

(Untitled Work)

The End

Had I taken a wrong turn somewhere? Fritz glanced around at the cavernous cavern he was in. It was awfully dark in spite of the lantern he held at his side and the walls only barely glistened in the light. He had been trudging around in the dark for about an hour now, and by the time on his watch it was nearly sundown somewhere above him. A part of him wished to go back, but in truth he probably couldn't find his way back anyways. Taking one last hesitant look around he stepped forward, and stumbled.

In the blink of an eye the cavern transformed into a tunnel, lined with bricks and the ground leveled with pavers. This was where he wanted to be, back in the tunnels. His luck had finally caught up with him. He glided effortlessly through the space, tracing his fingers along the time-worn walls and taking each fork in the tunnel with stride. Even without the lamp he could probably find the exit. Before long he was out at last in the fresh evening air. October 20th, 2011. It's been a while. Trees rose up around him and leaves carpeted the forest floor. The last rays of sunlight peered through the trees and alighted on the tunnel entrance, a haphazard array of wood planks which hardly kept anyone out. He looked again at his watch. 8:12 PM. Cutting it a bit close.

The tunnel entrance was nestled into the side of a hill, set a few feet down into the ground. Fritz quickly picked his way out of the depression and hid himself among some of the undergrowth that stubbornly held onto its leaves in spite of the autumnal gusts. There he sat and waited.

Sure enough, within a minute or two, Tim strolled into the clearing. A lithe young grad student from a nearby university. He wore a sweatshirt and cargo pants. His posture conveyed a sense of guilt, as though he wasn't supposed to be here. This was amplified by his quick glances around, as though expecting for someone to pop out from behind a tree and demand why he was picking around the abandoned tunnels. Fritz watched in fascination. It might be a while before he saw Tim again, if ever.

A leaf crackled under Fritz's weight. Tim's head snapped in the direction of Fritz. Fritz had been shifting his footing but didn't expect any noise to come of it. He froze, deathly still.

"Is anyone there?" Called out Tim, meekly. He stood for a few moments more waiting for a response. Apparently satisfied with the silence, Tim walked into tunnel. *And so it begins*, thought Fritz.

Starting Out at University

It's a cloudless August day, with the sun beaming down on all the students scurrying about like ants. It's move-in day, or at least one of them, for Parkersburg University, a small private college in West Virginia. Tim, lugging a mini fridge from the car, stopped for a moment to catch his breath. It wasn't that the sun was awfully hot, but that there was no breeze to help mitigate the heat. It had been like this for the last week, but he still hoped that maybe the weather would cool down, just for today. His parents weren't doing too well either, his dad had worked up quite a sweat lugging all of Tim's items around and his mother had resigned herself to organizing the dorm room. There wasn't much left to carry anyways. Keen on getting out of the sun, Tim picked back up the fridge and hurried away into his dorm.

Even with all the stuff he brought from home, the room seemed pretty bare. Two beds framed the one window on the wall opposite the door. His dresser stood at the foot of his bed and by the door he had a closet, which was packed with an odd assortment of clothing, cleaning supplies, some snacks, and a number of things that didn't really make sense elsewhere. His roomie, Alex, had a similar arrangement of furniture, making the room painfully symmetric. Tim made a note to maybe move the furniture around when Alex arrived, or maybe put up a few posters. Tim's dad was sitting at the desk, arranging his books from smallest to largest, and his mom waited for him on the bed.

"That everything?" She asked.

"I think so, I didn't see anything left in the car," said Tim. They hugged their goodbyes and soon Tim was left alone in the room.

Tim and Alex didn't have much of a history. They had been pseudo-randomly assigned to each other by the university. They had chatted a few times online and texted back and forth a bit to get somewhat acquainted with each other. They found that they both liked video games, running, and were pursuing technical majors; Tim is majoring in physics while Alex is studying mechanical engineering. Both of them came from fairly far away. Tim grew up in Oakland, Maryland, while Alex's family lived over in Indiana.

Tim wasn't sure how he would handle the transition. Most of his life up until now had been spent hanging around his hometown with his friends from school or participating in clubs. He had been captain of the cross-country team for his senior year of high school. It wasn't a big team, which made becoming the captain fairly easy, but he enjoyed it nonetheless. Maybe every other year his family would travel somewhere for vacation, but that was for at most a week. Staying at college for a full semester seemed unbearable. Sure, he was excited, but he already felt a tad alienated by the "institutional" structure of campus life.

Tim had begun to work on putting his stuff in order, as he didn't agree with the organizational scheme his dad had developed for his books. It wasn't long before Alex burst into the room.

"Tim!" He cried, slamming down the box he had been carrying on the unoccupied desk. They gave each other a fist-bump because that seemed appropriate for the occasion.

"When did you get here?"

"Just under an hour ago, my family has already left."

"That's a shame, I thought you guys were going to get here later." Tim had told Alex they'd be arriving around 5 PM, but they had made good time. Tim helped Alex and his parents transport the rest of Alex's belongings into the dorm room. It wasn't long before his parents left, leaving just the two of them to sort out who's stuff went where and to divvy up cleaning responsibilities.

Tim and Alex continued to tidy up the room. At some point Alex grew bored and sat, watching Tim continue to interminably shuttle things around and puzzle over his arrangements.

"Tim."

"Yes?"

“Want to get out of here?”

Tim glanced at the clock on his phone, which read quarter past six.

“Sure.”

Tim hadn’t had a chance to explore the campus much, but quickly realized that it is much larger than he originally anticipated. They initially passed a few tennis courts after leaving the dormitories behind, and then proceeded to spend roughly the next hour wondering aimlessly between the various academic buildings. Tim tried to get a rough idea of where his classes were, but somewhere along the way he got confused as to how to get back to the dorm. They stopped next to a building labeled “Clark Hall” and agreed to seek out the nearest dining hall, which also proved difficult. Thankfully at this point the sun had set, and it was comfortably cool out. After another half hour of repeatedly walking one way and then doubling back, the two stumbled into a cafeteria. They grabbed some food and sat down. It was fairly crowded, so they sat amongst some of the other students that were eating and began to recount their journey to one another, trying to make sense of where they were and what they had seen. One of the older students sitting next to them overheard what they were saying.

“You guys out exploring the campus?” He asked.

“Yeah,” said Alex.

“Did you get the chance to see the Isaac building?” He asked. We both gave him a blank stare. He continued on to make a futile attempt at describing it. Apparently, it’s the “coolest building on campus.” They sat for a moment in silence waiting for someone to pick up the conversation.

“Are there any places off campus we should check out?” Alex asked.

“Do you guys know about Digby woods?” The student had a sly grin on his face, “It’s over on the east side of campus. It’s technically campus property, but they haven’t used it for anything yet, so it remains wooded. There aren’t really any trails, but it’s nearby.”

Tim liked the idea of going for a hike and quickly fell off into a daydream of adventuring off into the woods for a day. At this point Tim’s fatigue from the long day was catching up with him and his thoughts were all muddled. Alex and the student kept on talking about something, but Tim wasn’t paying attention.

“I’ve got go, but hopefully I’ll see you two around,” said the student, standing up and abruptly pulling Tim back to reality. They bid him goodbye and finished up their meal soon after. Tim and Alex began the trek back to their dorm, talking wistfully of the coming semester, and somewhere, in the back of Tim’s mind, the thought of the Digby woods lingered.

Classes

“Rise and shine, boy!” Alex hollered, tossing a shirt at Tim. This did not please Tim. With a groan, he rolled out of the bed, quite literally onto the floor.

"Are you not excited?" Alex asked, "First day of classes and you're already back asleep on the floor." Tim snored in response. Alex gave up on his futile attempts to rouse the dead (Tim) and put his shirt on.

"I've been debating this since we got here, but am I supposed to brush my teeth before breakfast, or go to the dining hall, eat, then come back and brush my teeth?" Asked Alex.

"Don't even bother," muttered Tim, slowly pulling himself out of the throes of sleep.

"With brushing?"

"And breakfast while you're at it."

Alex grimaced at the notion of skipping breakfast. He took a quick glance at his clock.

"Well at the pace you're moving, I think you'll have to just to make it to class on time."

"What time is it?"

"9:15-ish."

Apparently, this was enough to get Tim moving.

"What?" he cried. He began to furiously scramble around the room, gathering together the semblance of an outfit and tossing notebooks into his backpack.

"Your class is at 10:30, right?"

"9:30!" Was all Tim managed to say. Miraculously, in the next 10 minutes Tim managed to pull together all his items and get dressed for the day (roughly in that order, but it's hard to tell). He bid Alex a quick goodbye and was out the door. Luckily, he vaguely remembered the location of the physics building from his early adventures around the campus and set off promptly in that direction. By the time he arrived it was 9:40.

He ducked into the physics building and quickly made his way to the lecture hall. His first class was an introductory electromagnetism course with Professor Heller. As he came to the door of the lecture hall, he stopped and caught his breath; he didn't want to make a commotion entering huffing and puffing. Once he deemed himself fit to enter, he delicately opened the door and furtively tried to find a seat. At the front of the lecture hall, an older man with deep wrinkles in his forehead and a full head of wavy gray hair sat in a raised chair hunched over a packet of papers, probably the course syllabus.

He looked up as Tim entered. For a moment the two made eye contact. A strange expression danced across the professor's face. Tim quickly looked down at the empty seat that he found but couldn't help but notice the odd look of confusion that Professor Heller had given him. Perhaps it was more of a look of irritation, annoyed with his arriving late and interrupting going over the syllabus.

Professor Heller quickly resumed his review of the grading policy. Somehow an extra copy of the syllabus made its way to Tim. He had a rough idea of what the course was about. His physics teacher from high school had gone over some of the concepts in passing, just to entertain the curiosity of the students. The student next to him nudged him.

"You understand any of this?" He asked gesturing to the "Topics Covered" section of the syllabus. Tim made half shrug and a nod, which said, "Yeah, well I've heard of it, but I probably couldn't tell you much about it." The student seemed to understand this.

"My names Eric by the way."

"I'm Tim."

"Where are you from."

"Maryland, you?"

"Pleasants county, just north of here," he said. Tim realized he had no clue what the counties of West Virginia were. Quickly looking up a county map of the state soon revealed that there were a lot more here than in Maryland. He probably couldn't even name all the counties in Maryland to begin with.

"Hey, do you want to study together some time? He already assigned some readings from the textbook before you came in." He gestured to the girl sitting on the other side of him. "This is Clare, we were planning on studying together tomorrow if you wanted to join."

Clare, catching the gesture in her peripheral, leaned over and gave a wave to Tim.

"Sure."

"Great!" They exchanged contact information and resumed paying attention to Professor Heller. He was just finishing getting through the academic integrity statement at the end of the syllabus. Class ended about ten minutes later. Professor Heller had started talking about Coulomb's law, which seemed pretty straightforward. Tim waved goodbye to Eric and Clare and made his way to his next class. It was noticeably hotter out now, compared to the bearable warmth of the morning. Tim began to wonder if he would survive having to walk between all his classes. His other two lectures that day played out similarly in format to the physics lecture. In between them he grabbed lunch, which proved to be a bit of hike. He wished he had scouted out the layout of the campus before making his schedule.

His oral communications class was his last lecture, which was hosted in the chemistry building (why, he did not know) and let out at 3:30 PM. Tim scampered over to a campus map he saw posted on a community board just outside his class. A cursory glance at the map indicated that the walk back would be a bit long as well, but the campus had a library which was right next door. Perhaps he could wait out the heat and get some work done there. He made his way out to the library and soon found himself amongst endless rows of books.

Tim liked books. He used to read quite often, but somewhere along the way he must have stopped. The titles here didn't seem terribly interesting: "Clinical Chemistry," "100 Years of Physical Chemistry," "Nomenclature of Organic Chemistry." It went on like this all down the aisle. Tim quickly moved into the next aisle over, flummoxed to find yet more chemistry books. He skipped a few aisles and found that the subject had changed over to physics. This was definitely more interesting. He pulled a few, rather large, books from the shelves and leafed through the pages. Numerous fascinating illustrations covered the interiors of the books and he had to remind himself that he had his own textbook already to get through. He replaced the book he was holding on the shelf.

He spent some more time scouring the library, hoping to find some works of fiction, but was baffled to find that not even a single title lent itself to the genre. How can you have an entire library without a single fictional book?

"Are you looking for something?" Tim nearly jumped out of his socks. Behind him a short, elderly, bald gentleman looked up at him with an inquisitive look on his face.

"I was just wondering if you had anything like *Lord of the Rings*," said Tim, composing himself.

"I'm afraid you're in the wrong library, son. This is the Adler library. The Donne library has a bit more in the way of fiction." The man gave him some directions. "My name's Clarke by the way." They shook hands and parted ways. Tim settled himself into a fairly quiet corner and began sifting through some of the initial assignments he had already been given. He resigned himself to taking notes for his oral communications class. The hours began to slip by as Tom waded through new vocabulary and lost himself among the pages of his textbooks.

The Tunnels

Things quickly fell into rhythm after college began. Tim regularly attended his classes and Alex semi-regularly attended his. Tim got involved with a cross country club on campus, so much of his time was divided between studying and running, which he didn't mind. Tim, Eric, and Clare began to meet more frequently outside of class, not just for studying. Though there wasn't much to do in Parkersburg they still managed to find means of entertaining themselves. Often this involved grabbing dinner at Jim's Jamboree, a derelict little restaurant just off campus, and then wandering aimlessly through the nearby suburbs and parks. Before Tim realized, the air had developed a bit of a chill and the leaves were eschewing off trees at an alarming rate.

The sun slowly started to dip in the sky as the afternoon hours quickly slipped away. It was cool out. In fact, it had been that way all week. No matter how sunny it was, the heat of the beginning of the school year simply did not return. Tim, Eric, and Clare sat around a small table at Jim's Jamboree. Tim had ordered an Italian sandwich, of which was gone now, and some fries, which he was happily munching away on. It was a Tuesday, so it wasn't too busy. A few patrons sat at the bar, seeming to stare emptily at the shelves of drinks behind the counter. Outside cars rolled by lazily as people started to leave work for home. Tim loved it. Clare and Eric were bickering about something. Tim had discovered that they do this often. It wasn't a mean bickering. As far as Tim could tell, they must enjoy arguing for they did it over the smallest things. Just last week they had got into a heated debate over how dry-cleaning works. Today Clare has ordered a salad and thus they were discussing what constituted thousand island dressing.

"Tim, taste this," Clare brandished a spinach leaf at him with some dressing on it.

"I don't want your disgusting leaves, Clare."

"Tell me it doesn't taste like ketchup and mayo."

"I'm fairly certain it would, it's thousand island dressing."

"See!" She cried, turning her attention back to Eric, who began to laugh.

The difference between Eric and Clare is that Clare is actually invested in her stance, while Eric seeks merely to rile her up over it. Today he was quite pleased with how he was doing. Clare pushed the remains of her salad away.

"I'm done with this," she said, fed up. Eric had already finished his food a while ago, and Tim quickly scarfed down the last few fries on his plate. They began their walk back to campus. By now the sun was getting particularly low in the sky and a cool autumnal breeze swept down the road. As they walked along Tim began to think of his plans for the evening.

He had a few midterms coming up just before Thanksgiving break. He quietly thought to himself how they should ban putting midterms before breaks, because inevitably the professors will plan them for that week, meaning everyone has a bunch of midterms bunched up all at the same times throughout the semester. Then Tim realized that by banning that week, they would all get moved to the week prior and the same issue would occur. Anyways, as Tim was thinking this, he returned to his evening plans. He had some assignments due in a few days, but nothing tomorrow necessarily. In truth, he didn't want to go back to campus just yet. A part of him still felt cooped up, even trapped, on campus.

The way back included a decent stretch of road that ran adjacent to Digby woods. It was at this point that they came upon it and Tim started to get a singular desire to go for a hike. Tim stopped walking.

"You guys keep going, I think I might walk around the woods for a bit."

"You sure?" Asked Clare. Both Eric and Clare were puzzled by this.

"Sure, why not?" Time began to tramp off into the woods. Eric and Clare both looked at each other confused. Eric gave a brief shrug, and then they turned and continued walking.

Tim had never been in these woods, though the thought of it had been lurking about in the recesses of his mind for a while. After about 30 minutes of aimlessly wandering about, he started to lose track of where he was. He couldn't get lost necessarily. If he walked in one direction long enough, either he would pop back out onto an adjacent road or come upon the Ohio river that ran along one edge of the town, and these woods. So, he was not concerned about losing his way. It was around this point that he came upon what appeared to be an abandoned tunnel set into the side of a hill and slightly down. It clearly had been boarded up some time ago, but the barricade had long fell into disarray. A quick look around gave no indication of a road that may have once connected the tunnel to elsewhere. Just trees and a blanket of leaves covering the ground. He had the odd sense that he wasn't supposed be here. He checked the time: 8:15. The sunlight would be gone soon.

Somewhere up along the ridge to his left a came the sound of some leaves crunching. Tim looked deeply into the brush that covered the area for moment and listened but heard nothing more.

"Is anyone there?" Tim asked to no one in particular. He was talking to himself at this point. He took a moment to debate his options, but in the end his curiosity won out and Tim strolled briskly into the tunnel for fear that he would change his mind. What he noticed first was that it was dark. That was all he could really notice beyond the echoing of his footsteps. He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight. It wasn't much, but he could at least see a few feet in front of him. Fear started to grip him, but he pushed on. He quickly found that the tunnel split several times, some passages leading to dead

ends, others he bothered not to explore. Ever and anon did the tunnels go deeper. The air developed a stale smell and grew increasingly cold the further he went. After some time of repeatedly hitting dead ends and doubling-back, Tim's fear finally caught up with him and sent him hustling back the way he had come. Thankfully he had kept meticulous track of the path he had took and was quickly making headway on getting out. The sound of his own footsteps racing up from behind him urged him to go ever faster. He took a sharp turn and stumbled.

He wasn't in the tunnel anymore. What had once been brick-lined walls was now bare stone, though cut smooth, as though by a machine. Tim turned around and found that no trace of the tunnel he had been in remained. He hadn't taken a wrong turn; it was just that the tunnel wasn't there anymore. The ceiling lifted away into darkness overhead. Somewhere in the darkness he could here water dripping, the sound bouncing off the walls and echoing several times over before the next drip. The air had maintained its staleness, but now took on a moldy smell as well. Tim, initially overwhelmed and struggling to maintain his composure, sat for a moment to regain himself. After a few minutes of quiet contemplation and trying hard not to think about what could be beyond the light cast by his phone, for Tim felt something was watching him in the inky oblivion that surrounded him, he resolved to simply start walking in one direction. How he had gotten here still perplexed him, but he saw no way of getting back to where he had been.

Along the ground were slight outlines of tire tracks, and so Tim followed these for a time. His footsteps traveled down many barren corridors. The more he listened to them, the more he realized how cavernous this new space was. What was worse is that he had a hard time maintaining a sense for the passage of time. He found himself constantly checking his phone only to find that a few minutes had passed since he had last checked, but the intervening moments had felt like an eternity. But finally, the cave started to change. At first the ground got smoother, and this troubled Tim for the tire tracks became less apparent. After some more walking, the walls came to be made of brick. Unfortunately, not the same brick as before, these were large bricks of granite or another material of more muted color. And then he saw a light! This gave him far more relief than he had anticipated, and he quickly rushed ahead, finding himself in wide chamber. What struck him was, at the opposite side of the space, a building. More precisely, the side of the building, as though the structure was set into the rock directly. It had several garage doors, followed by a smaller side door. The light Tim had seen was placed above one of the garage doors, the rest seemed to have burnt out. Above the door there a sign that read "Loading Bay B," and in smaller text below this it read "Hayter Labs."

Tim quickly forgot his woes of being lost. Though it was evident that this was clearly abandoned, Tim was fascinated by its existence (and perhaps there might be a way out through this lab, though reason told him that would be back the way he came). Tim tried the door, and it gave way with ease. Sure enough, he found himself in a larger, hanger-like room. Thankfully there were a few lights in here that still worked and dimly lit the area. Strewn about were pallets with strange mounds covered with tarps on them and two pickup trucks were parked just past the garage doors. Tim spent some time poking around the pallets, but only found equipment which he couldn't determine the purpose of and odd assortments of wires and electrical components. He soon lost his interest as fatigue started to grip him. At the far end of space were more doors, presumably leading further into the facility. He briefly glanced into these corridors, but they were dark and foreboding, so Tim let them be. To the back right there were stairs leading up to an office that overlooked the loading bay.

It was at this point that Tim was almost convinced he wouldn't be finding a way out anytime soon. This troubled him deeply, but at this point he was far too tired to care. He resigned himself to finding a place to sleep for some time. The door of the office had a lock that seemed to still be working (that is, still working but unlocked upon Tim discovering it). He had high hopes of finding something comfortable to lay on in the office, but there were just two desks and a few filing cabinets. Tim admitted defeat and tried to make himself as comfortable as he could on the floor. Before long he was asleep.

The Labs

Tim woke to agonizing pain in his joints. He stiffly rolled over and slowly worked himself into getting up. He forgot to check the time prior to falling asleep, but his phone now read 7:15 AM. The thought of the sun slowly coming up on the surface made him sorrowful and he yearned to get back. He crept out of the office. Not much had changed. Tim kept having the awful notion that there was something else living down here, but as far as he had seen it was stark and lifeless. He also began to worry over the charge on his phone. As of now it was getting to 20% and he resolved to conserve the battery as best he could. Luckily, sifting through the desk drawers yielded a flashlight and he found a few remarkably odd-looking and clunky batteries, but they seemed to still work. He went down the stairs and once again approached the doors he had only glanced passed a few hours prior. He pointed the flashlight down the hall and saw that it continued off into the gloom, with a few doors lining the halls. *Why am I doing this?* Tim thought, and he boldly stepped through the door. He soon found the far end of the hall and it branched left and right. He opted to go right for no particular reason and continued on.

He poked his head in through the doors that lined the hall, finding a number of abandoned offices. Most of them seemed to have been left untouched, as though the inhabitants had simply left work one day and never returned. At one point he took the time to properly inspect one of these offices. He instinctively tried the light switch to no avail. On the desk sat some files, a pencil holder filled with pens that had dried up a long time ago, and a picture frame. The photo was black and white and seemed to have developed cracks. It showed two young kids, probably around three and five. Tim removed the photo from the frame and flipped it over, where on the back it read "June 14, 1941." The odd thought that the kids in the frame were much older now, if not having already passed away, drifted through Tim's thoughts and made him uncomfortable. He replaced the photo in the frame and looked through some of the drawers of the desk. In one he found some candy bars, which reminded him that he hadn't eaten in a while. He suspiciously inspected the candy but concluded they were probably safe to eat. Indeed, they didn't taste quite right, but it was better than nothing. He set himself to scavenging for more and soon he was sick of the food there. It would at least hold him over for the time being. He reached the end of the corridor and double-backed. He passed the way he came in from and the preceding hall connected up with another hallway that to his left led to one of the doors to the loading bay. Off to the right he saw the faint glow of what appeared to be work lights.

He hurried towards them, finding that they were leading deeper into the facility. He passed a few windows that overlooked what looked like chemistry labs full of equipment with seemingly outdated interfaces of large knobs and gauges. In one he saw what appeared to be optical instruments, utterly covered in dust. Tim could only imagine the horror this would give the scientist that had worked there ages ago. As Tim wove his way through the corridors, it struck him how odd it would be for work

lights to be dotting the halls when the inhabitants could have simply flicked on the overhead lights. He guessed that the reason why they were there might be at his destination.

He was right. He came upon a metal door with a few hazard warnings printed on its surface. It was only now that Tim realized how much of an idiot he had been in simply diving into an abandoned lab that could be irradiated or have some kind of chemical spill. He quickly checked himself in the horror to see if he had developed any sign that this might be the case, but he appeared and felt exceedingly normal. He wasn't sure on what time scale he should expect a reaction, but figuring he couldn't do much worse, he pushed through the door, finding himself on a catwalk that spanned the length of a rather large room. He was at first stunned. At the far end of the room, to the left of the door he had come in through, sat a monstrous hunk of metal that looked like it had collapsed inward on itself, like a crumpled tin can. Wires and tubes stuck out at odd angles, many of which were savagely torn apart. Portions of the ceiling above the machine were torn out as well, presumably from having been anchored to the device prior to whatever catastrophe occurred here. Even more wires led away from it, connecting up to a row of terminals that lined either wall below Tim.

Tim found a ladder at the opposite end of the catwalk. It appeared that there was a lower level to the facility as there were two more doors level with the floor of the room. Tim picked his way between the wires on the floor and stood before the machine. After a few minutes of aimlessly poking about, Tim concluded there was nothing more he could learn about it. He started to head back to the ladder when he noticed there was a desk underneath the catwalk that he had missed upon entering. On it sat a lump of straps and wires, and beside this was a piece of paper with some writing scrawled on it:

The tunnels above are sealed off. The only reliable way out that I'm aware of is probably less conventional than what you're used to.

9F9D6-6A098-66F4F-841BA.

Below the writing was a big arrow in black sharpie pointing to the heap on the table. The thought that someone was expecting him sent shivers down his spine. He looked around suspiciously, half expecting someone to jump out from behind one of the computers or out of a doorway. Tim gingerly picked the straps up and found that it was a harness. Tim's mind jumped at the possibilities. *Was this some kind of teleportation device?* Clearly, he had been reading too much science fiction. He fiddled with it for a minute or two, finding a keypad and a digital display in the mess, and two modestly sized black boxes that appeared to be positioned on the chest and back. He set it down for a moment and thought of his next move. He stared warily at the string of letters and numbers on the page. He resolved to look around the lab for a bit longer.

After a few more hours of walking around the lab, he lost confidence that there would be a simple exit. He did find loading bay A, which was very similar to loading bay B. He also found some more snacks in the meantime, but he was quickly growing tired of the cardboard-tasting chocolate. In the end he concluded that either he should venture back out into the tunnels or follow the instructions on the desk. For a time, he sat at loading bay A and stared out into the darkness. Eventually the ominous stillness got to him, and he quickly ran back to hulking machine and threw on the harness. He adjusted the straps, finding that the keypad was to be strapped to his forearm. He tapped one of the keys and the display lit up. He punched in the string of characters on the page, triple-checking them for fear of what would happen if he got them wrong. After a moment's hesitation, he hit the enter key.

Somewhere Somewhen

To be continued...

This begins the second section of the novel (referred to as "Passing time in a time gone past" in the plot synopsis) and marks the beginning of the rising action.