with a hint of green and gray with little specks of like an auburn sort of color thing? Guess you know.

Anyways. She looked ticked. She pointed. I knew what she was pointing to, which was any place away from the crowd of people. I went with her. Partly having nowhere to run. Partly because I missed her. But I felt like I was “old yeller” being taken behind a shed.

Once we got away from the noise and constant paint showers, she took out her earplugs. She wrinkled her nose at me. Someone chucked a trash bag into a dumpster near the parked food trucks.

“Like. Are you following me again? Like, when you wanted that stupid note from Sally in Jr. High?” She said, with that pinch of that whatever that low-pitch California emo thing of hers is. “Who the hell talks to Sally? No one. Her parents aren’t even alive. Why are you here?”

Sometimes my brain needs time to shift through all the random thoughts that pop up. Her eyes rolled. She waited, knowing my head also runs on volunteer hamsters, which there aren’t too many of.

Instead of answering her question, I was like. “I know I punched a hole in your wall. I shouldn’t have done that over our ‘Mongolian BBQ’ vs ‘Mongolian grill’ fight-”

She let out an angry sigh. “It is not called Mongolian BBQ! It’s Mongolian grill! You make it sounds like they’re barbecuing Mongolians! That’s horrible! No one wants that unless it’s a name for a punk rock band!”

“I will not back down. But I’m sor-” I stopped myself. The “S” word is one of our forbidden words we promised not to use with each other. “I wish I could be better. I need your help. Something happened. I got this thing, I don’t know what to do with it. And nowhere to go.”

“12 pack night?” She asked.

I nodded.

“Come over for coffee?” She didn’t look at me when she said it.

“What??” I said.

“Um. Okay?” She mumbled, “I didn’t like that wall anyways. You should have called me.”

“You told me you never wanted to speak to me again. I messed everything up. I can’t do anything right and I don’t deserve you at all, to be-” I said, hitting myself with words.

She put a finger to my lips and closed her eyes. “Easy. The past is dead. We can always start over. You know, if you would take it easier on yourself, we wouldn’t fight. Never mind. I know where we can get a van. Let’s go to my house and look at those math notes you didn’t take. The class we need to pass if we want to graduate? I’m adding ‘Mongolian’ to our list of things we don’t talk about. That mean’s you’re on your own in next week’s history test, which I am sorr-regretful of. Also. My mom is home early from the trip again. So. Be ready for that.”

“Does your mom know? About us?” I asked.

She did that weird lip thing she does when she’s not sure how to answer something. The music stopped playing. The lights went out, and people headed to their cars.

“I’ll be back.” She ran in a random direction. I found a park bench and waited.

A glow of fireflies greeted me in the parking lot as I watched the people leave and the food trucks pack up. Feeling the package in the hoodie pocket, I wondered if she would return.

A bang rang out nearby, and a familiar old white hippie van drove to onto the curb in front of me. Mia sat in the driver’s seat and motioned me with her head to get in.

“Does your aunt know you have her van?” I asked, slamming my door after climbing into the passenger seat. She frowned and closed her eyes. She breathed out with her tongue partly sticking out.

“It’s mine after I get the money together.” She said, revving the engine. The van sped down the street, more than likely over the speed limit.

Finally, she is like “Can you change the tape? And put in the ‘Aurore’s birthday mix’?”

Cassette tapes were sprawled out between the seats and on the floor, like usual. Mia didn’t want to spend the 10 bucks on an adapter for the van’s CD player, so she made tapes. She recorded a bunch of stuff so she and her aunt could have something to listen to on the way back and forth from the court. Unless Ms. Kaye was home from a business trip.

“How did you know my birthday was today?” I asked, reaching for the tape.

“That’s a stupid question” she replied, and for once, she focused on the road so she wouldn’t have to look at me. “I was hoping you would call me.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I asked.

She let out an angry snort of air.

Something in my hoodie began to vibrate. Loud enough hear it. Her face became ghost white.

“Why the hell is that shaking?” She asked, gripping the steering wheel harder.

The intensity grew stronger and stronger in cycles of buzzing. Stopping then starting again.

“That’s what the goggled lady gave me.” I said.

“Who? GET IT OUT OF HERE!” She shouted. The van drove into a roundabout. She reached inside my hoodie and grabbed the box. She tossed the package outside onto the gravel.

Mia stretched out her arms to protect her face and got closer to me. I covered my head. We waited for what we thought would be an explosion.

The box kept moving on the rocks. We got out of the vehicle. It shook on the ground at our feet. But it didn’t explode.

We looked at each other. “Hello from Future Treats!” We heard from inside. The lid blew open. Confetti fell everywhere, “We care.”

“What the hell?” Mia shouted. “Where did that come from?”

A truck horn honked as it drove across the sidewalk to pass. She looked back to the van that blocked the roundabout.

“If it’s not going to blow up, let’s take it with us.” She picked up some confetti and put some in her pockets.

We got in and raced away. She pulled over again when it looked safe to park. We both looked at the package. I opened it. She ducked behind me. The device looked like a futuristic handheld PDA. A red screen on a square device switched on. The ice cream logo turned red.

A name appeared on the screen.

“A.z.a.m.i? I have no idea what an “Azami” is. Or how I would pronounce something like that.” I said.

Mia shrugged.

Under that name appeared mine. Aurore. The device began to talk as if a person were speaking.

“Let’s get to work!” It said.

We looked at each other. “Why does the PDA vibrate?” I asked.

“Hi, Azzzzssssami! Let’s start the employee video.” I wasn’t sure if the device thing glitched out, or if that’s how you say that name. Or if the device was supposed to shock and burn my hand a little or not?

I turned to her and I’m like, “Did that thing call me ‘A-zam-ee’?”

She shrugged. “Did that thing shock you?”

“Meh.” I shrugged.

A video played on the PDA thing. An ice cream scoop crossed the screen. Words appeared. The picture was sharper and clearer than anything we had ever seen. I wish I could see the rest of the world with that kind of clarity.

“This is nuts,” Mia exclaimed.

A flash blinded us. The ground shook. I felt this strange sensation all over my body. When I could see again, the light from objects bent in strange ways. Light from everything spun towards something. Everything went black.

Before my sight came back, I heard a voice. I looked around. Everything looked the same as it had moments before. The touch-pad glass thing did, whatever it did whenever sucking us into the thing, and now we stood in the same place?

“Happy Birthday, Employee! You can begin your shift whenever you want. You might have questions. Such as, what is going on? Where am I? How do I file my W-2? Let’s only address some of those questions.”

My head turned to the driver's seat. Mia moved closer to me and squinted at the PDA.

“What did that thing do to us?” She asked.

A new video played. “You work for Future Treats now, Azzzzamy.” The video cut from the ice cream cone to a beach with the waves hitting the sand on a bright day. “You are exactly where you were before you found this device. In the same room, with the same people you love and cherish. You are okay. You are in a completely different identical universe. *You* have signed up to work for Future Treats. Who are we? We deliver food whenever you want it. How does 'Future Treats' provide our great service? Without causing complications to the space-time continuum? Let me tell you. Because we care, we cannot offer our service within our universe. You can imagine why this might be a bad idea. But luckily, with your help, we can offer our service to a select few universes. Or dimensions if that makes more sense to you. Now, are you calm?”

“No!” We both exclaimed.

“Perfect. For a fun explanation, here is a scientist from our company.”

“The hell is all this? Identical universe?” Mia asked.

An ice cream scoop hand puppet appeared against a basic textured blue wall. A woman spoke in a lower ridiculous voice. “You like video games, don’t you? Well, imagine you got a high score and you’re ready to move onto the next level! The “game” auto-saves your progress into a file. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, this file can get saved into multiple copies. If you open any of these files, they play. You have all your items, and nothing major has changed. Think of this dimension you are in now like one of those save files. It’s a copy of the dimension you used to live in. You might notice a few anomalies, but let’s not freak! At Future Treats, we care. So, let’s pause a second, and think about what we learned!”

“Why is the puppet talking so much? I don’t like it.” Mia said.

To my horror, the puppet went on. “You’re in one of these dimensional “save files” right now! This isn’t a game, this is real. So please read the employee standards of conduct so you won’t get yourself hurt! We wouldn’t want that. Remember, you signed a waiver!”

The video changed to a wide shot of the lady with the puppet. She laughed and took the puppet off her hand. She spoke in a normal voice. The older woman had reddish-gray hair and laughed a bit before talking next.

“The dimension you are in is safe. Other than the risks you, and all your party, agreed to when you signed your contract. There is nothing you can do here that is going to mess up any timelines, realities, or any of that. Everything has been safeguarded for us. Now. You might ask. Could I go back in time and kill Hitler as a child? Yes, if you can find an order from back then I suppose, but you have fast food to deliver! If you choose to start your shift, you have 8 hours to take deliveries, at your convenience. At the end of the 8 hours, you might get to go home with all the money you earned. If you don’t want to work, that is okay too! We have another you on shift who is willing to work! If you choose not to take deliveries, please enjoy our time travel ‘PDA’. At the end of those eight hours in the shift, you could return to this exact moment in your own universe. If you still have questions, you can ask them then. Remember. We care.”

I saw a box on the device's screen prompting me to “Please agree”

“Is this a joke?” Mia asked. “We’re in a different dimension?”

“Are you doing this? Did you set this up?” I said.

“No! I have no idea what’s going on. Why would you say that?” She said.

I stammered. “I-I don’t know.” *Why did I say that? Mia never plays pranks on me. Why did I question her like that?* “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what any of this means.”

“I don’t blame you for stuff.” She exclaimed. “It sounds like you got signed up for something.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I looked down at the PDA.

“We gotta get back to my house soon.” She shifted gears.

“Wait. If this is a job. Do you think it pays well?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

She grunted, turning the steering wheel. “I need to talk to my mom about this. She’ll know what to do.”

I turned to her. “Didn’t the video say this is an identical dimension or something? Wouldn’t that mean that’s not your mom? It’s. One of your moms?”

“I mean,” She said. I could see her thinking. “It’s still my mom.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell her we got put in an identical dimension for some time travel fast food job? She’s not going to believe us.”

“That was that one day. She doesn’t always act like that, she takes stuff out on people like I do,” Mia explained.

“So she’d be okay with knowing we’ve been hanging out?”

Mia glanced then shook her head. She turned up the volume of the birthday tape mix. We listened to the bumps in the road along with wailing guitars and screaming vocals.

Episode 2 Don't Slam the Door.

Neither of us talked until the van pulled up into the open garage. We parked.

Mia whispered. "Close your door very, very quietly. Don't slam it. Mom can hear like, a mouse whispering prayers from close up. Don't make any noise above *this level* of a whisper. If she doesn't hear us, she's not going to wake up. And I don't have to explain stuff tonight. We can sneak you out in the morning before she wakes up."

I'm like "Why is the mouse praying? Why can your mom hear them? Who are they praying to? Are there cheese gods who demand sacrifices?"

She told me that wasn't the point, and told me again not to slam my door.

She got out of the van quietly as she could and snuck across the concrete floor. She reached for a rope attached to the top and pulled it all the way, closing the garage. Without making a sound.

Proud, she turned to me. "Nailed it." She whispered.

SLAM.

She looked at me in horror. I looked back, also in horror. My mouth hung open. "I was thinking. Don't slam the door so hard that I slammed the door. I am so sorry."

Stomping her foot and stretching out her fingers in anger she said. "I asked you to do one thing!"

"One is a hard number! I messed up, I'm sorry," I replied.

"Apology loop!" She said.

From the kitchen entrance of the garage, Ms. Kaye rushed out. She turned on a single light. She stood in her black nightgown looking hard and confused. We stood covered in paint.

"Mia? Is that you?" She asked.

Mia rolled her eyes. "No Mom, I'm Dumbledore. I'm here to solve all your problems for you." She shook her head as if that were the dumbest question ever.

Ms. Kaye's face got angry red. I know that look on a mom's face. I should have stopped myself from letting her pick me up from the park. She shouldn't be hanging around me. This is why I don't deserve to have happiness. Why can't I get out of my way?

"I'm sorry!" I said, hyperventilating.

Mia turned to me. "Apology loop!" She turned to her mom, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah Mom, I picked up a hooker, bought some blow, and joined a cult too."

Ms. Kaye looked at me. And sighed. "Are you the cult leader or the hooker?" She said to me.

Mia put a hand on my shoulder, since my knees were shaking and my face must have looked like a fish out of water trying to breathe. "Maybe both?" She said.

Ms. Kaye took a couple of steps toward us. "You don't have a license, Mia!" Her left eye twitched.

I gasped.

Mia shrugged. "If someone was ever home to take me to get the test, I'd have one."

Ms. Kaye is like, "Mia Serenity. What is going on? Why is. Aurore here? Close to one oclock in the morning?"

We looked at each other, hoping the other one would know what to do. But of course, I'm stupid and can't I think of anything.

Mia shook her hands at me in a strangling gesture after not saying something. "Bicana will figure out the van is gone. I went looking for Aurore at the park and found a glow party going on. Someone gave them a package with a futuristic PDA. Strange stuff happened. A puppet told us we were in an identical dimension, here to deliver fast food."

My hands shook as I reached out to show the PDA to Ms. Kaye. She looked at it. Tired.

"Nice palm pilot." Ms. Kay closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. "Identical dimension? This is what you came up with to tell me? Out of all the things you could have picked. It's identical dimension fast food? Do you think I'm stupid?"

On the futuristic device, I looked at the apps, trying to find some way to show Ms. Kay the employee video that we saw. But the video was gone. I couldn't find it. The phone had a weird setup that made it super hard to find anything. Mia looked at me. I shook my head. "I can't find the video. It said there would be an eight-hour shift. Then we'd get to return to when the shift started or something."

Ms. Kaye stepped towards the kitchen door. "What is happening is you are going to bed. I am calling Aurore's mother to come to pick up the identical dimension traveler." Ms. Kay looked at me. "What's your number?"

"I don't know what my number is." Which is true. I didn't bother to memorize my house number. What was I going to do calling my house anyways? Check on the answering machine to see if the house was lonely? My mom would never pick up.

Ms. Kaye walked over to me. I held my breath. She took something sticking out of my hoodie, taking a flier I had stuffed in my math book. I had forgotten about our school's parent meet-up event. My mom was supposed to bring punch, and contact another student's parents about dessert, but she didn't make it out to the meeting. Ms. Kay found my name, and put her finger under my home phone number. She walked to the kitchen and picked up the receiver on the wall. She fingers punched in some numbers.

"She won't answer," I followed her inside. My hands fell flat on the counter beside Ms. Kay.

"Mom, stop." Mia stood near the refrigerator covered in envelopes marked "Bills". Held on by those magnetic things. They were all unpaid.

"Let's get everyone home." Ms. Kaye huffed, waiting as the phone rang.

Cue to tragedy, for the first time, my 'other' mom answered the phone. I was doomed.

"Sorry to call so late Ms. Chandler. Aurore is here and—" She paused. Ms. Kaye turned to me as my mom spoke, slurring her words over the receiver. She couldn't stop looking at me.

She knew.

I listened. She listened. My mom had told her something. I lowered my eyes.

"You should drink some water." She hung up the phone.

Mia hesitated, before asking, "What did she say?"

Ms. Kaye turned away from us. She spoke. “That Aurore can spend the night. I’ll drive you both to school in the morning. Does that handheld device tell you when your “shift” starts? Is it going to interfere with the math class you’re failing?”

I shrugged.

“I’m not talking to you... Nevermind. How about you both go to sleep...” Ms. Kaye turned back to talk to us. Instead, she saw me grabbing something from the top cabinet. I poured coffee into Mia’s favorite cup. The one with the emo llama. I handed it to her. And then I realized what I did. We looked up at her, together.

“How do you know where the coffee cups were, Aurore?” She asked.

I didn’t answer... I took a sip of coffee, hoping she wouldn’t notice me wide-eyed.

She shook her head. “Go study, and if you’re worried about whatever this PDA time thing is, we can deal with it later. There’s leftover pizza in the fridge if you want it. I only have 40 bucks left so that might be it for a while. I’ll call my sister in the morning. I’m going to bed.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Mia walked further into the house and turned back to look at me. Ms. Kaye went back to her bedroom, closing the door. I stood there. Confused.

She knows what’s up. She’s like “No one is in trouble. We yell it out sometimes. Come on.”

“I’m used to like, fighting with fits and stuff. This is all weird to me.”

She almost smiled. But she sounded annoyed. “Get used to it.”

We brought the pizza slices up the stairs to her room, on a plate hot from the microwave. Mia sat on the floor next to me. After using a napkin to wipe neon paint off our faces, she took a slice of pizza. Her lips twisted before taking a bite and saying. “How can you work for a company you didn’t sign up for? How is that like, legal?” She looked as hungry as I was.

I nodded. The PDA buzzed. We jumped about a foot away together in shock. She pointed. “Is there a ‘make it not do weird stuff’ button?”

Something else on the screen came up. “Take this order now and receive a two-thousand-dollar bonus! Coffee delivery.”

My eyes went to the order details. “Two thousand dollars? I can make two thousand dollars by delivering coffee? I could find a place to live, and eat, couldn't I?”

“For a month. That’s about how much my mom pays in rent for this place. I know this address, that’s Lost Coffee. We’re always at Lost Coffee. Order sixty-six. We could pick the order before school tomorrow.”

“Your mom pays two thousand a month? About? For this house?” I asked, in shock.

She nodded. “If you include utilities, yeah. She pays a lot.”

“We don’t know what this is. What if this is some kind of... Scam. The video did have a puppet.”

“But if there are more jobs like that,” Mia said. “We could make some real money. Maybe my mom could take some time off if we could help out. Did you see all those bills on the fridge?”

I kept reading on the screen the “Two thousand dollars”. I didn’t say anything.

“Of course you don’t want to do anything.” Mia blurted. “You never want to do anything to make your situation better.”

“There’s so much about this thing we don’t know!” My fingertip glided over the glass screen. “I don’t think we should risk whatever this is.”

She looked hurt at this.

“I’m not going to mess us up this time.” I said.

She never answered that. She wanted to say something else. But didn’t.

It had been hard to sleep after drinking so much coffee and with so much excitement. But we laid close together for a few hours, with the window cracked, listening to my CD player skip every minute or so. Still laying on the floor. Because we are floor people. She had the right earbud, I had the left. We both listened to the same CD on repeat until we fell asleep, and the sun came up.

I wake up cold at the Kaye house because of how low Mia liked to keep the thermostat. She wraps herself in blankets by the time the sun rises. After staying there for a while until she can bear to get up and face the day. I used this time to go downstairs to make coffee until she calms down.

After she and I first started hanging out, we'd always start fighting first thing in the morning. I'm the grumpy one; she's an angry wild bear the entire time. She threw a spoon at me one time. That meant to stop talking. We started following a "morning depression checklist". It's our routine of coffee and panicking. Things got better. Kind of.

That morning, after showering and borrowing some of Mia's clothes, Ms. Kaye drove us to Lost Coffee in her expensive Mustang. The place was close to our school and didn't have as much traffic. I fumed over having to carry around that PDA. I couldn't leave the thing in Mia's room. But what was I supposed to do with that the whole day, keep it in my pocket? What's the point? The device uses the internet without having to dialing up, which is cool I guess, but I could just walk to a computer.

We went to get out of the car, and I was like, "Bye Ms. Kaye!" real fast and stuff. But she said "Aurore, can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

I bet my face looked like someone had asked me to tap dance on steak knives or something. I mouthed to Mia. "Save me." Then I remembered she couldn't read lips. And that Ms. Kaye totally could see me mouthing stuff. Mia stood there squinting at me confused, trying to figure out what I was saying.

"I'm getting you an Americano." She shook her head and headed into the neon building. I sat alone in the left back seat, behind Ms. Kaye who stopped the "Aurore's birthday" mixtape. She let out a deep breath as if relieved. The sadness of the music hurt her or something. She pulled out the tape and examined the label.

"Oh." She said. "Is this tape yours?"

I gulped. "Yeah. Mia made it for me today."

"Happy Birthday." She said.

I sat frozen, unable to speak. I tried to say something that sounded like "Smanks." but my mumbling words drowned out halfway through saying it. I nodded a few times instead. That seemed to be enough for her. She also nodded.

The seats smelled clean. That's what I remember thinking trying not to think. I'm always finding new ways to do that. I asked her, "Is this about the confetti in the room last night? I can explain."

There was a long pause before she spoke to me again. She sat gripping the steering wheel with both hands. She thought a while before saying, "I'm not sure which dimension we are in. But in whichever dimension you find yourself, you can stay with us." She informed me, "Money is tight. It's bad actually. Really bad. I don't know how much I can help you."

Squirming in my seat, I exclaimed "I can look for a job." It dawned on me. My fingers glided over the PDA in my pocket "I. Oh. I have a job, I can help you."

"You mean the palm pilot you found last night?" She blinked a couple of long blinks. She turned around in the driver's seat to face me.

"Some of the orders on the PDA are for a lot of money. It's a real job, I think." I showed the amount to her. Her left eye closed, and her head tilted sideways.

"Something about this all seems. Off." She glanced sideways. "You sure this thing isn't going to start asking you to take your clothes off or something?"

I reached for the door handle. "I will never take my clothes off for money, Ms. Kaye."

She shook her head.

"You know what I wish someone would have taught me, Rore?" She reached for her purse.

In case you didn't know, Aurore is a confusing name my mom picked for me because it sounded cool. A lot of people don't know the "re" at the end is silent. So, the teachers and other kids would call me "Auro-re" or "Rory." for short back in Junior High. I don't like to be called that anymore, but I was not going to correct her.

"I wish someone would have told me to not owe anything to anybody. I haven't made a sale in months." She seemed to reflect on the thought. Her face got weird like that wasn't something I was supposed to know.

She went on, "Make sure Mia finds a pay phone and checks in with me after school, I'll be at the office. Might have to fly back to Chicago tonight." She rubbed her eyes then handed me two twenty-dollar bills from her purse. "She's going to jump without looking someday. I know because I live out of a suitcase for most days of the year. Away from my family. That's how I got here. With you around, maybe she'll think twice. About. Doing Mia things."

“I. she. Err. Ms. Kaye? She’s. My. I’d never leave her behind. You can trust me. I’m stable.” Ms.Kaye grabbed my shirt as I went to get out of the Mustang. I flinched.

“Wait.” She said, loosening her grip after seeing my mini freak out. “Did you see that person? They are stumbling inside. I should go in with you.”

“I can throw down,” I lowered my raised eyebrow.

She gave me a death glare. She leaned towards the steering wheel, tapping her fingers. “Throw down?” She remembered ‘The fight.’ from Jr. High, the one where all the counselors and therapists got involved.

“I... Got to go study math Ms. Kaye. We got a test this morning.” I got out of that Mustang so fast. I slammed the door and ran inside the coffee shop.

“Be careful,” I heard her say behind me.

I found Mia waiting in the back of the coffee shop, collecting pillows from the other eight retro sofas lining the outer walls of the shop. People sat drinking coffee in large black mugs. The purple and light blue tubes lit the place, casting shadows on the register on the L shape counter. The aroma of roasted coffee beans and indie books lingered in the air.

I walked past all the college students sitting cross legged on the floor reading weird poetry aloud, and sat next to Mia on the sofa. She reached over and put a pillow between me and the armrest. Beethoven played over the store’s speakers.

She handed me the americano. The drink didn’t last long, as I swallowed the whole thing in about 20 seconds. I placed my empty mug next to her’s on the coffee table.

“You watched me freaking out the whole time from in here didn’t you?” I asked Mia.

“Yeah, that was intense. What she say to you?”

I sneered, pulling up the PDA. Mia bumped her hips into mine, moving closer.

“What did she say?”

"I'm staying with you. If I can help pay some stuff off. We are taking this shift and giving your mom the money. And she also told me you spilled sour milk in my locker." I glimpsed at an abstract painting of a crow pecking at a cucumber on the wall.

I took the job on the device. "Shift Begins! You have 8 hours to take orders. At the end of the shift, you might return to your dimension. Good luck, worker! We care." It chimed.

"She's letting you stay with us?" Mia asked. Shocked.

"... In this dimension? I guess?" I asked. Feeling as if I had slammed the door of the van again, by not asking her if it was okay.

She leaned over and hugged me. Pressing her forehead into my waist.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm having a moment," She let go of me and sat back up before fidgeting with a pillow not sitting flush behind her. "Shut up. We're going to figure this all out. This life stuff. Aren't we?"

"Yeah," I let my head rest on hers. "I'm not messing it up this time." I said.

I tapped on 'Confirm.'

"Now that your shift has started, you can take an order!" It said, "These orders are from regular customers who want a good old treat from the past. Don't forget to smile, and don't forget to say the Future Treats motto! Our Motto is..." The speakers crackled and hissed. I held the device away from my body.

"And we're going to buy your van from your aunt."

She hugged me again. Which completely threw me off, cause this hugging usually wasn't a thing.

Not after too long, a woman in her early thirties covered in awesome tattoos walked to the counter. She called out order sixty-six. I hugged Mia tighter before getting up to grab the drink.

"That's mine." The stumbling drunk Ms. Kaye saw out in the parking lot stood in front of me. They wore a red tie and a wrinkled white button-down dress shirt. They looked old. Burned out. Like they had been hit by a train about 20 times but somehow lived through it.

“That’s not your coffee, kid.” They said.

“It says it’s my order on my PDA.” I held up the device. The stranger held something of their own. Their device said:

“Authenticated.”

I backed away, turning to Mia, who squinted at the stranger in the store.

“What did you do?” I asked them.

The familiar looking person ran to the counter and grabbed my coffee. Mia stood closer next to me, now holding a sofa pillow ready to fight.

“What are you doing? Why? Would you take her?” The stranger asked, drooping their shoulders. How did they know who Mia was? They went on. “I could throw this, you know. I’m being nice to you. Which is nice of me after what YOU did to me.” The drunk took a few more steps back. They were moving towards the exit.

“What did I do to you? I don’t know you,” I put my hands in my pockets.

“Why do you think I look like you?” They hissed. I peered into their familiar eyes.

Other people in the coffee shop turned to us and watched us argue. The cool goth lady waved her hand. “Whatever this is, get it outside and away from here.”

The drunk shook their head. “I. Am you. From 20 years in the future. From another dimension. But you should know that by now. Look. We got off on the wrong foot here. Let’s all go talk things out. I have some hard things to say to you, but I’m going to set you right. I know a great margarita place in 2019 with some cheap specials.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t believe what I heard. I’m like “I don’t drink. I’m eighteen! You’re joking with me, right? You don’t. We don’t. Drink.”

Thinking about their offer brought a random mental image of my mom into my head. Her rummaging through the fridge for one last can of beer.

The other me started patting their pockets with their other hand. As if they were searching for something. “I have an ID that says you are of age. It’s not even fake. Give me your phone and it’s yours.”

Mia grabbed my clenched hand. "Breathe," She said.

The stranger went on. "Can you stop being a sad little emo kid for five seconds little Azami? I got things to do."

My jaw clenched. "That was on the package. Are... Are you calling us A-zam-ee now? Like you think that's a name normal people use?"

"What are you saying? Azami! I changed my name to Azami."

I'm like "Umm. Why?"

"Because you suck, and I want nothing to do with you. You're dumb. I'm getting out of here." They tightened their empty hands. But the to-go cup they thought they were holding was gone.

"Run!" I yelled to Mia, holding the coffee. We dashed out of the store. A-zam-ee ran after us but gave up. Instead, they raised their middle finger at us as we ran towards Fremont street.

Episode 3 Two for One

We got as far away as we could from the crazy old future “me” and retreated to my other thinking spot, the Neonopolis outdoor mall, which was not far from the coffee shop. It felt like having a private space. No one would be there. Even though it had only recently opened, it already felt like a ghost town. We took the escalator up to where the buttery scent of popcorn from the open yet already abandoned movie theater overwhelmed us. From the top floor we could look down at the food court and if the old psychopath came looking for us.

“Did that happen?” I asked. Had I really met my future self?

“It better not have.” Mia scoffed. “There better be a gas leak at the coffee shop, and that. Person. Isn’t...” She trailed off and stared into the blackened glass of a window of the former high end fashion shop. The store lasted a week. The armless mannequins seemed to be looking at Mia. “But unlike those creepy things. I think it is real. Is this all my fault?”

“What do you mean? What is your fault? That we are going to miss school today? ”

Mia grabbed the PDA out of my left hand. “Why can’t you understand anything I talk to you about. The delivery date on this says 2022. Like, It doesn’t expect us to stand here with coffee and wait around forever, does it? Where do we deliver this for money?”

“Didn’t you just say not long ago that you don’t blame me for stuff?” I asked.

She gave me a cold hard look. I returned one, and we stood in awkward silence for what felt like a million years. Finally, she bit her lip. “The pocket computer thing says we have fifteen minutes, why is there a timer? I thought we were time traveling?”

She started pressing ‘buttons’. She’s good at that.

The PDA shook and hummed as loud as a jet engine. “Don’t do that! That’s not even yours, Turn it off!” I freaked out.

“I can’t stop it.” She cried.

We saw a flash. Everything went dark.

When we came to, we stood in an empty Neonopolis. That part was normal, but all the shops in the outdoor mall looked vacant. We were standing in the dark on the wrong side of a dusty “closed sign”. Only some of the the neon signs that we recognized from 2002 still worked.

The time travel device started speaking. “Welcome to the year 2022. This PDA time travel trip has been sponsored by Elon’s Cabbage! Satisfy that crunchy cabbage craving with a taste of Elon! Now verified!”

“Do they use cabbage when they barbecue your Mongolians? We got to get this delivered if we want that money,”

I grunted. “The list of forbidden words.”

“Yeah whatever.” She mumbled. “Doesn’t look like our rules helped us.”

“What the hell?” I put my hands on my hips. “Do you know how many forbidden words I struggle with when talking to you? I feel like I have to censor myself so much that I...”

“Do you know what your problem is?” She interpreted. I found myself letting off a growl in annoyance, though I sounded more like a kitten than a tiger.

“That I have someone nagging me all the time who doesn’t get I’m trying really really hard?”

“Your problem is you don’t try hard at all. You can’t do anything that might be convenient. You just complain about it and don’t try to fix it.”

“We don’t have time for this, let’s go.” I said.

“It’s fine.” She said. Of course everyone know’s those words don’t mean that. She might have well have thrown a spoon at me.

We hurried out of the outdoor mall and onto Fremont Street. People walked around us. The casino lights flashed, and slot machines clanked from a distance. Paint from a street artist sprayed into the warm air. Music from our time blasted through speakers hanging on the jumbotron overhead.

“This is the future, huh?” I asked. We stopped and looked around, together. Looking at all the lights and sights around us.

“I already don’t want it to be.” She said, deep in her thoughts. She grabbed the CD player from my hoodie pocket to drown them out.

Above the front door was an enormous banner that read “FuKuYu”, and everyone had to walk under it to get into the store. She put the CD player back in my hoodie pocket as we walked inside shaking our heads.

“FuKuYu family market? That sounds like someone made a joke but no one got it but they kept it anyways.” I said.

Mia pointed at a giant poster on the back wall. On it was an old lady with her thumb sticking up against a background of lilies. The poster read “Neighborhood market fifty percent off canned tuna day.”

“Dr. Tan-aka?” I whispered in amazement. “Did my therapist quit and buy a grocery store?”

“After meeting your future self? I know why.” She deadpanned.

“I need a drink.” I paused. “Water. Not that kind of drink.”

“I got it.” She instantly headed to the short fridges near the register full of glass marble soda and other drinks.

The order didn’t say where we were taking the coffee, so we started looking around. FuKuYu family market had a bunch of weird stuff in it. Mostly things wrapped in rice and seaweed. The air smelled sweet from the bread baking at the back of the store.

The woman at the register waved us down.

“Is that my Lost coffee?” The woman loosely swung her arms. “It should be order sixty-six?”

“Here you go. One Lost coffee.” I handed her the order trying to smile.

“Did I offend you?” The clerk asked.

“That’s how they smile.” Mia explained.

She took a large sip, closing her eyes and tilting her head. She slurped, and made a strange noise as if she was enjoying it.

“That’s the taste I’ve missed for 20 years. Makes me want to read poetry. This cost a lot of money for coffee, but.” She hummed classical pieces of music to herself. “This two-for-one deal was worth it.”

Mia grabbed my shoulder. “Two for one?”

“Yeah! Azami delivered the other coffee five minutes ago at 9:35. I gave the first one to my boss. Take the waters as a tip, I’ll cover for you. Thanks again for the discount!”

“What do you mean two for one?” My eyes turned to the time on the PDA. The time read 9:41. Which was different from the time displayed at the store by about twenty minutes.

Mia dragged me away from the counter, holding two giant plastic water bottles. “It means we didn’t make the delivery first. Your other self must have gotten the money from the order.”

The device chimed as we walked out of the air-conditioned store back into the hot parking lot. On the screen now appeared my name and A ZAM EE’s name. Under mine showed zero dollars. A ZAM EE’s had two thousand under it. I pushed the screen almost to her face, knowing her vision sucks, to show she was right.

“If you wouldn’t have fought with me we might have gotten her first.” She pointed. “Find another order, something with a big bonus.”

A voice called out from inside the store. “Azami!” The store doors opened. I turned around to a shocked older Japanese lady wearing a store uniform.

“Oh no.” She sighed. “You took that delivery job.”

“Hi, Dr. Tan-aka!” I said waving. “You look great!”

She frowned. Something about the sight of Mia seemed to trouble Dr. Tan-ake. She stood looking uncomfortable.

“We’re friends now,” Mia said, trying to figure out why she was letting off those very obvious weird vibes. “The trauma bonded us or something.”

Tan-aka blinked. “You’re trauma bonding. Yes.” She closed one eye and tightened her lips. “I don’t do that anymore. I’m glad to see you worked things out. For a minute. Hey Aurore, tell your older self to move their van. It’s been out front all month. I’m going to get it towed if they can’t get it going.”

“Van?” My words fumbled as they came out. “I have a van?”

She pointed to the corner of the parking lot. I recognized something I had not seen on the way inside.

“Is that your aunt Bianca’s van?” I asked.

There parked at the far end, taking up two spots sat the hippie van. Super-sized wheels, giant side windows. The van might as well have had a surfboard attached to the roof.

I peeked in the back windows, walking around to the front. The sun reflected off of something sitting on the front seat. I put my hand to my forehead.

“My license,” I whispered.

My wallet sat opened up with my DMV photo out in plain view. My soul died a little. “And my emotional support hoodie.” The fabric had seen better days. The more worrying part was the empty beer cans and plastic whiskey bottles littered about.

Mia choked on her words. “Why’s your stuff in my van?”

“I don’t know,” I felt my hands shake the more I thought about a future living in a parking lot. Where were my friends? Why didn’t I have a family?

I thought about finding a rock to break the window, but realized the door was unlocked. Also, it wouldn’t right the wrong of the DMV photo. Mia stood staring at her reflection in the passenger side mirror.

My eyes turned to the back of the van. The back looked like a trash-themed adventure park. The seats had been removed, and off to the left side lay a sleeping bag on a mountain of clothes. To the right was a wall of stuff with a backpack I recognized. The side saddle bag, the one I had forgotten to take to school and left in Mia’s room.

“Do you see anything of mine?” She asked. “Are you sure it’s Azamee’s? Cause you wouldn’t buy this without me right? Unless, my aunt had to sell it for some reason.”

“I’m not seeing anything that looks like it's yours. Why do-”

“Where am I then? Is that why your future self is...” She stop abruptly. I motioned for her to go on, but she refused. The look on her face reminded me of when Ms. Kay turned off my birthday tape mix, as if the sadness was causing active pain.

“This is a joke universe. This isn’t what's going to happen in twenty-one years is it? You, gone? Me, living out of the back of a van? Worth nothing? Is is all there is?”

She stuck out her hand. “That’s a little dramatic. We don’t know anything yet.”

Mia opened the door and found keys that had been tossed on the driver side floor. She reached over and put the keys in the ignition. She tried to start the van. The engine made a clanking metal sound.

She gasped. “This is my van” A moment later the hood popped, and she hit some car thing near the top. “Now try it.” She mumbled, pointing towards the ignition.

I turned the key. The engine started.

The hood of the van closed shut. I got in.

“I can’t live in a van!” I said. “This isn’t what I wanted at all.”

At hearing this, Mia hit the steering wheel hard. She sat for a moment, before revving the engine.

“I wanted the van so we could get out of here. Away from Vegas, and all the sad stuff.”

I lowered my head, disgusted at myself. “We have to change this. I don’t know what this is but I don’t like it.”

“It’s useless.” She said. “We’ve watched those movies. All that stuff is impossible to change. Someone ends up dying, or someone learns some bull lesson.”

“Salmon. Like the fish!” An audiobook suddenly played through the beat-up side speakers. You know how the electronics work in that thing. She turned it off.

“It won't matter what happens in the future or whatever. This is a different dimension. Once we end the shift. With this van full of money. We can do what we want and fix everything.” Mia shifted the clutch.

“Why didn't you tell me you wanted the van for us? I would have tried to have helped you.”

“No. You wouldn't have.” She said. She floored the pedal and roared out of the Fukuyu parking lot.

As the van drove down the road, I looked at orders on the device. She pointed to one of the orders. “Find one.”

I found one.

“Hey! That's your address! Our address, I mean. Your mom. Your Future other mother must be ordering something. It won't be a problem if other me shows up. We can team up to beat them down if they do.”

The order was for a sandwich from a pizza place we go to, from 2001. Spinnerbait Pizza. The retro ocean-y setup was cool, but the music they played annoyed both of us. It was the kind of music that would sound a lot better in a car wash than it does over speakers. Either way, we knew the place.

“Your other you didn't look like they liked me.” Mia went on. “I bet other older you won't take this order. Even if the bonus is five thousand dollars.”

“Mia.” I stopped. I took a deep breath. “My future self is a... I can't think of anything nice. A jerk with short ugly hair. But you're always going to be awesome to me.”

She's like, “I kind of liked the short hair on you.”

I stared at her for a second. In disbelief. Instead of saying something, feeling a fight coming on, I looked back to the PDA.

“Sponsored order?” I stared down. “This says after we complete this we can do sponsored orders for more money.”

“Sponsored by whom? How much more money?” She asked.

“I don’t know. But we should find out.” I accepted the order and Mia made a left turn driving towards the pizza shop.

After picking up the sandwich in 2001, we returned to Mia’s house in 2022. Something seemed unsettling about the place now. Maybe it was the collection of garden gnomes sat by the entrance. Or the garbage laying. It wasn’t how the house was usually kept.

Mia walked to the door and tried to open it. But the knob didn’t turn. She tried her key, but the key didn’t fit. She banged on the wood. “Yo, mom it’s me. We got the sandwich.”

After a bit, we heard footsteps from the other side. For a moment Mia took a step forward, to enter but stopped. Like she didn’t believe her own eyes. I expected Ms. Kaye to come out of the house, but she didn’t.

Instead stranger stood there. Dressed in fine dinner date sort of clothes.

“Who are you?” Mia asked.

“You have my food?” The woman asked back.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Thanks.” She grabbed the sandwich. “You know when the second one getting here? I got a party starting and I owe my sister-in-law a sandwich too. Have you tried these? They are so good. It’s the peppercorns that really make the flavor pop.”

“Does anyone else live here? Does my Mom live here?” Mia asked with concern.

“I don’t know you.” The woman replied.

“Do you know who lived here before?”

“No.” The stranger seemed uneasy. “We bought it. In an estate sale twenty years ago. I’m going to eat this now. Good night.” She closed the door.

We walked away from the house. As we stood, looking down at the shadows cast by the flickering light, Mia’s eyes narrowed.

She covered her face with her hands. “This isn’t real, is it? What happened?” Her body rocked back and forth. She folded her arms. We tried to search AOL on the device to see if we could find out what happened to Ms. Kay and Mia. But we couldn't find any real information. Everything lead us to advertisements for funeral home services and french fry sale codes.

“ This isn’t something we can fix, is it?” I asked.

“Why isn’t my Mom here?” Mia bowed her head. “We’d never sell that house.”

Had I failed Ms. Kaye? The thought punched me in the gut.

“The plan doesn’t change.” I said, pointing to the PDA. “We can take a sponsored order. We can still make as much money as we possible can.”

“What does it matter? If I’m dead?” Mia said.

“I’m not going to let that happen.”

I looked through the jobs on the device. I found one and held the phone to Mia’s face.

“Look at the amount on this order.”

She squinted. Her eyes widened at the number on the screen.

Instead of watching a rightfully emotional Mia drive that clunky van, I checked my watch. Which was useless. Time traveling between dimensions is confusing. Is that what jet lag feels like I wonder?

She parked the van at the stadium, which totally wasn’t there in 2002, and I pulled up the order. On the screen, we found two front row tickets at the 50 yard line, as well as the parking pass that we used to get in, which the device printed out for us. The delivery notes instructed us to wait in the seats until further notice.

I could see tears dripping from Mia’s cheeks. It crushed my soul. Not two seconds after parking I see a familiar jerk coming at us from the other side of the parking lot. Their walk seemed to be more stumbly this time.

“Hey!” They shouted. “You stole my van! I had to take a stranger’s car here! How did you get it running?”

“I do not want to talk to you, A-zam-ee.” I yelled out the window.

“Azami!” They pounded on the back window. We got out of the van.

“How did you know where we were?” I asked. I could still smell “The weekend twelve pack” on my breath.

“Find my phone.” Azami said.

“You mean your device? It’s in your hands stupid!” I said.

“What happened to me?” Mia asked my future self. “Why is someone else living at my house?”

“You might have moved. It’s been years.” My future self suggested, cold, rehearsed. They quickly peered into the back of the vehicle.

“We tell each other everything. Aurore.” Mia said to my future self. “Why wouldn’t you tell me this?”

Azami threw up their hands in frustration. “There’s a lot of things that are not like how I want them. But I can’t change any of that. This isn’t Back to the Future.”

I poked them in the chest. “You are going to tell me everything.”

“I’m not doing anything you ask me to do there, little foot,” They laughed.

I took a step closer to them. “I’m not asking.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Apology loop.” I reminded myself.

“I’m not bound by your rules.”

Mia threw her hands in the air. “I ... can’t deal with two of you. I need a moment.”

"I'll be right there, I'm going to-". Before I could finish talking, she reached inside my hoodie pocket pulling out the CD player.

"I super need these right now." Which I knew.

"Give me back my keys?!" Azami yelled, pointing at Mia.

"You can pry them from my cold dead fingers," She said, putting in the earbuds. She hurried inside.

"The hell, dude?" I pushed my future self, who to my surprise was a lot lighter than I expected. I noticed I could see the outline of my own ribs through the dress shirt. "What... What are you doing? With life? What is wrong with you? Why would you treat her like that? After all she has done for us?"

"We. Dude." My other self said. "We. Don't go penning all this on me. You're better off without that narcissist."

I don't know what came over me. But I hit them. Right there in the parking lot. Closed fist and all. They stumbled back into someone else's car, touching their bloody lip.

"I will cut you." I said.

Azami laughed at this. "You are so under her control you have no idea how brainwashed you are." They said turning back to the stadium. "She doesn't just boss you around dude. She controls you. She uses your emotions to manipulate you. But you are so stupid you can't even figure it out. I get tired of this conversation. We have this fight every time I take a shift. I'm sick of it. You never figure it out. And you never will. You didn't mention it this time, but it's not Dr. Tan-aka but it's Dr. Tanaka. You idiot."

"I don't care about your opinion, or how many shifts you've taken.." I yelled. "Where. Is future Mia?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't tell you even if I did."

"You're lying."

"Believe whatever you want."

I gave up on myself and let them go inside. I tried to settle my emotions before trying to find Mia, but after a few minutes I had to head in. I knew I wasn't going to calm down. Because I

knew somehow, someway, I was to blame for what happened. And I didn't know what to do about it.

As soon as I found my seat Mia grabbed my CD collection I kept in my emotional support hoodie pocket and quickly flipped through all the CDs in the case.

"This is all you brought? You steal my entire dream life but can't bring a CD I like." Mia frowned.

I froze. Thinking of all the things I could say. "My bad." I sat down.

"I didn't mean to snap. I don't mean it."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"Are you having Jr. High cheer-leader flashbacks?" I thought it was funny, and that a joke would lighten the mood. Since she did not like being forced to do cheer in Jr. High, as you know. She did not. She straightened up and pulled back her hair from her earbuds. About to yell. We heard a familiar voice.

"You're in my seat."

"Mia's in your seat," I said, talking to my older self who arrived with a beer in their hand. They scoffed at me and sat next to us.

Future me waved their arms in the air, trying not to spill their beer. "Yeah, I'm the big scary monster. I get it kid." They mocked. "I'm the ghost of the future you!" They laughed an evil laugh. They found it funny, I guess. They chugged their entire beer then threw the empty plastic cup down to the ground.

"Don't call me kid," I told them.

"Why are they here?" She pointed at my other self with a look of disgust.

"That's how this works." Azami said.

“Then why weren’t you at the last one?” Mia asked.

Azami didn’t say anything. Mia changed the track on the CD player.

Music played over the stadium speakers. “It’s your Las Vegas Looters vs The Phoenix Hot CoMmAnDeRs. This game has been sponsored by FUTURE TREATS. We got you at Future Treats. Meet our Future Treat trained professionals who are squaring off as a treat FOR YOU!!”

Realizing everyone in the stadium can see you in your emotional support hoodie was not cool. I tried to smile for everyone watching the jumbotron but I looked mad again.

“The winner, who signed a waiver, will get 2 million dollars if they win! No rules.”

Two million dollars? That wasn't what the order amount was for. I turned to Mia, who stood.

I sighed. “This is the weirdest birthday ever,”

“Shut up and do something already,” A-zam-ee bared their teeth at me. Which wasn’t a great look.

Azamee held the guardrail looking at the giant green tray of a field. Something began to fall from the ceiling of the stadium. Being let down on a rope to almost the fifty-yard line. It was a brief case.

“ARE YOU READY!” The crowd around us cheered. I noticed Azami bending their elbows. I recognized the look. Determination.

“The first person to get the briefcase back to their seat wins! Good luck Future Treat Employees!”

A horn blew, we heard hooting and hollering. I turned to run down to a gate allowing you field access. But I looked back to see if Azami followed me. They hadn’t. They had jumped the rail and were running across the field into a tunnel. I lost sight of them after they ran in.

I turned to call Mia, but she also wasn’t in her seat. I looked back to the field and saw her running toward the case. She ran through the cheer-leading squads. Both teams looked at the competition confused.

I tried to jump over the railing, but my foot slipped. I regained my footing, but saw my other self-run back out of the tunnel holding a ladder.

“What is this?” I yelled. I jumped down to the field. My feet moved towards Mia, who now stood at the fifty-yard line looking for some way to get up. She turned towards me. I grabbed her waist and tried to lift her up. But Azami came behind us and swung the ladder at her. I dropped her just in time. The ladder had missed her by inches.

The crowd cheered.

“The hell you doing Azamee!” I screamed, charging at myself.

“Winning.” They screamed back.

Azami set up the ladder and climbed as I checked on Mia to make sure she was okay. They grabbed each silver step as fast as they could. I shoved the ladder. The whole structure came crashing. The case waved back and forth.

I looked in all directions trying to find something to help my friend out with. I had to have something. I couldn’t keep standing there useless. With my mind blank, I tackled my future self at the knees. They threw a fist.

She had found a way to stand the ladder up. She leaped up and grabbed the suitcase, but the ladder shook. Azami had thrown me against the metal. I planted my feet, trying to not knock the ladder over. I glanced up and saw her climbing down, with the case in hand. They came at me, pushing me back.

Mia jumped before the ladder fell, landing on her feet on the grass below. Like she had practiced landing all those times back in cheer practice. She dashed towards the seats where we had been sitting.

She tried to lead Azami through the cheerleaders still standing on the sidelines. Azami approached her as if they were a hunter stalking prey running through a forest of cheerleaders. I went for a tackle, but my future self pushed me down to the ground. Azami reached for Mia, who climbed partly up the railing. She stretched out with one hand. She swung the briefcase up in an effort to push herself past the railing and onto the seats above. But the force of the swing caused it to slip out of her fingers. And it fell below, right into Azami’s hands.

She climbed over, and her sneakers landed on the floor below by seats. Azami climbed up. Mia began to strike at my older selves hand still holding onto the railing, intending to knock them down. But she stopped. She had that same pained look on her face. She couldn’t do it. Instead, she crossed her arms and stepped back. Giving them a hard look.

My hands reached out to pull Azami down. But I was too late. Before I could get back up to the row above, they sat down with all the brief case.

“We have a winner!” They announced over the speakers. Mia, with her hands folded, sat.

Panting, from having skipped out on P.E. class too many times, I returned to my seat. My other self held the case tight. It reminded me of those nature films where some animals hold the dead thing in their mouths. All proud or whatever.

“Dude, you almost hit her,” I accused. “What were you thinking? Why would you...”

“You could have killed me, Azami,” Mia sat wide eyed. “You were going to hit me.”

“In a few minutes it’s not going to matter.” They barked. “I don’t have to answer you.” They sat up, adjusting the briefcase across their chest. “I keep starting a new shift every time I get back to the store. I’ve been doing this for a while. I know how to win.”

Mia’s hand shook with disappointment. “You seen other me’s? And Aurore’s?”

“Not you Mia....Don’t worry about it.” They leaned forward in their padded stadium seat.

I leaned closer. “What happens to the losers of this game? Shift? Whatever this thing is. The ones who don’t get to the “reset point”. What happens?”

Azami didn't answer. “Everyone, who doesn’t make it to the reset point is okay. Then the company gives everyone cupcakes and giant hugs. They care. Don’t worry about it.”

“Every shift? You do this. Over and over?” I asked.

“Told you when I first met you, I was planning on being the one to get out, and nothing you did mattered. I told one of you anyways. I guess I didn’t think time.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I threw my head back.

“Yes,” She stood up. “I’ll meet you outside.”

“See you, gatekeeper,” They waved.

I stood up and shook my head. “Are you going to sit here? We don’t have a lot of time left on this shift.”

“I’ve done this before. If I don’t see you again, like peacefully? Good luck.” They slurred their syllables.

“Screw you too.” I walked away.

I almost left the stadium, but a video ad in the food area caught my eye. “Have drinks delivered to your seat!” I looked towards the field. Helmets clanked and the whistle blew. Fans cheered.

“Hey,” I yelled to a woman vending a cart. “What’s the strongest drink you got?” I asked.

They looked at me. “You got I.D?”

I ordered Azami, something strong, called a ‘Mind Eraser’.

“Seat 111. Tell them I said Happy birthday. Put as much booze in it as you can.” I handed the woman a 20-dollar bill and walked away.

Episode 4 A What Limit?

Mia sat in the driver's seat looking through the clutter of tapes, looking deep in thought. The van door slammed shut. She winced as I climbed in.

“I don’t drop things. Why did I drop-” She started to say something else, but she couldn’t.

I paused. “Please don’t be sad,” I shifted in my seat. “We can take what we made back to your mom.”

She turned to me. “You can’t listen to anything I say. I don’t understand Aurore. Why don’t I get to know what happens to future me? Where is my future Mom? Why is future you so-”

“-Other me takes other shifts. If we beat them there, we can do this job whenever we want. Nothing else matters.”

“The one where everyone gets cupcakes? Are you kidding me with this? Do you understand what is happening? You’re not beating them. You are killing them.”

“We need to hurry. None of this matters anyways. Not when that timer ends, and we get back to the reset point before-”

Mia began to turn the key but stopped.

“You aren’t understanding, Aurore,” She said, raising her voice. “I think. You don’t care about me. At all. You don’t care about anything. Not even yourself.”

“That’s not true!” I said. “I would never! You don’t know that! We can fix this. We can work on the issues between us. With this job, we can make money whenever we want and -”

“I’m supposed to be okay watching you kill yourself to work an eight-hour shift? Over and over? I thought we were getting better! But how can? When you’re over there, having an identical dimension death-match with yourself? For what? Future you can’t be poor. If resetting destroys the entire dimension? You are Azami the destroyer of worlds dude. Thanos has nothing on your body count!”

“Mia. I don’t know why the future me does anything. But... I don’t think future me means to suck. I’m still lost. When I’m lost, I do things to try to keep myself stable. You taught me how to cope. I. Think older me hurts. Because something happened to you.”

“You.” She said. “You happened to me.”

Neither of us spoke. She hit the eject button on the tape in the cassette player. She looked at the handwritten label. Her hand flipped the tape around to show me the name written.

Coffee and Pizza mix.

“That wasn’t the tape in there before.” I said.

“We need to get going,” She said, looking into my eyes. “We got to beat traffic if we’re going to kill everyone in the universe and get the money we made from one order back to Mom. After that? With us? I don’t know.”

My heart sank. “Maybe my other self was right. Maybe you do just use me.” I said.

Mia looked as if the world crushed her spirit, and the remaining bits of joy she had been extinguished. She began to cry and started the van. The phone buzzed, sounding like a cowbell. “Eight hours are up. Shift complete. Please make your way to the reset point.”

I couldn’t bare to say anything to her.

“The PDA says this is it!” I yelled. We ran into the cabbage store, leaving the van running in the street. Getting out of the stadium in that traffic hadn’t been so bad since Mia used the sidewalks. She didn’t run anyone over or anything, but we did break some traffic laws. Since the diemson was about to end and everyone was about to die we figured it would be okay.

The store near Fremont Street was literally full of cabbages for sale. They all looked the same to me. Red and green. Shelves lined with boxes of Elon’s cabbage, all with the same logo. Throughout the store, they played strange futuristic music. It was hard to hear that while fighting with the person that means the most to me in the entire realm of existence. Why couldn’t things just be okay?

“People don’t actually shop here, right?” Mia scoffed.

We heard a lady in the back of the store call out to us. “You have arrived.” I guessed it was the same goggle lady from the paint party. She looked younger than I thought, wearing a t-shirt and tie with black slacks. “It’s in the back.” She didn’t look at us. She read what looked like a Future Treats employee handbook.

“KID!” We turned around, seeing Azami step out of a cab that had parked near the van. They stumbled towards us, hardly able to walk straight. “Donnn’t get any further. Don’t get any closer to that baaack room.” They slurred their words so much it was hard to understand them.

I reached for the nearest head of cabbage and whacked Azami across the face, as hard as I could. They fell to the ground. I kept hitting them. Their device fell. Mia leapt and picked it up.

“Seriously, dude?” Azami stood, “This is how we are doing this?”

“What, my other me’s you’ve killed haven’t fought back? ” The cabbage I had held broke in half on their head. I cursed at them. Repeatedly. I grabbed another.

The goggle lady didn’t look fazed by any of the fighting. She kept looking over the employee handbook. As if she’d seen this kind of thing before.

I kicked my future self in the side, hearing them cough. I reached for a giant shelf filled with cabbage boxes. Pulling with all my weight I sent the heavy shelf crashing on Azami. Chunks of green and brown flew everywhere falling on top of them. Azmai’s foot kicked, trying to free themselves of the boxes.

We sprinted towards the back of the store and slammed the door shut. An angry Mia crossed her arms as I locked and barricaded the entrance.

“You don’t think the weird lady is going to help my-other self do you?” Something felt like I was standing on the wrong side of the door. I don’t know why, but that annoying voice inside your head that tells you not to walk into oncoming traffic was screaming at me not to do what I was doing. I didn’t listen.

In the middle of the room sat a large duffel bag stuffed as full as it could get. On top, a bulb stuck out. It lit up green.

Behind those were two red boxes on a shelf, not far from a back exit, filled with what looked like gold Future Treat vouchers for the amount we had made on the orders. Labeled on them was both my and Azami’s name. At seeing this I poured all of Azami’s earnings into my box and held onto it. Mia looked very not cool with things going on.

After that I unzipped the plastic slider on the bag. USB Sticks of yellow and red, along with hundreds of dollars of bills burst out. I held up one of the bills to the light above and saw the raised printed watermark. The embedded strip ran down the length of the bill.

Lifting the handle, I saw the words “Property of Future Treats.” A USB stick and a necklace with a large blue diamond surrounded by a bunch of other colorless rocks fell to the floor.

The light on the duffel bag turned red. “Please return company property,” An electronic voice from within seemed to speak. “It is the employee’s responsibility to return the company earnings with the money and tracking data intact.”

“How do we get out of here?” Mia said.

I hesitated, realizing I was hoping Azami would be able to get out of those shelves. Why didn’t I hate them? I had every right. However, no one came. If I hadn’t become like my mom, my future self could have fought it. But I couldn’t fight. Mia was right. I took a step away and paused. *This was the only way to keep Mia safe.* I told myself. I saw on the devices screen the option to “Reset” and end the shift.

The feeling didn’t stop. But I tapped on the PDA. Something wasn’t right. The sound was off. It hummed and clanked.

The device zapped my hand. I felt it, deep in my skin. Burning.

“Please reduce weight.” The device demanded. “Can not reset with the amount of weight detected.”

“It has a weight limit? This is ridiculous, why? Maybe this isn’t supposed to be a two person job?” I asked. “How can we reduce the weight? Do we take out some of our vouchers?”

“My mom needs that money!” Mia took off her shoes and threw them across the room into a cabbage box. I did the same with my shoes, missing the box. “Take off your clothes.”

I panicked. “I promised your mom I wouldn’t take my clothes off for money!”

“Just this once!” She said.

She threw off her watch and took the socks off her feet. I took off the comfort hoodie, which must have been weighing us down a ton. We stood in only our sports bras and boy shorts. I hit the reset button. It shocked us again.

“We need to leave our share of the money.” I realized.

“I can’t do that to my mom. I can’t. This might be the only chance I get. With. Whatever has happened in this messed up future. I won’t.” She said.

“Let’s take some of it.” I reasoned.

Mia began to pace thinking. Suddenly I had the worst idea ever. “Azami’s PDA!”

She took out their device. Their screen looked exactly like mine, with the button ready to be pressed to return us home. To reset both of us.

“We can hit the buttons at the same time.” I said. “That has to up our weight limit or whatever wouldn’t it?”

A loud thud came from the back exit door. Someone pounded from the other side. I heard my other self scream.

“We have to do this,” I said. “It’s the only way. To stop myself from hurting me.”

Mia looked at our vouchers, closed her eyes and hung her head. She nodded. We pressed the reset button on the screen at the same time.

“Congratulations on winning your shift! You win!” Confetti burst into the air. A rumbling sounded off in the distance.

The devices roared and crackled louder. I heard my future self cry out from the other room. Azami had broken down the door. They stood. Looking at me, devastated.

My vision turned blurry, until I saw the familiar spins of light circling towards a dark hole. Only now there were two black holes, on opposite sides of each other. I could hardly see, but Mia came into focus, holding onto Azami’s PDA in the air. She headed towards a different dark hole thing than I did. And then I saw a flash. She was gone.

Flames engulfed, wherever we were. My future self screamed, in pain. Things got cold.

“Welcome back to your timeline!” The PDA said, “This reset has been sponsored by Bobs Apples! Have a free apple on us!”

“No. No. No!” I found a way to stand up. The van sat in the roundabout with the engine and headlights on. I held the duffel bag and the box of money.

Everything looked the same as before we left our universe. Except, Mia was not there.

“Bob knows apples like how the sunset knows the Grand Canyon,” The PDA continued.

“Hey,” I heard a voice say. “Azami Chandler.”

I turned. The worker from the cabbage store stood on the sidewalk nearby.

“Yes. I am Aurore Chandler,” I answered.

“I’m here to pick up the duffel bag.” She rubbed her thumb across her fingers, waiting for me to comply. “Congrats on winning the shift.”

“Where’s Mia?” I said.

“Future Treats is not responsible for lost items. Hand over the bag please.”

I paused. “No. I want my friend back. And my other self. And everyone in the universe.”

“You should have picked better.” She grabbed the bag out of my hands. “Thank you for working for Future Treats.” She left.

What kind of sick game was this?

After rolling the van quietly back into the Ms. Kaye’s garage, I stepped out and put the keys in my pocket. I adjusted the money box. And then. Without thinking, I slammed the van door. Again. ‘Cause I can’t do a single thing right. But I wasn’t thinking. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe.

Ms. Kay rushed from the kitchen, in the black night gown as she had before.

“Rory? What are you doing in my garage? With Bicana’s van? Where is Mia?”

I gasped. I thought to myself, *hold it together, Aurore. Hold it together. Mia is gone. There is a way to fix this.*

Wait. But other Ms. Kaye is dead.

I bit my lip to avoid crying.

“Aurore? Aurore, I need you to speak to me. What are you doing here?” The real Ms. Kaye said.

“I don’t know, I swear.”

“What happened?” She said. “What’s inside that box in your hand?”

I gave it to her. “You don’t have to go to work anymore. Mia wanted to make sure of that. She wanted this for you.”

“What do you mean?”

I choked. What do you do with that? This PDA sucks and Mia.. is gone? ‘Cause I’m dumb? And I choose this? But we got a free apple! There’s no chance of explaining that horrifying situation to any kind of normal person. But this wasn’t a normal thing going on.

She took a step towards me. “Is this some kind of prank? Sour milk in a locker is one thing, but this is theft. Kidnapping? We could press charges. How did you get in here? How did you get the keys, did you take them?”

I tried to think what to do next but... I had nothing. This is when I’d ask Mia what to do. But I couldn’t. I had an overwhelming thought. Had I ever known what to do on my own? Do I not make my own choices and stuff?

“Aurore?” Ms. Kaye looked at the strange object I held in my hands.

I thought long and hard, realizing I had to tell her. I had no other choice.

Or not.

I didn’t know what “or not” was at the time, but I picked it. To my shock though, pressing “start shift” on the screen did nothing. My finger jabbed at the start text over and over, trying to start a shift to go find her, to figure something out. It didn’t work. I stood there, in front of a very concerned and angry Ms. Kaye.

“I have to go. Keep the money.” I said.

“Where is she?” She asked.

I looked into her eyes. That’s where those specks came from.

“I’m sorry,”

Ms. Kaye ran after me as I left the open garage. I ran into the dark on foot, with nowhere to go.

I tried to sleep for a while in the park behind some bushes after everyone had left the glow party. Most of the time I lay there thinking about how Mia wasn’t coming to save me. Looking across the desert, I tried to count how many colors I could see as the sun rose. Not many. (My eyes also suck pretty bad.) I knew I should have been doing something to better my situation or whatever, but I didn’t. I sat there. Like Azami did. I kind of felt I understood them better. Even though how they had been living was. Iffy is a nice way to put it I guess.

I stood up from the ground. The light all flicked behind me and stuff. I headed to the bus stop down the street.

Episode 5 There are no Cupcakes.

Class chatter echoed through the halls of the school. Paper pumpkins and witches swayed on clips from the ceiling. It looked like a typical day. Most of the kids had been herded like cattle between classes already. I used my hands to comb my hair as I walked toward locker 88b. An ugly steel locker with chipped blue paint and vents so tiny it's hard to leave a note in it sat in front of me. We couldn't figure out how to get notes out, so we left a few of them. It blocked the sour milk and candy pumpkin smell from the outside world if nothing else.

I turned the combination to 01 24 75 and the locker creaked open. My nostrils flared at the sour smell as I picked up a CD case from inside. I flipped through the albums.

Next time I see you, I'll have a CD you like, I thought.

Mia wasn't gone. She's just not here. That's what I told myself, she was out there. In a dimension somewhere I couldn't reach. I needed to find a way to take another shift. I needed to bring her back.

From instinct I tried putting the CD case in my hoodie pocket, but I wasn't wearing my hoodie. The one thing that always comforted me, was now gone.

Something I didn't recognize lay on top of a bunch of crumpled notebook paper. I picked up the flier and pencil shavings fell out onto the laminate floor.

The flier read, "Hello, Winner! Come work with us again! Find an Elon's Cabbage to recharge your "P.D.A".

Why did the flier have quotes around "PDA"? My other self had called it a phone. Elon's cabbage was not a thing I ever remembered before any of this crazy stuff started happening. I assumed the location might be the same place as it was in 2022.

I dug around in the locker. I thought I had some onion dip chips in there, but I didn't.

"Aurore! You're supposed to be in class. Get going." I heard from behind me.

"Yeah. No, Ms. Trinity," I said. "I just got out of a job that devalues you as a person. That way they can take whatever they want from you. School didn't seem to work out for me either. So. I'm out."

A voice came across the intercom. "Aurore Chandler, please come to the front office."

I looked outside. Two police cars drove into the parking lot.

“Yup. I’m not doing that.” I said.

Ms. Trinity stood between me and the other exit. “You’re coming with me.”

“Like. No.” My fingers clenched around the CD case.

I kept walking. Ms. Trinity followed.

“Don’t take another step.” She said.

“Trust me, Ms. Trinity. What I’m dealing with right now, you do not want any part of.”

Ms. Trinity grabbed me by the arm. “Let’s go.”

“Can you like, not?” I ripped my arm out of her hold.

She came at me to grab my arm again, and I ran. All the way to the end of the hall. Our steps echoed. I reached the exit and pushed against the lever thing-y and I continued running.

I headed back towards the bus stop. Ms. Trinity stood, watching me run.

“It’s not working because you need to charge before you can take another shift.” The employee explained. I found the Future Treats sign up on Fremont Street. I recognize the employee as the woman from the rest point. She looked like she hadn’t slept in ages.

“You made money, right? If I made as much as you did? I’d invest it. Why would you take another shift?”

“Why haven’t you worked a shift?” I asked.

“You can’t take a job without facing an older or younger you. I couldn’t kill my future or past self. Having to look in my face and say ‘I’m here for the money Brooke?’ I couldn’t do it to myself. Could you? Oh. Yeah. You could uh?”

Something in her eyes made me think she had often thought of this scenario. That's why her eyes froze. She brushed back the hair on her neck and went on.

"No thanks. Well, if you want another shift, I can charge the phone up for you. It's going to take a while though, like a minute." She shuffled papers on the desk before taking the PDA from my hands. With the flick of a wrist, she flung the phone over her shoulder, which clunked against a metal pan at the bottom of a bin.

"How do I find my friend?" I asked.

"You don't." The Future treats employees shrugged. "That dimension is destroyed. Gone. Everyone's dead. You can't go back to it."

"I. Killed everyone?" I said.

She nodded. I have no words to describe what I felt realizing the pain I caused. The loss. I put my feelings aside.

"They weren't in that dimension. She pressed the device at the same time as I did. She drifted into another. I don't know what. Somewhere far from me."

"You're talking about the light show after you get sucked in. Your friend is in another dimension. Did you restarted your device yet?" Brooke leaned in a little. Now interested. Her ears perked.

"I don't know what a restart is. The phone kept talking about cabbage."

"That's good. Kind of. Your odds of finding your friend in an identical dimension are better. But not great. The device looks at the recent locations in RAM to determine which data farm, or dimension, to send the worker to. It helps the delivery algorithm pick more stable universes."

The bin the lady had thrown my phone in lit up red. She frowned. "Actually, This phone's battery is toast and needs replaced. But when I cut the power, it kills the memory in the RAM. I can try to pull that dimensional location point from the RAM, but the data is fragile. Since it's stored in a temporary drive. The device generates incredible amounts of possible dimension location points. This fills up the temporary RAM fast. Sooner or later the device will find a confirmed real identical dimension. Companies buy this identical dimension point at auction, which goes for billions of dollars. So the phone spits out an insane number of tiny codes, looking for this confirmed IDP. Trying to find one of those where your friend might be is like finding a certain rock at the bottom of the ocean. Burnt toast I would say."

“You lost me way before the random toast part. Is the phone lightly toasted where it’s boring? Or burnt toast that sticks to the top of your mouth when you eat it?”

“It’s sticking to the top of your mouth, but do you want the toast or not?” She said. “Because you can start a shift on it, and you might be able to get back to the dimension your friend is in. But not on that phone’s battery. Not an eight-hour shift. Unluckily. I know a solution.” Brooke bit her lip. “It’s going to suck. Hold onto your butts.” Brooke typed something on my phone. “Are you sure you want this? If you do this, Future Treats can’t send anyone to save you.”

“I... I can’t leave her. I promised.” I said.

“A weak answer. For what you have to do. But. Sure. I’m going to switch some settings to help you out.... I ask one favor. On the condition that this works, I will present it to you at a later time. Is this acceptable?” She asked.

“Anything.” I said.

She shrugged. After doing more typing, she handed the phone back to me. “Deal. It’s gonna suck. The phone only charges halfway. You can’t replace batteries or recharge when you’ve started a shift. I’ve helped your odds by changing some settings and cutting the shift in half, but you’re going to be cutting it close. I would avoid checking your cabbage feed, but don’t tell them I told you. And don’t pay for verification. In my opinion, it’s a scam.”

I squeezed the PDA so tight my hands turned white. “I’ll figure something out. Thanks, Brooke.” I said. I walked out of the store and back out onto the busy strip.

I sat on the bus listening to a screamo metal band on the cd player, cranked to 10. The bus jostled back and forth as I held onto the handrail. Looking out the window, I saw row after row of stucco housing until finally I saw Mia’s house. At the stop, I jumped off the bus onto the pavement.

After taking a deep breath I looked towards the house. How would I find Mia after I started the shift? A feeling of dread came over it. I didn’t know if I would come back. I didn’t know if I should come back. But I wasn’t going to leave her.

“Here we go.” I walked closer to the house. I started to press “Start Shift.”

But the door opened. I stood face-to-face with Ms. Kaye.

“What are you doing here, Rory?” Ms. Kaye looked down at my shirt pocket, which held Mia’s CD case. “Where did you get that?” She asked.

“I’m going to get her. She’s going to be back real soon. I’ve got this.” My fingers were red as I gripped the phone.

“Tell me!” She screamed.

My shoulders hung. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“You’re hiding something.” She said.

I could hardly speak. “My future self got involved in a stupid time travel scam. We earned a bunch of money. For you. For us. I beat myself over the head with cabbage. But we couldn’t take everything we won. Mia didn’t make it out. But I’m going back to get her.”

“I don’t think you’re well,” she said. Actually, that’s not what she said. I won’t say what she said but you get the idea.

“It’s the truth, Ms. Kaye. I messed up, but I can fix it.”

“Tell me the truth!” She made a mad dash towards me, charging at me as if I were a rodeo clown.

I pressed “Start shift.”

The PDA sounded up like a roaring dial-up, a noise it hadn’t made before. On the top right of the screen, a battery icon flashed. The picture showed the battery less than half full.

“THIS will be the reset point you will return to!” The device reminded me. Ms. Kaye grabbed my shirt and pulled me towards her.

I tried to run but she wouldn’t let me go. The PDA swirled and pattered.

I screamed. “Get away from me!”

Confetti burst out of the device and landed on the ground. The ‘cosmic light show’ Brooke had talked about began. My vision went black. My stomach got sick.

Something grabbed at me. My eyes adjusted as I turned. Ms. Kay and I both drifted towards the dimension. Together.

I found myself at the entrance of Mia's house again. Arriving in the new identical dimension. The doorknob wouldn't turn, no matter how hard I pushed. I turned to a stunned Ms. Kaye, who stood on the lawn with her jaw dropped. Well, I guess as if she had time traveled.

Something began to play through the phone. "THANK YOU for choosing to work for Future Treats! This shift has been sponsored by New Dip Fun Burgers! We changed the recipe and dipped the fun back into our burgers! 2 for 20 bucks but order now and get a 3rd for only 10 dollars more! MUST SIGN WAIVER TO EAT FUN DIP BURGER, NO REFUNDS, ALL CRIMES COMMITTED IN AN IDENTICAL PARALLEL UNIVERSE ARE DEEMED IMAGINARY BY LAW IN THE U.S."

"I don't know who's inside the house, but I need your help!" I began pounding on the door. Hoping. I kicked so hard I lost feeling in my bare feet. "Someone!"

"Aurore!" Ms. Kaye cried running to me. "Why did I get teleported a few inches away from where I was?"

"It's a new identical dimension. I need one of us to understand what's going on here Ms. Kaye! We can't both be clueless." I kept pounding.

The door opened. Hand braces rattled. It was Mia. Kind of. This girl wore about seventy million necklaces around her neck as if it were the coolest thing ever. Her long blonde hair hung below her shoulders.

"Ewww," she said. "Are you Aurore's sibling or something?"

"What year is it?" I asked.

"What year is it?" Ms. Kaye interjected. "It's 2002, what do you mean what year is it?"

Jr. High Mia looked at me in confusion. Her right hand gripped around strains of hair as if it were a Tamagotchi. She squinted. "Is that you, Mom? Why are you here? You're supposed to be in Phoenix for two weeks. You look tired."

"Thanks." Ms. Kaye said. "I haven't had to travel to Phoenix for business since... 1998." Ms. Kaye started to put the pieces together.

Jr. High Mia looked at her older mother confused. “Um... Yeah, you do. You go all the time. You get fired?” Jr. High Mia asked. “Are you taking me to the party?!”

“1998 was so long ago,” I told Ms. Kaye.

“Why is younger Mia standing in my house?”

“There’s only one of me?” The teen tugged at her own hair. “I don’t get it. Why is everyone freaking out?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to confuse her. I guess that was a confusing response, but whatever. I walked away from the front door and pulled out the PDA. How did I end up in 1998? It didn’t matter. Maybe she would be in the year this all started. I didn’t know how things worked, and I didn’t care.

I found an order from 2002 and tapped on it to accept it.

The device spoke. “Error. 5c23wy0u. Dimensional jump mode enabled. Please authenticate and explain the rules of the shift to your other self before accepting an order.”

Ms. Kaye gawked. “What have you gotten us into Aurore?”

“Aurore?” Little Mia asked.

My lips sucked inward in confusion. “Authenim... authenimate... what am I doing?”

The device showed a picture of two PDAs held together, with a heart between them. “Authenticate” Which like, gross, right?

“I don’t have another PDA,” I cried. “Oh my god, I don’t have another PDA to authenimate with.”

Little Mia looked at me with her hands on her hips. “Why did Mom call you Aurore?”

“Um... Call me... Azami or something, I don’t know. That’ll make it easier.” I said.

There had to be a way to locate another device. There had to be a way to make this crazy situation work. But what was I going to do with Ms. Kaye? I couldn’t get myself and Mia out of the reset point. How was I going to get both of them out? Trying not to think about it, I searched the phone trying to figure out some way to get out of this mess. I found something.

“Find my phone!” I blurted out loud. Remembering something. “My future self used Find my phone to find us at the stadium. Maybe I can find the dimension Mia is in that way.”

Little Maria looked at me. “I’m right here? That’s a hella weird thing to say to someone.”

I ignored her. I heard footsteps behind me. She looked over my shoulder. “Where is my Mia? A-zam-mi?”

“PHONE FOUND!” The device said.

I screamed. I heeled over and hit my hands on my shins, which by the way I held the PDA in that hand. That hurt, but I stomped my foot on the ground, repeatedly. Ms. Kaye and the youngling backed away.

“That’s my address,” I pointed. “It’s my mom’s address. My home. Oh...”

Little Mia’s all like “Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

Before I could figure out what to say, a familiar van drove into the driveway.

“Maria!” The woman yelled from inside the van. She honked the horn and killed the engine. The tall woman who stepped out looked to be in her late twenties, muscular, with dark hair, and wore large round sunglasses. She stopped and turned to me.

“What you looking at?” The famous aunt Bianca glared at me.

“Just enjoying the sunset,” I held my breath. I’m not sure what I meant, there was no sunset.

“Audrey?” Bianca asked seeing Ms. Kaye making her way into the house. She stood next to her niece, putting both of her hands on her shoulder. “Why aren’t you in Phoenix? You finally quit?”

“I need everyone in the house. We need to talk. We have a problem.” Ms. Kaye turned to me.

“Aurore, give me the death device you are holding. Turn it off.”

I stepped back. “I can’t. That’s the only way I can find Mia.”

“More people are going to get hurt.” She begged. “Please. Give me the phone.”

I panicked.

“I can’t. I promised you something in another dimension. And I messed up. But I’m going to keep trying until I get it right. Trust me, Ms. Kaye.”

I sprinted to the van, started the engine with my keys, and backed out of the driveway. I floored the gas and raced away from the house. Leaving everyone on the lawn behind.

As the hippie van sped down the road, I couldn’t help but wonder. How could I fix this now?

When I went inside my own house, I could see my mother lying on the sofa in the living room. She laid in the same spot she had when I left her in 2002. She narrowed her eyes at me. I hadn’t realized how much I looked like my mom. She almost looked like a younger Azami if that makes any sense.

“Well,” I whispered. “Hi, Mom.”

She tried to sit up. “Who are you?”

“You should drink some water.” I said.

Before going upstairs, I stopped in the kitchen. All the dishes were dirty, and the dishwasher hung open, half-loaded. I cleaned a glass and then filled it with water. I walked over my mom. The big TV playing at full volume. My mom took it, to my surprise.

“Why are you in my house?” She asked, taking a sip of water.

“I’m here for Aurore.”

“Okay,” She drank the rest of the glass of water and put it on the floor.

I shook my head in disappointment. “Thanks, Mom.”

I went up the stairs and into my old room. I cringed at the sight of all the papers on the wall, held up by thumbtacks. They were poems I had written that I thought were amazing. They ended up in the trash a few years later.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move. Someone standing on a chair, looking into a mirror I had kept on an old dresser.

No. Freaken. Way. There I stood: fifteen-year-old me. Yawning, with a sweatshirt inside out. Confetti scattered through the floor as the fan spun above.

“Why are you wearing a sweatshirt?” I asked. “It’s hot out.”

“Why are you wearing like no clothes?” Rory asked, stepping down. “Who are you?” They took their headphones off. My, as in ‘Rory’s’, hair, looked awful. They had cut it short, and their bangs stuck up. Like they were conducting weather experiments. Little me looked like I hadn’t washed my face in weeks, which I bet I hadn’t.

“The hell you do to your hair!” I yelled.

“I cut it. I found some photos of someone who looked like me but older on the U-pad and decided to cut it like them.” They said.

I had NEVER and would NEVER cut my hair. And oh my god, did I sound like that??

“Doesn’t matter.” I said. “I need whatever thing you got in a package. The one that shot out confetti.”

“You can’t have my U-pad. It has games on it.” They said.

I’m like “There’s games on here? Never mind, I need that phone now.”

“You’re not the boss of me. Get out of my house.” Rory said.

“I am the boss of you, I am you,”

“Ewww. No. Why do you look like that?” They said.

“Like what? There’s no time for this Rory. You don’t get a choice.” I started looking through the room, through all the garbage I used to collect I used to call my things.

“Where is the PDA?” I said.

“I’m not giving it to you!” Rory clenched both fists.

I ducked down to look under my bed. Something hit the back of my head. I turned around. There Rory stood, holding a math book above their heads.

“Kid! The hell?” I yelled. “They charge you a lot for leaving marks on textbooks.”

“I’m hitting you with something heavier if you don’t leave right now!” Rory yelled.

“Listen to me. You let me authemniate with you, and I’ll do anything you want. I got a van. We can go anywhere. Do anything.” I took a step back. “Anything.”

Rory looked at me.

At first, Rory hesitated to get into the van. But after I reminded them of the ice cream, they got in and fastened their seat belts. It kinda sucked. I was that gullible but I always kind of knew.

“What should I call you?” Little me asked.

“Azami,” I shrugged. Who cares what they call me? They weren’t going to be there for much longer.

Rory looked at me. “I can’t say that name. It’s hard.”

“It’s not hard. A. Za. Mi.”

“Okay. A,” Rory peeked out the window and began counting light posts.

“Cool, kid,” I sighed. Close enough.

Kids ran everywhere at Sweet Scoops. What I thought would be a short stop for ice cream looked like it would take a lot more time. Time I didn’t have. I could sucker the gullible kid into authemiateing a different way. I looked at the PDA battery level and tried not to think about it too much.

“Sorry,” I heard the woman say from behind the counter. “We’re closed for a birthday party.”

“We’ll go somewhere else, kid. Let’s go.” I motioned them back outside.

“Aurory!” I knew the sugary sweet voice. I turned my head and there she was: freaking Sally Lewis. She sat at a table in her cheerleading uniform, eating a sundae with other kids sitting around a bunch of presents.

This was the party I didn’t go to three years ago. That little psychopath had tricked me. I remember laying around all day upset that day. But Rory looked happy. This didn’t feel like the same dimension, yet it had to be.

A woman stood up from her cake.

Sally reached out with her arms. She smiled wide. “Sit down, Mom. I apologized in the invitation Mia gave them. Aurory, come and have some cake! It’s German chocolate!”

I never got an invitation to Sally Lewis's' birthday party. We had a fight over it. Mia never gave me anything.

I turned to Rory, but Sally had run across the room. She hugged them. Rory didn’t move. Their eyes widened like a cat getting too much affection and not knowing what to do.

“The hell you doing, Sally?” I asked. “You hate me.”

“I don’t know you?” She asked, hugging Rory still. She had a smile on half her face and a frown on the other it seemed.

“Right, look we can go somewhere else,” I said.

“Please don’t go!” Sally cried. “We’re playing table pool, then having cake, and…”

“Can you let go of me, please?” Rory wiggled their way out of Sally’s death grip.

She bounced up and down on her toes and grabbed Rory’s hand. “What kind of ice cream do you want? They got Strawberry Blast-ro-naut! Pieces o’ Cookies n Cream!” She started listing off all the flavors they had at the store.

“The hell?” I said.

I heard Rory shout from across the store. “Hey! Ass Amy! What kind of ice cream do you want?”

“Azami.” I winced. “The coconut and chocolate Surprise.”

Rory shot me a look. “Eww.”

“They don’t have it!” Sally yelled.

“They have it! Second to the bottom left by the... Oh right. 1998, Um. I’ll take whatever Rory has.” I said.

Sally waved and pointed to the corner of the ice cream display: “Cookie dough Da-no-delight!”

With all my soul I tried not to say anything. “Thanks, Sally.”

I took a seat near one of the mothers in the booth. Rory walked over to me holding two giant ice cream cones with sprinkles. Sally, who didn’t finish her sundae, walked with them, smiling. They came to me.

“I’m glad we came,” Rory sat next to me. I shifted towards the wall so Sally could join us.

“You got enough room, Rory?” Sally asked waddling in.

I couldn’t hold it any longer. “They threw you up against a tree, Sally. What are you...”

Sally shrugged. “That happened last week. I was wrong. I should have left Mia out of our fight. No big. It’s okay to make mistakes.” She took a giant bite of ice cream. “I’m glad you showed up. I didn’t think you’d ever talk to me again.”

In the “real world” I had not ever talked to Sally again. I coughed. “Think I need something to drink.”

Rory laughed at my discomfort. My jaw dropped. There I was. Smiling. Not a depressed smile, a real one. Grinning from ear to ear. Joyed to be around people. They started talking about some kids' new trapper keeper. A feeling came over me that I didn’t know how to describe as I watched them interact, like a normal kid. Eating ice cream and telling silly stories about floppy disk drives failing with their homework lost on it.

“Can you stop looking at me?” Rory finally asked me, with a disgusted look. “It’s creeping me out.”

I ignored myself and thought about how that me wouldn't get to experience life after the shift. There was no way to bring Mia back without winning the job. I had to kill that younger version

of myself. That's a thought that turned my stomach. I had already made my choice. There was no going back now.

I pushed my younger self out of the booth, intending to go find something to drink to take the pain away. But Sally scooted back.

Bianca stood at the end of the table, smiling at me. Not a good smile.

"Stay there a moment. Tell me about your van." Aunt Bianca stood, crossed armed with the family wild bear eyes. Little Mia "Maria" stood next to her. "Tell me about the sunset."

"Where's my invitation, Maria?" Rory asked little Maria. Which was not a cool thing to do in front of Bianca.

"I gave it to you. At lunch on Friday." Maria looked down.

"You didn't!" Rory shouted.

"What would you know!" Maria shoved Rory.

Episode 6 The Reset

Leaning in towards the booth, Aunt Bianca chewed gum, holding Maria back. Sally gently stood in front of Rory, who tried swinging after the water fountain bully.

“Want to talk about your little joy ride with my van, sunset?” Biacana said to me with the the palms of her hands lying flat on the table. “You wake up and decide it’s a nice sunny day for grand theft auto?”

“Mom wants us all back at the house. To figure this out,” Maria said, holding the side of her bloody nose.

“That’s my van,” I stated.

Bianca's lips jerked out. She started to yell “Ex-Fu...” Bianca stopped and looked at Sally who smiled, looking happy to be there.

She chose nicer words: “What did you say?”

I turned around, looking out the window behind me. There in the parking lot sat the van. I noticed something else: a tiny crack on the lower part of the window above my head. I looked back and saw Rory holding their PDA. I moved my pocket computer thing as close to theirs as I could.

“Authenticated! Data transferred! Future Treats assets secure!” It said.

Data transferred? I hoped nothing on the rammy chip got moved and I had a chance to track the real Mia still.

“Turn your pager off. We got some talking to do.” Bianca spoke to me as if I were some lawyer’s personal assistant.

I grabbed Rory’s cell phone with my left hand and ripped it out. My right hand jabbed into the glass, PDA side up. I totally was going to break the window.

“That’s not how that works.’ Bianca laughed at me.

I shoved the table towards Bianca as hard as I could. Rory and Sally scooted away from me. The mothers at the table nearby stood up.

Bianca rushed at me. I climbed my way up on the table bench and jumped over my past Jr. high self. I spirited out of sweet scoops, holding on to the items in my hands with dear life. I made for the exit.

I took the keys out of my shirt pocket with my right hand and opened the door. The keys turned smooth in the ignition and the engine started. With the van in reverse, I stomped on the gas and turned as hard left as I could. I shifted into drive and floored it once again.

As I grabbed the steering wheel with my right hand, I noticed I held something. The wrong PDA, Rory's PDA. I stopped the van and leaped out. I ran back towards my own device.

Bianca, Maria, Rory, and Sally, along with most of the rest of the party, ran out of the building. Bianca ran to the exit and stood in the middle of the road. Rory held my old time travel machine.

"I don't want to do this," I said. I ran as fast as I could to the dimension death device, but I looked up. My eyes locked with Biancas, who made a mad dash for the van. I couldn't make it, and I did not want to get in a fistfight with that woman. I turned back and ran to the van, shutting the door and raced out of the parking lot.

I drove down the road. Screaming and cursing at the steering wheel. "Why couldn't you have held onto it?!" I yelled at myself.

I took a breath. The smell of the van clogged up my nose a little, but I kept trying. I looked at the phone.

The edge of the Rory's phone had cracked. As I tried not to not freak out with a full on panic attack. I had to turn back into my lane before I hitting a curb.

"One hour until the end of the shift!" The death device buzzed. I glanced again and saw a message written on the screen. This shift is a 4-hour shift, due to Future Treat minor worker labor practices."

"Brook?!" I yelled. My hand hit the steering wheel. I guess she did tell me this would suck. This wasn't what I wanted.

The phone went on. "Aurore's voice recognized. Would you like to load your profile and your last known RAM image?"

"YES!" I shouted. Then I remembered what the Future Treats employee said. If the rammy chip had to be unloaded it was over. Burnt toast. "No!" I corrected it.

“Ram profile loaded.”

You ever had a moment when you lost all control of your senses and feelings? I had one of those moments on the freeway. I had to devalue myself to escape, and I never was going to see Mia again either. I couldn’t even feel the wheel in my hands.

The van tires hit the curb as I pulled over to park near a quiet side street. I rammed my head into the steering wheel and screamed into the void.

Brook changed the settings on my shift so that I would have 4 hours to save Mia. And I couldn’t do it. I was screwed. My only chance was to somehow beat my younger self and to go back, to take on another shift. *But how?*

“The duffel bag!” I shouted.

I backed into the ridiculous cabbage store and turned off the engine. The timer on the phone dwindled to minutes remaining on the shift.

Inside, Brook stood where she had last time, reading the handbook.

“You know, you could get the money first,” She chuckled. “Your older you never figured that out. Your shift ends soon. Better get that bag, so our plan will work.”

“How could you know?” I asked. I speed walked towards the back of the store. “Why are you always here?”

“I’m always working,” She deadpanned. “Living large.”

I went to the room the bag had once been in before. In a different identical dimension that is.

“Oh,” Brook remembered. “Your younger self is here.”

The fluorescent lights in the back room were so bright they hurt my eyes. My younger self stood in front of me. Holding the Future Treats duffel bag of money.

“Please,” Rory begged. “Don’t tell me you also thought of taking the bag and hiding it so you had more time to figure out what to do.”

“Yeah, Kid,” I lied. “That’s pretty smart. How did you learn about this? About what is going on?”

“I talked to Ms. Kaye,” Rory pulled on the bag around their shoulders.

“How would she know anything?” I asked. “She wasn’t with us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me one of us is going to die?” Rory backed away.

The box of money. I had left the money with Ms. Kaye when I returned from the other shift. She must have gone looking for Elon’s cabbage. But why was Sally here?

“I’m trying to do what’s best for everyone. Those choices are hard,” I said.

“You suck at making them,” Rory jeered.

“I know. You’re supposed to keep messing everything up until you get everything right.”

“You’re not getting this money.” Sally handed Rory a cabbage.

Something happened. At first, it felt like I had been hit in the back head with a wet pillow. I rubbed my neck where I felt chunks of cabbage. I turned around.

I had the right to be hurt, but instead I sighed. I turned around to face Ms. Kaye. Holding a head of cabbage over her. I closed my eyes, “Hey Ms. Kaye.”

She lowered the cabbage. “Hey, Aurore. Or Azammi. Whatever.”

“I’m trying so hard to do the right thing. I’m trying to get her back. I wish you’d help me.”

“You’re in it for yourself. Brook told us everything. You can’t do this. Not like this.” She said, hurt.

Rory could see the pained expression on my face. “I’m not in this for myself.”

I leaped towards Rory, who now made a mad dash with Sally towards the back exit. Rory had almost made it out, but the bag snagged on the door frame. They tried to clear the frame but it wouldn’t let go. I grabbed the bag and pulled.

The phone DINGED. “Shift over! Get to the Reset Point!”

Sally grabbed onto Rory, and then onto the bag. They pulled together.

“Why is Sally here?” I yelled. I felt another soft hit to the back of my head.

“Can you stop hitting me with Cabbage, Ms. Kaye?” I yelled. “You’re making a mistake.” I pulled. The bag broke free.

Before I could plant my back foot to run, Rory bear tackled me, knocking me back. I reached to push them off of me, but they pushed my hands away, causing me to lose my grip on the bag. BUT I GRABBED MY PHONE BACK!

On the floor, I rolled as hard as I could away. Years of stop, drop, and roll in elementary school had finally paid off. My elbows banged on the floor, leaving my skin raw and burning. I didn’t care. I pulled out the phone and found an order as fast as I could. I backed away.

A message appeared on the screen. “Ram transferred. Travel to dimension 07827534?”

I hit confirm so hard my finger jammed. It was over, but I might as well cling to hope. That was my thinking.

The phone spoke in a different, calming voice. “Confirmed, Rory! Traveling to dimension 07827534!” It said.

Rory dashed at me, but I backed away in time for the phone to take me away.

I fell hard to the ground, blinking. The store looked more modern than it had in the other dimension.

I heard a voice from the other room. “Got both the phones uh?”

“You bet!” I yelled.

“Nice,” Brooke crooned.

“Welcome to 2002! Special code successful! A similar dimension that matched your request has been loaded. This dimensional jump has been sponsored by Pet Escort Services! Let our escorts

walk your pets for you while you make deliveries! Doesn't matter the pet, we'll take care of them! Pet Escort Services. We know our way around town. Click on the PDA now to learn more! Two hundred roses."

I didn't know if Mia was safe, or where she was. I had no way of knowing.

I gasped. "Find my phone."

"Now you're getting this." Brooke encouraged, not looking up from her desk.

I had to take a bus to get to Mia's house. But since I had both phones, no one would get out of any universe. Finally arriving back at the Kaye house I yelled and made whatever noise I could, hoping someone would come to the door.

The door opened. There was that curly side part and an instant eye roll. She wore an oversized t-shirt with a pocket, no pants, and no shoes. As if she had just arrived.

"Aurore?" She spoke softly in that wonderful sarcastic voice crying. "I am so happy to see you. How did you get here?"

"I don't know how to tell you." I said. "The cabbage lady got me here. Mia. You're right. I need to stop beating myself up. Because at the end of the day, I'm all I have, and I'm no good if I'm all black and blue. I can do things. Like finding a way to see you again. I can live without you. But I don't want to. I'm going to hug you. If you'll let me," I told her.

"I was wrong," She said, crossing her arms. "Back at the reset point. I shouldn't have pushed you like that." She shifted, leaning against the frame. She looked to the side. " You punched a hole in my wall and are about to kill an entire universe's worth of people. But I don't want to live without you either."

I tackle-hugged her so hard. I held my face close to hers, holding onto her with my everything.

"I want to learn how to function. With you." I said. "I lost you. It's hard to explain but I lost myself too. And now I'm here and we are going to have to act now. Together."

"What's wrong?" She asked, concerned.

“I don’t know how this is going to end.” I almost whispered, holding down the trauma. “The next choice we make is going to be hard. Like Brooke said. But we need to go. And you got to trust me. For once. Not to slam the door. Or drop the phone. And we have to tie up your mother.”

“What?” She asked.

“You also lied to me about Sally Lewis’s birthday party. She totally did invite me.”

“No she totally didn’t,” She looked down and away.

“I’ll explain at some other time. Our time. We need to get to the reset point to take back the duffel bag so we can escape.”

“Steal back the duffel bag? From whom? Your future you? Why are we tying up my mom?” Mia walked alongside me.

“It’s okay, she hit me with cabbage. Everyone is trying to do the right thing here.” I canceled my order in 2002, taking another one in 1998, back in the other universe.

“Hug me,” I leaned in for approval. She did.

I hit confirm. The phone took us back for one last shot at getting things back to normal.

“Welcome to 1998! This dimensional jump has been sponsored by Jim Bob shaving cream! Jim Bob shaving cream gives you a close shave every time. About. Now comes in three distinct edible flavors! Raspberry, Lemon, and extra whipped. Try some on your favorite dessert!”

The phone buzzed. “Shift over! Please return to the reset point to return home with your winnings!”

We heard a thump from upstairs. Like someone walking across the floor.

“That’s from my room,” Mia said loudly.

We ran upstairs. The locked room was not a Mia thing. I thought I heard voices and faint whispers of breathing.

“They didn’t leave the bag here, did they?” I asked.

“Mia!” Ms. Kaye yelled from the other side of the door.

“Get the bag!” I yelled, charging inside. Mia went after her Jr. High self. I held my hands to my pockets to protect the phones. Rory and Ms. Kaye charged at me. Sally stood in the corner, watching.

I realized what was happening. I ducked. Bianca swung a baseball bat. She swung at my knees, missing as I pushed my hips back away. Rory threw a head of cabbage, wacking me in the face.

“Got it!” Mia yelled. She ran for the exit behind Bianca. She swung the bat downwards, missing Mia probably on purpose. I dashed by Rory and pulled Ms. Kaye to the other side of the door. I slammed it shut as hard as I could using all my weight. I pulled out the phone.

A message appeared on the screen: “Weight limit increased. Please return company property.”

I heard my younger self cry out. It got quiet.

“No!” Ms. Kaye reached for the knob.

“Mom! Don’t!” Mia shouted. Ms. Kaye pulled on the door against us.

“Mom!” Maria pounded on the wood from the other side. “Let me out!”

I heard my own voice. “Please! Please don’t do this, Azami. I don’t deserve this. Please! Why do you get to live and I don’t?”

“I’m sorry kid. It’s the job. Only one of us can get out. It sucks, but I’ve got to go.” I pressed harder door.

“If we are going to do this, we need to do this now.” Mia said.

“Let them out!” Ms. Kaye pleaded with me.

“There’s no other way, We need the three of us to get out of here. That’s the only way we can return things to normal. There are countless dimensions out there, there’s other uses. None of them will feel pain.”

“But I will!” Rory screamed.

I paused. Maria and Bianca kept pounding, kicking at the wood, trying to move us out of the way to escape. I pulled up the other phone. The other phone had the same message.

My eyes closed. I thought about the last time I saw my older self. The look on their face. There I was. Taking everything out on myself again. Hoping by doing it things would get better. Again.

Have you ever had a moment you realized you had to do something hard? I had that moment. And I decided to face it.

“Enough.’ I stood. Mia stumbled up, baffled. I walked away and threw down my phone. The door opened. “Okay little one.” I let Rory walked to me. “If you have a better plan. I’ll go with it. I don’t need to fix all my mistakes.”

The duffle bag issued an audible warning. “Reset and return the company property now. Or face the consequences.”

“The young ones should get out.” Bianca said. “Older one’s stay behind.”

Mia grabbed my hand and squeezed. We nodded. Rory, Maria and Sally stood together by the bed. Maria had the money bag.

We stood back towards the corner of the room near the ‘screaming labrums’ band posters, huddling together.

Rory’s finger hovered over the screen. They looked at Sally and Maria.

The duffle bag buzzed. An alarm sounded.

“Get going. Go make a bunch of mistakes.’ I waved.

The three stood in what felt like a photo. Not moving. Not blinking. Not breathing. The noise in the bag grew louder.

“Go on Rory.” Ms. Kaye said.

Rory and Maria looked to each other.

Maria sighed. “Don’t do it.” She said. “They’re dumb.”

“I know. Mia!” Rory snapped. They threw the phone. “You adults act like you’re all smart. I think secretly none of you have a clue what you are doing. How is this going to solve anything?”

“RETURN COMPANY PROPERTY NOW!” The bag roared.

“Rory, you’re going in.” I put the phone back in their hand. “You’re resetting.”

We heard a voice from the other room. “Hello! I’ve let myself in.”

Brook appeared from the hallway, wearing a tie and black slacks. She put one hand in one pocket and put the other hand on her hip. We found ourselves backing further into Mia’s room. Bianca picked up the baseball bat.

“You’re in the wrong house.” Bianca patted the metal with her palm.

“Nonsense. I’m here for my favor.” Brooke said.

Rory gasped.

“This is an uncharted dimension. No one can find us here,” Brooke said. “So I want... wait. Why is everyone standing around the phone and the duffel bag? You weren’t. You weren’t going to reset were you? The realization hit in and you realized you didn’t have to end the world? I hinted pretty hard, I said we had a plan. Are all the phones on airplane mode so we can let the batteries drain out?”

We all looked at each other. Rory and little Mia shook their heads at us.

“Yeah that’s what we did.” I lied, putting the phone into airplane mode. “1998 is cool. We can hang out here.” We breathed out collectively a sigh of relief.

“Most employees don’t figure out the whole Future Treats scam falls apart if you don’t do anything.” Brooke said. “No offense. But it took you a long time to figure that out. Anyways. I take some money from the bag and a few USB drives as part of the favor. The thing will run out of power after 48 hours. I’d put it in a noise proof room until then. I’ll have to hang out for a while, since I have nowhere to go. With that in mind, where is the bathroom?”

Sally pointed Brooke towards the bathroom while Bianca helped find whatever she could to silence the bag.

I realized Brooke didn't tell me about the plan because the phone was recording us in a chartered dimension. Now it didn't matter. She could have said something later, though I'm not how her shift worked.

I faced my youngerself. "I'm going to learn to be cooler to you. I'm not beating you up anymore, from here on out I am your friend. We might not get along, but I promise I will fight for you. I don't know how. But I'll learn."

Rory paused. "I don't know how to respond to that." They whispered.

"I want a sonnet."

"No." Rory nodded their head.

"So no one is dying?" Bianca asked.

Mia tackle-hugged her, and then me. She buried her face in my cheek. I squeezed her back.

I woke up like I did most mornings when living at the Kaye's house. Though I wasn't wearing my emotional support hoodie I'd never be able to replace. Well, I could if I went to the same store and bought the same hoodie in the same year but it wouldn't be the same. Though I felt off, I felt that since I accidentally killed everyone in an entire universe I shouldn't complain. I'm not proud of everything I've done. If I had better information at the time I would have acted differently. That's how hindsight works, I'm learning. Sometimes our mistakes hurt others. But we didn't kill everyone in this one, so I'll keep doing the best I can.

I made my way downstairs super early and made a full pot of coffee to start off the new routine. Rory sat at the counter, already up with their suitcases packed. Their hair stuck up worse than normal, but they didn't seem to care.

"You can make coffee, you know," I reminded them. That wasn't always a thing when the other me lived at home. I have no idea if young me should be drinking coffee either, but that didn't stop me at that age so I let it be. But our mom had started getting better after she took a part-time shift at FuKuYu family market. Dr. Tanaka opened a few years early after we told her what happened. Rory lives with me, but we tried to go visit when mom wants to see us. We're all getting there.

The coffee pot clanked. I poured Rory a cup.

“I’m putting milk in mine,” Rory said.

“That’s fine,” I sighed. They poured milk into their cup and began to drain the entire sugar container. I got annoyed, watching them use all the sugar in the house. Sure, we have more money than we know what to do with. But we’re figuring out our ‘laundry’ arrangement with the store. So we can pay taxes and spend our money. I didn’t want to go buy more sugar. I wanted to say something about being wasteful. But then I saw how my younger self smiled. In the morning. I didn’t shake my head. I left it alone.

Mia entered the room. Rory opened the fridge door to put back the milk. They turned to the waking bear. They tried to gently close the door. But it fell out of their hands and slammed shut.

“I’m s...” Rory began to mumble.

“Thank you for trying.” An annoyed Mia said. Little Maria walked down the stairs, with an equal hate of existence. She sat next to her older self.

I poured another cup and handed it to Mia. She sat in silence, eyes squinted, hair ruffled for a couple of minutes. She continuously checked her cup with her hand. When the coffee had cooled, she took a sip. She turned to me and smiled.

“Sally will be here soon. Her parents are dropping her off for the trip. I need to talk to Ms. Kaye we go.” I said.

I poured one last cup of coffee. I messed up Mia’s hair with my free hand and headed upstairs.

Knocking on the bedroom door, coffee mug in hand, Ms. Kay said. “Come in.”

I brought the coffee mug in and sat it the nightstand. She stood in front of the dresser, packing a suitcase for our trip.

“You said you wanted to talk to me last night, Ms. Kaye?” I said.

“Yeah. I’m finishing up packing. I’m going to try to call Bianca before she takes off to meet us.”

“Nervous about driving? Or meeting your past self for the first time? My first time didn’t go well for me.”

“Yup.” She zipped up a large suitcase. “And New York is far. But she. I. She needed time to think.”

“We have time,” I said.

“Can you. Talk to. Myself for me? And tell her everything that happened? Because. I’m not sure I put it into words okay. Our first phone call did not go well. We fought over the house.”

“I can try.” I said.

She looked back up. “Are you worried? Is the company going to come after you? For not returning the duffel bag with the money?” Ms. Kaye asked.

“After the death devices powered off, Mia and I buried them. They can’t find us here.” I said.

The doorbell rang.

“That must be Sally.” Ms. Kaye frowned. I laughed at this.

We both headed to the living room. Sally’s parents, and Brooek from the cabbage store, helped bring in two large suitcases. I walked behind Mia and rested my head on hers.

“How long are we going to stay at the park??” Sally asked, all excited.

Rory was like, “As long as we want.”

“Dips on the front seat,” Brooke stuck up her finger.

I put my hand on Mia’s shoulder.

“I told you things were going to get better,” I said. I decided to eat breakfast while everyone got ready. I took one of the home baked cupcakes from a container on the counter and took a bite.

Mia stole a bite from the other side.

And that’s how I finally learned to live with myself. Not that it’s easy. Rory and I can’t agree on anything but I guess that’s how things go. Mia and Maria pretend the other doesn't exist. I bet it’ll get easier for them.

Meeting yourself for the first time is strange. And you might find yourself saying things you don't mean. Rory won't stop saying "I'd never do that." It's confusing but we'll make it. And so will you two. Just take it easy on yourself.

Oh. Had you thought about what you wanted to call yourself, 'other' Ms. Kaye?

THE END