



THE MEMORY BROKER

Lost souls drifting to the abyss



BY,
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JAYAWEEERA



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PREFACE

Literature is a benchmark for measuring the development of a nation. In Sri Lankan history, the Dambadeniya period of the Polonnaruwa era stands out as a time of great literary enlightenment. Similarly, the present era of Mahamaya can be considered a golden age of literature. For many years, our young women have demonstrated their wisdom through writing, contributing significantly to this literary progress. Establishing a culture of book writing within schools and expanding it to the entire national education system, while integrating the global student community, is a remarkable achievement by our young authors.

Going beyond this, the school community has also taken steps to revive the ancient monastic literary tradition by engaging Pirivena student monks in writing, as a tribute to the revered Atthadassi Mahimi Thero. This initiative, named the "**Herana Gathkarani Project**," aims to revitalize traditional monastic literature within the country. Through this scholarly and religious endeavor, we hope to bring about a qualitative transformation in both school and Pirivena education.

As the principal of this institution, I take immense pride in leading this initiative, which marks a significant milestone for our school. Encouraging students to recognize their innate talents and engage in writing from an early stage in life is highly commendable. This publication, born out of such dedication, will undoubtedly serve as a valuable resource for future education and life itself.

Shashikala Senadhira

Principal, Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy

INTRODUCTION

It's the year 2049, a time when humanity's relentless pursuit of technology has reshaped the world beyond recognition. The Earth we once knew is gone, replaced by a sleek, cybernetic version of itself a living, breathing machine. Over the years, humans faced monumental challenges, but each obstacle only pushed them to greater heights. The most groundbreaking achievement of all? Surpassing the speed of light.

This single discovery opened the door to the stars. Planets once thought distant and unreachable were now just a teleport away. Humanity colonized 250 Earth-like worlds, but none surpassed the importance of two: the original Earth and Mars. Mars, the first habitable colony, is linked to Earth by teleportation gates so advanced that a trip takes less than a minute.

But as 2049 draws to a close, a new year approach. A year that will change everything. Technology continues to evolve at breakneck speed some inventions helpful, some pointless but nothing could prepare humanity for the breakthrough that awaits them in 2050.

On Earth, in the crowded streets of New York, lives a boy named Rick. His family is poor, unable to afford trips to the other colonies. Yet, despite their hardships, they live a humble, happy life. Rick, a restless teenager with a knack for tinkering, has always dreamed of becoming an inventor. Most of his creations have been little more than toys and gadgets that never quite worked as intended. But this time, things will be different.

His next invention will be the one that changes everything. It will be the one that changes him.

Because his next invention is a time machine.

And it's about to uncover secrets about Earth's past that were never meant to be found.

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SHADOWS IN THE RAIN

Rain lashed against the window like a thousand tiny drummers, but Rick's eyes weren't on the storm — they were on something far more distant. His gaze wandered, his mind spiraling through thoughts that didn't seem to have an end. The hum of his classroom surrounded him like static noise, but one voice cut through.

“The Earth is the first known habitable planet in the universe,” the teacher said, her voice sharp but tired. **“Some claim there were habitable worlds before Earth, but that’s just a myth.”** Her eyes darted to the window, as if she expected someone to be watching. **“Our knowledge of Earth’s past is... limited. For reasons we aren't allowed to discuss.”**

Rick’s head snapped toward her. That was new. His teacher was normally so boring that even sleep felt like a better use of time. But **this?** This was different.

“Why aren't we allowed to discuss it?” His voice came out sharp and steady. Heads turned. A few kids snickered, whispering among themselves. It was probably the first time half of them had even realized Rick could speak.

The teacher's face tensed. Her fingers tapped her desk, each tap a little faster than the last. **“Because it’s illegal, Rick,”** she said. **“That’s all you need to know.”**

“Illegal to know about our own planet?” Rick leaned forward, his eyes locked on her. **“Why?”**

Her face hardened. **“Class dismissed! Enjoy your winter break.”** She grabbed her bag and hurried out the door like she was being chased.

The rain hit harder now, rattling the windows. Rick sat frozen in his chair. His mind wasn't spiraling anymore. No, it was locked on one thing.

“Why don't they want us to know?”

Rick's apartment wasn't far from the school, just a 10-minute walk. But he always took the train. Something about it felt *cool*. The soft hum of the magnetic rails, the low glow of blue lights, and the brief two-minute ride made him feel like he was on a spaceship.

He leaned his head against the window, watching neon signs blur past. His reflection stared back at him — untidy black hair, dark brown eyes, and that same scowl that wouldn't leave his face. The rain blurred his reflection, and for a second, it almost looked like someone else was staring back at him.

The train came to a soft halt. **“Arrived: Sector 9 — Residential District.”**

By the time Rick walked into the house, his mother was setting the dinner table. Her smile lit up the room like a lantern in a cave. The smell of strawberry pudding hit his nose, and his stomach growled.

“Rick, you were thinking about something since you got here,” his mom said as she placed a plate in front of him. **“What's on your mind, honey?”**

Rick hesitated, then asked, **“Mom... do you know anything about Earth's history?”**

Her hands froze for half a second, then she laughed — but it didn't sound real. **“Sweetie, no one knows about it. Even if someone did, they'd never be allowed to tell you. It's illegal to look it up, so it's better not to think about it, okay?”** She ruffled his hair. **“Now eat up! Your favorite tonight — strawberry pudding.”**

He frowned at his plate. She always dodged his questions. Everyone did. For the first time, even pudding didn't make him feel better.

After dinner, Rick climbed the stairs to his room. Rain tapped against his window like little fingers begging to be let in. He stared at the water streaking down the glass, then gazed at the stars in the distance.

"How did we get here?" he muttered to himself. **"Why is the world like this? How did we get this much tech, and why don't they tell us about the past?"**

He sighed. **"And the future... I wonder how the future will look."**

"Well, you'll never know if you just stand there talking to yourself."

Rick flinched, eyes darting around the room.

"What? How did you—?"

He spun around, his gaze landing on **Dog Bot**, his robotic dog-shaped companion. Its circular eyes blinked with a soft blue glow, and its metal ears wiggled like a real dog's.

"Guess who's here!" Dog Bot said, tail-wagging animation on full display.

"I thought I left you on the charger, dummy," Rick grumbled.

"Yeah, well, you thought wrong, genius." Dog Bot tilted his head. **"You're thinking about weird stuff again, huh? Earth's history? Oh boy, here we go."**

"Shut up and get back on the charger," Rick snapped.

"Fine, fine. Bossy today, aren't we?" Dog Bot rolled away, mumbling, **"Shoulda been built by a nicer guy."**

Rick chuckled, but his eyes went back to the window. The rain was letting up, and the moon was out. **That was his signal.**

The lake was only a few minutes away. It had been his safe spot since he was a kid. No matter how much the world around him changed, the lake stayed the same — still, silent, endless. Tonight, it was perfect. The moonlight hit the water just right, making it look like liquid silver.

But then he saw **him**.

A man darted between the trees on the other side of the lake. Fast. Desperate. His movements were frantic, like prey being hunted.

Boom!

An explosion shook the ground. The flash of orange light lit up the forest, and Rick's heart almost stopped. Smoke rose from the trees. His instincts told him to **run home**, but his curiosity whispered, "**Follow.**"

He followed.

His sneakers crunched against the wet leaves as he moved deeper into the woods. Branches scratched his arms, but he didn't care. He followed the smoke. And then — he saw **him again**.

The man stood in a clearing, talking into a device on his wrist. His back was to Rick, but his voice was clear.

"Yeah, I've got it. The data's secure. We're leaving now." He paused. **"No, no one saw me... Well, almost no one."**

The man stiffened, head turning **just enough** for Rick to see his face. His eyes were **glowing orange**. Not like a flashlight. Not like a robot. It was something else.

Then it happened.

A deep hum filled the air. A circular swirl of blue and white light spun in front of the man. **A vortex. A hole in the air itself.** It spun faster and faster until it looked like a tunnel of light.

“No way,” Rick whispered, eyes wide with disbelief.

The man stepped forward... and disappeared into the vortex. The portal began to shrink. **“No, no, no, no!”** Rick scrambled forward, eyes fixed on the vanishing light.

But just before it closed completely, the man **reappeared behind Rick.**

“You’re curious, huh?” The man's voice was smooth, like he'd been expecting Rick this whole time. **“They said you’d be. I’ve been waiting a long time to see it for myself. The 'curious genius of the past,' they called you.”** He crouched low, his glowing orange eyes burning holes in Rick’s soul.

“Nice to meet you, little genius.”

Rick didn’t move. He couldn’t. His chest felt frozen, like his heart had stopped working. His breath came in shallow gasps. Then, without warning, his body moved before his brain could. **He ran.**

The man’s laughter echoed behind him. It wasn’t human. It was sharp, hollow, and far too loud. Rick didn’t look back. He didn’t stop running until he made it home.

He collapsed on the floor, chest heaving, eyes locked on his front door. **The man was gone.**

Dog Bot rolled over, eyeing him like he’d seen a ghost. **“Geez, what happened to you? Looks like you saw the past and future at the same time.”**

Rick’s eyes darted to the TV. The news anchor’s face was serious. Behind her, a forest fire blazed. The red text below read:

"FUGITIVE SCIENTIST ON THE LOOSE. HIGHLY DANGEROUS."

His breath caught. The man's face flashed on the screen.

"That's him," Rick whispered. **"That's him."**

THE BLUEPRINT OF SECRETS

The rain had stopped, but the thunder still rumbled softly in the distance. Rick lay on his bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling like it might suddenly offer him all the answers. His heart was still racing, and the memory of the man's glowing orange eyes was burned into his mind.

“Curious genius of the past...” he muttered. **“What did he mean by that?”**

He turned his head toward Dog Bot, who sat in the corner of the room, plugged into his charger. The faint hum of Dog Bot's power core was strangely comforting. Rick knew he wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.

“Hey, Dog Bot.”

The blue lights on Dog Bot's face flickered to life. **“What now, boss?”** he grumbled, still charging.

“If I told you I saw a man create a vortex and disappear into it, what would you say?”

Dog Bot's digital eyes squinted like he was judging Rick. **“I'd say you need to check the expiration date on that strawberry pudding.”**

“I'm serious, dummy.”

“So am I, kid.” Dog Bot's eyes shifted from blue to yellow, his “thinking” color. **“Vortex technology is theoretically possible, but no human has access to it. Not legally, anyway. Plus, only a total moron would jump into one without proper stabilization. It's a one-way trip.”**

Rick sat up. His fingers tapped his knee rapidly, mind racing. **“But I saw him. He jumped in and came back out. And he knew who I was. He called me ‘the curious genius of the past.’”**

Dog Bot's eyes flickered red for half a second. **"Hold up. He knew you? That's... weird."**

"Yeah. Really weird."

The room fell into a heavy silence, only broken by the distant hum of traffic outside. Rick's gaze shifted toward his workbench in the corner of the room. Wires, gears, old circuit boards, and half-finished inventions were scattered all over it.

Then, his eyes landed on a small device in the center of the table.

The Memory Extractor.

It was supposed to be a joke project. A little "what if" device inspired by something he saw on a TV show. The idea was simple: extract and view memories from the human brain. Of course, it didn't work — *yet*. But tonight, something about it felt different.

"Dog Bot," Rick said slowly, his voice growing more confident. **"I'm gonna finish the Memory Extractor."**

Dog Bot's eyes turned white, his "stunned" face. **"You're joking, right? It's barely functional, and if it malfunctions, it could melt your brain like hot cheese."**

"Then I guess I better not mess up," Rick replied, grinning like a mad scientist.

"You *are* a total maniac." Dog Bot sighed. **"Fine, I'll help. But when your brain is pudding, don't say I didn't warn you."**

Hours Later...

Rick's hands worked like clockwork. His fingers moved faster than his thoughts, soldering wires, adjusting the circuit board, reprogramming the

code with his old tablet. Dog Bot hovered beside him, offering sarcastic advice every now and then.

“That wire's backwards, genius.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It’s absolutely backwards.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I have an actual processor, unlike you.”

Grumbling, Rick flipped the wire and continued. Minutes turned into hours, and soon, the storm outside had passed. The sound of rain was replaced with the faint hum of distant airships flying through the city sky.

Finally, he placed the last wire. The Memory Extractor was complete.

It looked crude — a metal headband with blinking LED lights and a small processing unit at the base. Wires snaked around it, leading to a simple screen on his tablet. It wasn’t pretty, but it was his.

“Boom,” Rick whispered, holding it up like it was a crown. **“Genius work, if I do say so myself.”**

“Looks like a tin can with extra steps,” Dog Bot said, unimpressed. **“So what now, Brainiac? You gonna stick that thing on your head and hope for the best?”**

Rick’s grin widened. **“Exactly.”**

“That was sarcasm, Rick.”

“And I’m ignoring it, Dog Bot.”

He placed the headband on his head and powered up the device. The LEDs lit up one by one, blinking in sync. The small screen on his tablet displayed a loading symbol, then a simple prompt:

SCAN MEMORY? [YES] / [NO]

“Alright...” Rick took a deep breath and hit **YES**.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then it hit him.

A surge of images, sounds, and emotions rushed into his mind. It felt like someone was shuffling through his memories like they were pages in a book. His head throbbed. Every second felt like hours.

He saw flashes of moments from his childhood. His mother smiling. His first trip on the train. The day he built Dog Bot. Each memory flew past him at blinding speed.

But then, something odd happened.

A memory he **didn't recognize** appeared.

He saw himself — **older**. His hair was longer, and he looked exhausted. His eyes had that same sharp, focused look as the man from the forest. He was standing in front of a giant machine. It wasn't like anything Rick had ever seen before.

In this vision, older Rick was typing on a screen. His voice echoed in Rick's ears.

“If you're seeing this, then it worked.” Older Rick's voice was colder, more serious. **“This is not a recording, by the way. This is a memory. *Your* memory. It's been hidden inside you since the day you were born.”**

“What?” Rick gasped.

“I don’t have time to explain everything, so listen carefully. You’re going to be hunted, Rick. They’ll come for you. The Memory Broker. The 250 Earths. The Syndicate. All of them. They’ll want what you have.”

The machine in the memory buzzed with energy. Sparks flew. It looked like it was about to explode.

“I can’t tell you everything, or it’ll mess up the timeline,” Older Rick said, his voice strained. **“But remember this: the key isn’t the past. It’s the future.”**

The machine behind him exploded, and everything went white.

Rick jolted awake, gasping for air. Sweat dripped down his face. His heart pounded like a war drum. He ripped off the Memory Extractor and threw it on the table.

“Dog Bot,” Rick whispered, shaking. **“You... You’re not gonna believe this.”**

Dog Bot rolled over, his blue eyes shifting to red. **“What now, Rick?”**

“I just saw a memory of the future,” Rick said, still panting. **“It was... me. But older. He said I’m being hunted. He said... I’m the key to something.”**

Dog Bot’s eyes stayed red, scanning Rick for any sign of damage. **“Okay, okay. Calm down, boss. Maybe it’s just a side effect of the extractor.”**

Rick shook his head. **“No, this was real. I’m sure of it.”**

He glanced at the screen. The last message from the memory was still displayed:

“The key isn’t the past. It’s the future.”

A soft knock echoed from the front door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't forceful. But it was enough to make Rick's blood turn cold.

"Who knocks at midnight?" Dog Bot whispered.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Rick's eyes darted to the door. His hands shook. Slowly, he stepped toward the front door, his breathing shallow and uneven.

"Don't do it, Rick," Dog Bot warned. **"I'm serious. Don't open it."**

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Rick's heart pounded.

He placed his hand on the doorknob, his fingers trembling. He held his breath, heart thudding in his ears.

Then he slowly turned it.

The door swung open.

No one was there.

But on the ground was a small black device, blinking with an orange light.

Orange... glowing... light.

Rick's eyes widened. He slammed the door shut and locked it.

Dog Bot's eyes flickered back to blue. **"Yeah. We're definitely being hunted."**

To Be Continued...

SHADOWS OF THE FUTURE

The clock struck 3:00 AM, and the soft hum of the city outside filled the silence. Neon lights from distant airships flashed through the window, casting glowing streaks of red and blue on the walls. But Rick wasn't thinking about any of that.

His eyes were locked on the small black device lying on the floor in front of the door. It blinked slowly — orange, off, orange, off — like a heartbeat.

Dog Bot hovered behind Rick, his glowing eyes locked on the device.

“Don't touch it.”

Rick took a step forward, eyes focused like a predator.

“Rick, I said *don't touch it.*” Dog Bot's voice was sharp now. **“That's not a toy. That's a signal device.”**

“Signal for what?” Rick asked, his voice as steady as he could manage.

Dog Bot's eyes flashed red. **“Not 'what.' *Who.*”**

The realization hit Rick like a thunderclap. His mind flashed back to the man in the forest. The vortex. The glowing eyes. The man said he would be hunted.

“They found me,” Rick whispered.

“No, they found *us.*” Dog Bot's eyes turned yellow, his "strategic mode."
“We need a plan. Fast.”

Rick leaned down to get a closer look at the blinking device. It was about the size of a deck of cards, sleek black metal with glowing orange cracks running

across its surface. There was no button, no screen — just the slow, rhythmic flash of light.

“What if it’s a tracker?” Rick asked. **“What if they know I’m here right now?”**

“Then you just answered your own question, genius.” Dog Bot's eyes flickered with urgency. **“They *do* know you’re here. And if it’s a tracker, you’ve got maybe five minutes before they show up.”**

“Five minutes?” Rick's heart started to race.

Dog Bot rolled over to the window and peeked through the blinds.

“Correction. *Less than five minutes.*”

Outside, three small black drones hovered in the distance, blinking orange lights scanning the area. Their propellers made a faint mechanical hum, like a swarm of bees. Rick’s throat went dry.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Rick muttered, pacing back and forth. **“What do I do? What do I do? Think, think, THINK!”**

Dog Bot rolled beside him. **“First rule of being hunted? Don’t be here.”**

Rick stopped pacing. **“You’re right.”** His eyes darted toward his workbench. **“We’re leaving.”**

“Finally, he gets it.” Dog Bot’s eyes flashed green, ready for action. **“Pack only what you need. We’ve got *maybe two minutes.*”**

Operation: Vanish

Rick yanked open his closet, pulling out his backpack. He shoved in spare clothes, his tablet, and some of his key invention parts — wire coils, batteries, a mini-soldering kit, and his multi-tool. Then, his eyes locked on the Memory Extractor sitting on the table.

For a moment, he hesitated.

“I’m taking it.” Rick snatched it and tossed it into his bag.

“That’s a bad idea.” Dog Bot groaned. **“If that thing malfunctions, you’ll have scrambled eggs for a brain.”**

“It’s also the only reason they’re after me,” Rick shot back. **“If it’s important to them, it’s important to me.”**

Dog Bot couldn’t argue with that logic. **“Fine, but when you turn into a vegetable, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”**

As Rick zipped up his bag, a loud *THUMP* echoed from the roof.

He froze.

Dog Bot’s eyes turned pure red. **“They’re here.”**

Another *THUMP*. This one closer.

Rick slowly moved toward the window and peeked through the blinds. He saw them. **Two figures in black cloaks standing on the rooftop across the street.** One of them held a small device pointed directly at Rick’s window.

Bzzzt.

The window flashed white, and suddenly the glass shattered in a slow-motion swirl of glowing particles.

“EMP shot,” Dog Bot warned. **“No electronics work for at least 30 seconds. Including me.”** His eyes flickered off, his voice cutting out. **“S-stay... sa—...”**

Rick grabbed Dog Bot and tossed him into his bag. **“No time to reboot, buddy.”** He sprinted for the back door.

The hallway lights flickered. Rick's instincts kicked in. He knew they'd be coming for every exit. **"No front door, no back door."** He glanced upward, his eyes landing on the vent near the ceiling.

"Perfect."

He grabbed a chair, dragged it under the vent, and climbed up. Using his multi-tool, he unscrewed the vent cover and pulled himself inside. The metal was cold, narrow, and smelled like rust and old socks. He pulled the cover back into place just as the front door **EXPLODED** off its hinges.

BOOM!

Smoke and debris filled the air. Rick held his breath.

Footsteps. Heavy, mechanical boots stomped across the wooden floor. Rick peered through the vent's slits and saw them. **Black-cloaked figures with glowing orange visors covering their faces.** Their armor shimmered with a faint glow, like liquid metal.

"Search the house," one of them ordered, his voice distorted like a broken radio signal.

The other figure pulled out a scanner that sent waves of orange light across the room. It beeped loudly as it scanned the area. **"Signature detected. Two lifeforms. One human, one synthetic."**

"Synthetic?" The leader tilted his head. **"He's got a bot."**

"The kid's smart. Smarter than expected."

Rick's breathing was slow and shallow. His heart thudded so loudly he was sure they could hear it. The vent creaked as he shifted his weight.

The cloaked figure's head snapped up, staring directly at the vent.

"He's in the vents."

“No, no, no, no,” Rick whispered to himself.

The cloaked figure raised his hand. *Bzzt*. Sparks of energy surged from his palm.

Electric pulse.

“They’re gonna fry the vent!” Rick realized too late.

BOOM!

The shockwave blasted the vent, and Rick was sent flying backward through the narrow metal tunnel. He tumbled and rolled, hitting his head against the wall. Sparks flew.

He gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain. **“Gotta move, gotta move!”** He crawled as fast as he could, dirt and metal scraping his clothes. **“They’ll catch me if I stop.”**

The vent tilted downward and opened into the alley. He kicked it open, slipped through, and fell face-first into a puddle of water.

“Ughhh.”

No time for complaints. He pulled himself up, soaking wet and freezing. His breath came out in clouds. The smell of wet concrete filled the air.

He glanced back. No sign of the cloaked figures — yet.

Then he saw it. **The vortex.**

Just 20 feet ahead. Spinning, glowing with the same orange energy from before.

“No, no, no,” Rick gasped. **“Not again.”**

Suddenly, the man from the forest stepped out of it. The one with the glowing eyes. He was calm, unbothered, and somehow... smiling.

“I told you, Rick.” His glowing orange eyes locked with Rick’s. **“You’re not ready for the future.”**

Rick took a step back. **“Who are you?”**

The man tilted his head. **“Someone you’ll meet soon enough.”**

Suddenly, the vortex behind him grew larger. Rick squinted as the light became blinding. His heart pounded like a drum. He felt the pull. The gravitational pull.

“No, no, NO!” Rick screamed as he was yanked off his feet, flying toward the vortex.

Dog Bot’s muffled voice echoed from inside his bag. **“I HATE THIS PART!!”**

Rick's vision went white.

His body felt weightless.

No sound.

No light.

Nothing but a single, fading voice.

“Welcome to the future, Rick.”

To be continued...

THE RIFT BETWEEN WORLDS

Rick's world blurred, spinning uncontrollably. His body felt like it was being twisted, compressed, and stretched all at once. For a brief moment, everything was white, a pure, infinite light that seemed to stretch forever. Then, it snapped back into focus.

He hit the ground hard. A sharp, icy pain shot through his body as he landed on something solid — cold concrete, maybe? His head throbbed, and the world tilted for a moment before he could gather his bearings. The distant hum of machinery filled the air, followed by a low, mechanical whirring.

"Ugh..." Rick groaned, pushing himself up. His hands scraped against rough metal. He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

The first thing he noticed was the sky. It was... wrong.

Above him, the sky was a deep violet, streaked with dark clouds that swirled like something unnatural. Stars flickered, but they weren't like the stars he knew. They were too bright, too close, as if they were watching him. He could feel the weight of them on his chest.

Then he looked around.

He was on some kind of platform. Metallic walls surrounded him, sleek and polished like the inside of a spaceship, but the air felt... heavier. And the strange, pulsating lights that illuminated the area made him uneasy. The ground beneath him was smooth but uneven, almost like it was alive, humming with energy.

"Where am I?" Rick whispered, his voice trembling.

A strange sensation crawled up his spine. He wasn't alone. A figure stepped out from the shadows — a tall, imposing silhouette, cloaked in shadow. The

voice that spoke was smooth but unsettling, like it had come from all around him at once.

“You have crossed the threshold, Rick.”

Rick’s breath caught in his throat. His body tensed, ready to spring into action, but his legs were weak from the fall. He couldn’t quite gather his strength. Slowly, the figure emerged from the darkness, stepping into the sickly light.

It was him.

The man from the forest. His glowing orange eyes pierced through the darkness, and his black cloak shimmered with an otherworldly sheen. His face was still hidden beneath a hood, but Rick could feel the man’s gaze, cold and calculating, resting on him.

“You... you're the one I saw in the forest,” Rick gasped, struggling to stand. **“What do you want with me? Where am I?”**

The man tilted his head slightly, as if amused. **“You are where few are allowed to go. This is the Rift — the boundary between worlds. This is where the past, present, and future converge, where time itself bends.”**

Rick’s heart raced, and his breath quickened. **“The Rift? Time? I don’t understand. What do you mean?”**

The man let out a low chuckle, as if Rick’s confusion was exactly what he had expected. **“You will understand soon enough. You have already unlocked the path to the future. This... is the place where the secrets of your world were hidden. The place where the truth of Earth’s past lies.”**

Rick stumbled backward, his pulse pounding in his ears. **“The truth of Earth’s past? What are you talking about?”**

The man’s voice was steady, cold. **“You asked questions, Rick. You sought the truth of your world’s history, but you didn’t understand the cost of**

that knowledge. Now, you are here. In the place where your curiosity has led you. In the place where the past and future collide.”

Rick was frozen. **“What is this place? Why can’t I just go home?”**

The man stepped closer, his glowing eyes reflecting the eerie light of the Rift. **“Because you cannot go home, Rick. Not yet. Not until you have completed your journey. You are no longer a mere boy on Earth. You are now part of a greater story — a story that spans across time and space. You have a role to play in this future, whether you accept it or not.”**

Rick’s mind raced. **“No, this can’t be real. You’re just messing with me!”** His voice cracked, panic creeping in. **“This is all some twisted dream, right? None of this is real!”**

The man’s lips curled into a smile, but it wasn’t comforting. It was unsettling. **“This is very real, Rick. You have no choice but to accept it. You have already crossed into the unknown, and now there is no going back. The past of your world is buried deep, but the future is unfolding. And you, Rick, are part of that future.”**

Rick shook his head, his chest tightening. **“I’m just a kid. I don’t belong here. I don’t belong in this future!”**

The man paused, his orange eyes narrowing slightly. **“You *do* belong here. You just don’t realize it yet. But you will. The truth will come for you, one way or another. Whether you like it or not, your inventions, your curiosity, they have already set things in motion. The future is waiting for you, Rick.”**

Rick swallowed hard. **“What do you want from me?”**

The man leaned in, his voice low, as if sharing a dark secret. **“I want you to understand. I want you to see what others cannot. The past of your world holds answers that no one has dared to uncover. You were meant to find them. You were meant to *unlock* them.”**

Rick clenched his fists. **“Unlock them? I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”**

The man sighed, as if disappointed by Rick’s lack of understanding. **“Your inventions, Rick. Your mind. It was never just about creating things. It was always about understanding what came before. The key to everything, to everything, lies within you.”**

Rick felt a chill run down his spine. The man’s words echoed in his head. **“What key? What do you mean?”**

The man stepped back, gesturing to the shimmering space around them. **“The Rift. This place. Time. The answers you seek are buried within the fabric of reality itself. And you, Rick, are the one who will bring them to the surface.”**

Suddenly, Rick’s stomach twisted in fear. **“No. I don’t want to be part of this! I just want to go home!”**

The man’s smile faded. He turned and motioned toward the swirling vortex behind him, which now pulsed with a soft, inviting glow. **“It’s too late for that. You cannot turn back. Not now.”**

Before Rick could protest, the man stepped into the vortex, his form melting into the light. The space around Rick began to distort once again, the walls shifting as though the very fabric of reality was stretching. He felt himself being pulled toward the vortex.

“No, no, no!” Rick screamed, struggling against the pull. **“I don’t want this!”**

But his body wouldn’t listen. The force tugged at him relentlessly, pulling him forward. His feet slid across the ground as though he were moving through thick mud.

And then, before he could even comprehend what was happening, he was sucked into the vortex. His surroundings dissolved into pure light, and the

world around him vanished. The last thing he heard was the man's voice, fading into the distance.

“This is just the beginning, Rick. Welcome to the future.”

To be continued...

THE HIDDEN TRUTHS

The world around Rick seemed to blur once again, the vortex pulling him deeper and deeper into the unknown. His body felt weightless, like he was floating in the vast expanse of the universe itself. His mind raced, a thousand questions whirling around like an endless storm. He wanted to scream, to cry out, but the force of the vortex made it impossible to speak. He was trapped in a reality that wasn't his own, hurtling toward a destination he could not comprehend.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the pull stopped.

Rick slammed into the ground, his body slamming into something soft yet firm. He groaned, trying to catch his breath, the dizziness clouding his senses. When he opened his eyes, he could hardly make sense of what he saw. He was in a completely different place now — far from the Rift, far from the metallic platform he had just been on.

The surroundings were eerily quiet. It was as if the world itself was holding its breath. There was no sound except for the faint rustling of leaves in the breeze. The air smelled... fresh. Almost too fresh, like the air on Earth, before everything had changed.

Rick slowly sat up, the dirt beneath him cool against his skin. He looked around, his eyes scanning the landscape. This place was strange. The trees were taller than any he'd seen before, their bark shimmering with a strange luminescence, almost as if they were alive, breathing with the earth. The sky above him was not the violet, swirling one he had seen before. Instead, it was a calm blue, with two suns hanging in the sky, casting a surreal, golden glow over everything.

Rick stood up, his legs shaking, still trying to process the sudden shift. **“What is this place?”** he muttered to himself. **“Where am I?”**

The moment the words left his lips, he felt a presence behind him. He spun around quickly, his heart pounding in his chest. Standing there, just at the edge of the trees, was the man — the same mysterious figure who had spoken to him in the Rift. His glowing orange eyes seemed to pierce right through Rick, his black cloak flowing even though there was no wind.

“Welcome, Rick,” the man said, his voice calm and steady, though there was an edge of something ancient in it. **“You are standing in a place that few ever see. This is not Earth. This is a world that exists outside the flow of time. A place where the past, the present, and the future converge. It is a world that was hidden from you... until now.”**

Rick’s chest tightened as the man’s words sank in. He looked around again, his mind reeling. **“This isn’t Earth? Then where am I?”**

The man stepped forward, his orange eyes never leaving Rick’s face. **“You are in the Nexus. The crossroads of all realities. The place where time itself begins to unravel. Here, the secrets of Earth’s history, and the future, are hidden — locked away from the eyes of those who aren’t meant to see them. But you... you have unlocked the path.”**

Rick took a step back, his breath shallow. **“I don’t understand. Why me? Why am I the one who’s been pulled into all of this?”**

The man’s lips curled into a smile, but it wasn’t a reassuring smile. **“Because you asked questions, Rick. You were always curious. You didn’t just accept the world as it was. You dug deeper, sought the truth. And now, the truth is here.”**

Rick’s mind swirled with confusion and fear. **“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t ask for any of this. I just wanted to know about Earth’s history. I wanted to understand why everything is so... strange.”**

The man stepped even closer, his eyes gleaming with something like approval. **“And that is precisely why you’re here. The history of Earth is not what you think it is. The world you know... the Earth you’ve been living on... is only one version of reality. There are many. And each one holds a**

different story. A different truth. But the truth you seek, Rick, lies in the past — a past that has been erased. Hidden from all eyes except yours.”

Rick could feel his heart racing. **“Erased? Why? Why would anyone do that?”**

The man’s gaze darkened, and for a moment, his voice dropped to a whisper. **“Because the truth is dangerous. The Earth you know, the one you live on... was not the first. There was another Earth. One that fell, consumed by its own greed, its own thirst for power. That Earth is buried deep, hidden from the eyes of those who would repeat its mistakes.”**

Rick’s breath caught in his throat. **“You’re saying... there was another Earth? And it... fell?”**

The man nodded. **“Yes. The Earth you know was created after the old one was destroyed. It was reborn, but the history of its destruction was buried. Erased from all records. The powers that be didn’t want anyone to know the truth. They didn’t want anyone to repeat the mistakes of the past. But you, Rick... you’ve uncovered a secret that no one else has dared to. You’re standing on the edge of a precipice, a place where the past and the future collide. And now you must decide what you will do with this knowledge.”**

Rick stood there, frozen. His mind was spinning with the weight of the revelation. The Earth he knew was not the first. The past had been hidden, erased, and now he was standing at the threshold of a truth that could unravel everything.

“What do I do now?” Rick whispered, his voice barely audible.

The man’s eyes gleamed, a glint of something sinister flickering in them. **“You must choose, Rick. The knowledge you seek will lead you down a dangerous path. There are those who want to keep the past buried, who will do anything to prevent you from discovering the truth. But there are also those who will help you... if you are willing to fight for it.”**

Rick swallowed hard. **“Fight? I’m just a kid. What can I do?”**

The man’s smile faded, replaced by a look of seriousness. **“You have more power than you know, Rick. Your inventions, your curiosity... they have unlocked something far greater than you realize. You were never just a boy. You were always meant to find the truth. Now, you must decide whether you will use that knowledge to change the future... or let it destroy you.”**

Rick’s head was spinning. His thoughts were a jumble of confusion and fear, but one thing was clear: he had uncovered something far bigger than he ever imagined. He was standing at the crossroads of time itself, a place where the past, present, and future converged. And the truth, whatever it was, was waiting for him to uncover it.

The man took one last step toward Rick, his voice low and filled with weight. **“The choice is yours, Rick. Will you step into the past and unlock the truth? Or will you walk away, letting the future remain in the dark?”**

Rick looked at the man, his heart pounding in his chest. The decision weighed heavily on him. But he knew, deep down, that there was no turning back now. The path was set. And whatever the truth was, he had to know.

“I’ll do it,” Rick said, his voice firm. **“I’ll uncover the truth. I have to know.”**

The man nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. **“Then let us begin.”**

To be continued...

INTO THE PAST

Rick's heart pounded in his chest as the man turned and beckoned him to follow. Every step seemed heavier than the last, as if the weight of the truth was already beginning to settle on his shoulders. His mind buzzed with questions, with doubts, and with a gnawing sense of fear. But despite all that, he couldn't turn back now. The man had already said too much, and Rick knew that the answers he sought — the answers about Earth's lost history — were within reach.

They walked through the strange, luminescent forest in silence, the eerie quiet of the place pressing in on them. The trees seemed to hum with an energy that Rick couldn't understand, and the air felt thick, like it was charged with something ancient and powerful. Every now and then, the man would glance over his shoulder, as if ensuring Rick was still following.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, they came upon a clearing. At the center of the clearing stood a massive stone structure, its surface covered in intricate carvings. The carvings seemed to shift and move as Rick looked at them, like they were alive — telling a story he couldn't quite understand.

The man stopped in front of the stone structure and turned to face Rick. **"This is the Nexus Gate,"** he said, his voice reverberating with awe. **"It is the gateway to the past. Through here, you will witness the history of Earth — the one that was hidden from you."**

Rick's breath caught in his throat. He had heard of the Nexus Gate before, in whispers and rumors, but he had never believed it could be real. It was said to be a place where time itself could be manipulated, where the secrets of the past could be uncovered. But to actually stand before it, to feel its presence, was something entirely different.

Rick took a hesitant step forward. **"Is this... is this where the truth is? The truth about the Earth that was destroyed?"**

The man nodded. **“Yes. You will see it all. The fall of the first Earth. The mistakes made. The choices that led to its destruction. But remember, Rick, what you see here will change everything. Are you ready to face it?”**

Rick swallowed hard, his throat dry. **“I don’t know if I’m ready... but I need to know.”**

The man studied Rick for a long moment, as if weighing his words. Then, without a word, he raised his hand and placed it on the stone surface of the Nexus Gate. The carvings on the stone began to glow, casting an eerie light across the clearing. The air around them hummed with energy, and Rick could feel the very ground beneath him vibrating.

“Prepare yourself,” the man warned. **“Once you step through the gate, there is no going back. Time will bend, and you will witness the truth. Are you sure this is what you want?”**

Rick nodded, his resolve strengthening. He had already come this far, and there was no turning back now. He had to know the truth — no matter how painful it might be.

The man stepped aside, and the stone structure split down the middle, revealing a swirling vortex inside. It was like looking into the very fabric of time itself, a swirling mass of colors and lights, as if the past, present, and future were all tangled together in a chaotic dance.

Rick hesitated for a brief moment, then took a deep breath and stepped into the vortex.

The world around him seemed to dissolve as he was pulled into the swirling mass. Colors, shapes, and sounds blurred together, and Rick felt like he was falling through an endless void. He couldn’t tell if time was moving forward or backward — everything was a blur of motion and sensation.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, everything stopped.

Rick stumbled forward, his knees buckling as he landed hard on the ground. He gasped for air, disoriented and dizzy. Slowly, he pushed himself up, his eyes adjusting to the surroundings. He was no longer in the strange forest. He was somewhere else entirely.

The air was thick with smoke, and the sky above was dark and foreboding. In the distance, Rick could see towering structures, once grand but now crumbling and in ruins. There were fires burning in the streets, and the sound of shouting and chaos filled the air. This was not the Earth he knew. This was something else.

“What... what is this place?” Rick whispered, his voice trembling.

The man appeared beside him, as if materializing out of thin air. He looked out at the scene with a mixture of sadness and anger.

“This, Rick,” the man said quietly, **“is the first Earth. The Earth that was destroyed.”**

Rick’s eyes widened as he looked around, taking in the devastation. This was Earth — but it was a world on the brink of collapse. The cities were in ruins, the landscape scarred by war, by greed, by the mistakes of humanity. It was a far cry from the pristine world Rick had known.

“What happened here?” Rick asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

The man’s eyes darkened. **“The people of this Earth were consumed by their own ambition. They sought to conquer time, to manipulate it, to control it. But in doing so, they unleashed forces they couldn’t control. The fabric of reality itself began to unravel, and the Earth began to collapse. Cities fell. Empires crumbled. And in the end, everything was lost.”**

Rick felt a chill run down his spine as he looked at the destruction around him. **“So... this was the downfall of Earth? Because they tried to control time?”**

The man nodded solemnly. **“Yes. Time is a powerful force, Rick. It can be bent, but never controlled. Those who tried to manipulate it paid the price. And now, only fragments of that world remain. What you see here is a shadow of what once was.”**

Rick took a step forward, his mind racing with questions. **“But... how is this connected to the Earth I know? Why is it hidden? Why don't we know this history?”**

The man's gaze softened. **“Because the people who rebuilt Earth after the collapse wanted to erase the past. They feared that if the truth was known, history would repeat itself. So they hid it, buried it, and created a new Earth — a fresh start. But they never told anyone about the fall of the first Earth. They hoped it would remain forgotten.”**

Rick felt a lump form in his throat. **“So we've been living in a lie?”**

The man's face darkened. **“Yes. But now you know the truth. The question is, what will you do with it?”**

Rick swallowed hard, trying to process everything he had just learned. This was far bigger than he had ever imagined. The destruction of Earth, the secrets buried in time, and the price humanity had paid for tampering with forces beyond their control. It was a lot to take in.

But one thing was clear: the history of Earth was far darker, far more complex, than anyone had ever realized. And Rick had just uncovered the first layer of a truth that could change everything.

“I don't know what to do with all of this,” Rick admitted, his voice shaky.

The man gave him a grave look. **“That's something only you can decide. But remember this, Rick: the past is never truly gone. It's always waiting, lurking in the shadows. And if you don't choose carefully, it could come back to haunt you — and everyone else.”**

Rick nodded slowly, the weight of his new knowledge settling heavily on his shoulders. He had uncovered the beginning of the truth. But now, he had to figure out how to live with it — and how to stop history from repeating itself.

The journey was far from over. The secrets of the past were only beginning to reveal themselves. And Rick had a feeling that the worst was yet to come.

To be continued...

THE HIDDEN LAB

Rick stood motionless, his mind racing, as the man's words echoed in his head. The weight of the truth he had just uncovered was heavy, almost suffocating. The Earth he had always known, the one that had seemed so safe and technologically advanced, was built on the ruins of a destroyed world. But now he was faced with an even greater question: what was he supposed to do with this knowledge?

The man, who had brought Rick to this place, was still standing silently beside him, his eyes scanning the ruins that stretched out before them. Rick's gaze followed the man's, taking in the devastation that spread across the once-thriving landscape. Crumbling buildings, scorched earth, and the remains of a world that had reached for greatness, only to fall into disaster.

Rick felt a surge of anger. How could humanity have let this happen? How could they have hidden the truth from everyone? His mind wandered back to the history lesson that had started this whole journey, the mystery of Earth's forgotten past. Now, it was all beginning to make sense. But it didn't make him feel any better.

“What happened to the people who caused all this?” Rick asked, breaking the silence. His voice was cold, as if he was trying to distance himself from the emotions bubbling up inside him.

The man turned toward Rick, his expression grave. **“Some of them tried to escape. They fled through time itself, seeking to avoid the consequences of their actions. Others stayed, hoping to fix what had gone wrong. But in the end, the damage was irreversible. The Earth collapsed in on itself, and the few survivors were forced to start anew — to rebuild from the ashes.”**

Rick clenched his fists. **“And what about the people who rebuilt Earth? What happened to them?”**

The man sighed, his eyes distant. **“They created a new Earth, a new society. They buried the past, erased it as much as they could. They didn’t want the next generation to repeat the same mistakes. But in doing so, they started a new cycle. They built a world that was safer, more controlled, but at the cost of the truth. They created laws to protect the secret. And anyone who tried to uncover it... they were silenced.”**

Rick’s heart sank. He had always felt like something was missing, like there was more to the world than he had been told. But this? This was beyond anything he had ever imagined. It wasn’t just a forgotten history; it was a controlled narrative, a lie built to keep people ignorant of the past.

“Why are you showing me all of this?” Rick asked, his voice trembling slightly. **“Why me? What do you want from me?”**

The man studied him for a long moment, his face unreadable. **“Because you’re different, Rick. You’re not like the others. You’re an inventor. A creator. You see the world not just for what it is, but for what it could be. And that’s what we need. Someone who can think outside the box, someone who isn’t afraid to question everything.”**

Rick frowned, confused. **“So, what do you expect me to do? Fix everything? Travel back in time and undo all the damage?”**

The man chuckled softly, but there was no warmth in it. **“No, Rick. It’s not about fixing the past. The past is gone. The world you see now is what remains. But you, you have the potential to change the future. You can stop history from repeating itself. You can build a new world, one that doesn’t make the same mistakes.”**

Rick didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t a hero. He wasn’t some great savior who could change the course of history. He was just a teenager with a passion for invention, a boy who liked to tinker and dream about impossible things. But now, it seemed like the weight of the world was being placed on his shoulders.

“But how do I even start?” Rick asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The man smiled, a glimmer of something dangerous in his eyes. **“That’s where I come in.”**

With a swift motion, the man reached into his coat and pulled out a small device, no bigger than the palm of Rick’s hand. It was sleek and futuristic, its surface gleaming with an otherworldly sheen. **“This is a key,”** the man said. **“A key to the secrets hidden from the world. It will lead you to the lab where the first Earth’s time experiments were conducted. The ones that led to its downfall.”**

Rick took the device hesitantly, turning it over in his hands. It felt heavy, far heavier than its size suggested. **“What do you want me to do with it?”**

The man’s gaze grew intense. **“I want you to go to the lab. I want you to find the information that has been hidden away for centuries. The knowledge you seek is there, Rick. The answers to how time was manipulated, how everything went wrong, and how to ensure it never happens again.”**

Rick felt a chill run down his spine. He had always wanted to understand the mysteries of the world, but now he was being asked to uncover the most dangerous secrets in history. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for this. But something inside him, something deep in his gut, told him he had no choice.

“Where is this lab?” Rick asked, his voice steady despite the storm of thoughts swirling in his mind.

The man’s lips curled into a smile. **“It’s hidden, buried deep beneath the ruins. It’s in a place most people would never think to look. But I’ve marked the coordinates for you. It’s up to you to find it.”**

Rick looked down at the device in his hand. The weight of the decision was becoming more and more apparent. This wasn’t just about curiosity anymore. This was about uncovering a truth that could change everything — for better or for worse.

“How do I get there?” Rick asked, his voice determined.

The man nodded. **“I’ll help you get started. But after that, you’ll be on your own. You’ll have to rely on your instincts and your inventions. This will be dangerous, Rick. But if anyone can do it, it’s you.”**

Rick looked up at the man, determination growing in his chest. He had spent his whole life tinkering with machines, creating things that most people thought were useless. But now, he was faced with a challenge that was unlike anything he had ever imagined. This wasn’t just about inventing something new. It was about saving the future.

Rick nodded. **“I’m in.”**

The man’s eyes gleamed with approval. **“Good. Then let’s get started.”**

And with that, they set off — into the heart of the ruins, toward the hidden lab, toward the truth that could change everything.

To be continued...

THE HIDDEN LAB 2

The journey ahead seemed impossible, and yet, Rick felt a strange excitement bubbling up inside him. He had never been faced with something so monumental, a task so dangerous. The weight of the man's words from earlier still clung to him, like a dark cloud hovering over his thoughts: *"If anyone can do it, it's you."* Rick wasn't so sure about that, but he had no choice but to try.

The man led Rick through the dense woods near his house, deeper into the wilderness than Rick had ever dared venture. The night had fallen, and the forest was eerily quiet, save for the occasional rustle of leaves stirred by the wind. Rick had to admit, the place felt off. The trees were unnaturally still, and the air was thick with a sense of foreboding.

As they walked, Rick kept stealing glances at the device in his hand. It was small, inconspicuous, but it held the key to the unknown. The man had given him no real explanation of how it worked, only that it would help guide him to the lab. For all he knew, it could be a complicated riddle waiting to trap him, or worse, a tool that could put him in danger.

The man's voice cut through the silence. **"The lab you're looking for is not just an ordinary place. It was hidden for a reason, Rick. Many tried to find it over the years, but few succeeded."**

Rick's curiosity only grew. **"Why was it hidden? What happened there?"**

The man's face darkened. **"It was the birthplace of the technology that caused Earth's downfall. Time manipulation, space distortion, and the experimentation that led to the collapse of the first Earth. They were playing with forces they didn't fully understand. The truth is, the past is littered with the bodies of those who tried to rewrite it."**

Rick shuddered at the thought. Time manipulation? He had heard rumors of such experiments in the past, but he had never really believed them. Now, he was about to uncover the truth. But would it be worth it? Could the world even handle the truth? He didn't know. All he knew was that the answers lay ahead, buried somewhere deep within the forest.

Hours passed, and the forest grew denser. Rick's legs were sore, and his mind was heavy with thoughts of the man's cryptic words. Was he really prepared for what lay ahead? Could he truly change anything, or was he walking straight into a trap?

Finally, they reached a clearing. The trees opened up to reveal a series of ancient ruins, half buried in the earth, covered in vines and moss. A sense of awe and dread washed over Rick as he stepped forward. This was it. The hidden lab, or at least what was left of it.

The man stepped forward, his face illuminated by the dim light of the glowing device in Rick's hand. **"This is where it all began. But be warned, Rick. The moment you step into that lab, you'll be in more danger than you could ever imagine. The technology here isn't just about time and space—it's about controlling them. And whoever controls time, controls everything."**

Rick didn't respond. He was too busy scanning the ruins, his mind already racing with the possibilities. How had such advanced technology ended up here, hidden beneath the earth for so long? What secrets did it hold? And what would he find if he dared to uncover them?

He looked down at the device. In his hand, it was warm, almost pulsing with energy. He wasn't sure how, but he instinctively knew what he needed to do. He pressed a small button on the device, and instantly, a low hum filled the air. The ground beneath them seemed to shift, and a hidden entrance in the ruins slowly revealed itself, a massive door sliding open with a soft screech.

“It’s time,” the man said, his voice colder now, almost ominous. **“Once you go in, there’s no turning back.”**

Rick nodded, his heart pounding in his chest. His curiosity had led him this far, and there was no turning back now. The unknown was waiting for him. It could be the answer to everything, or it could be his undoing. With a deep breath, Rick stepped into the entrance.

The air inside was cool and sterile, and the lighting was dim, barely enough to see by. The walls of the lab were lined with strange, intricate machinery, most of it unfamiliar to Rick. There were screens, wires, and panels embedded in the walls, most of which appeared to have long since stopped functioning. But despite the decay, Rick could tell that this was once a place of incredible power.

The man led Rick further into the lab, his footsteps echoing off the metal floor. The air smelled of dust and forgotten history, as if the place had been abandoned for years—decades, maybe even centuries.

“Where is it?” Rick asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The man paused, then pointed to a large, circular room at the far end of the lab. **“In there,”** he said. **“That’s where they kept the most dangerous of the experiments.”**

Rick’s heart skipped a beat. He had read about the labs, heard whispers of what might be hidden away, but seeing it now, in person, made his stomach twist in fear. What had they done here? And why was it hidden from the world?

They reached the door to the circular room. The man placed his hand on the scanner beside it, and the door slid open with a soft hiss. Inside, Rick found what he had feared.

The room was filled with large machines, all of them showing signs of damage and age. But one machine in particular caught Rick’s attention—a tall, cylindrical device that looked like a large portal. Wires and tubes snaked

across the floor, leading into a complex array of computers that blinked intermittently with dim lights.

“This is it,” the man said. **“The machine that started it all.”**

Rick walked toward the machine, his eyes wide. It was nothing like anything he had ever seen before. The sheer scale of the technology was overwhelming. This wasn't just time travel—it was something more. Something deeper.

He stepped closer to the machine, reaching out with trembling hands. But before he could touch it, the man stopped him.

“Don't. It's dangerous. It's the reason Earth is like it is now. Time was altered here. The past was tampered with, and that's why things have never been the same. It's why the truth was hidden.”

Rick turned to the man, his face a mixture of awe and terror. **“But why? Why was it hidden? Why didn't anyone stop them?”**

The man sighed, as if the weight of the answer was too much to bear.

“Because they thought they could control it. They thought they could fix the mistakes of the past. But in the end, they made everything worse. And now, it's up to you, Rick, to stop it from happening again.”

Rick stared at the machine, understanding dawning on him. The power to change history. The ability to rewrite time itself. It was all here, waiting for someone to use it.

But Rick wasn't sure he was ready for that responsibility. Could he really change the course of history? Or would he become just another pawn in a game that had already been lost?

The decision weighed heavily on him, but one thing was clear—whatever he chose to do, the world would never be the same again.

To Be Continued...

THE CHOICE

Rick stood in the heart of the forgotten lab, his eyes locked on the massive, cylindrical machine that seemed to pulse with an ancient energy. The room around him was filled with the scent of dust and decay, the hum of malfunctioning equipment almost drowned out by the weight of the moment. His breath was shallow, his mind racing. This was it—the machine that could change everything.

The man, who had led him here, stood behind him, watching silently. His face was grim, but Rick couldn't help but feel a strange mix of awe and terror. This machine, this *device*, was the key to altering history—perhaps even the fate of Earth itself.

Rick's heart pounded in his chest. He had never imagined anything like this would be real. He had thought the rumors, the myths, about time manipulation and space warping were just that—stories told by the old, whispered about by conspiracy theorists. But now, standing before the machine, he knew it was all true. This technology, this unimaginable power, had been hidden away, buried for reasons he still couldn't understand.

The man spoke, his voice low and cautious. **“It's tempting, isn't it? To think you could change things. To go back and fix what was broken.”**

Rick turned to him, confusion and frustration clouding his thoughts. **“Why is this hidden? Why not tell the world? Why not stop them from ever making these mistakes in the first place?”**

The man's expression darkened, his eyes flickering with something Rick couldn't quite place. **“Because they tried to fix it. The ones who came before us. They believed they could control time. They thought they could right every wrong, undo every disaster. But all they did was make things worse.”** He paused, his gaze hardening. **“History isn't something you can**

fix, Rick. It's something you have to learn from. If you try to change it, you risk breaking it forever."

Rick's mind swirled. The temptation to fix the past—to undo the mistakes of those who had come before him—was overwhelming. But the man's words echoed in his mind. *History isn't something you can fix.* Could that really be true? If time could be manipulated, what would that mean for the present? For the future?

Rick glanced back at the machine, his pulse quickening. **"But what if I could make things better? What if I could save Earth? What if I could stop the destruction before it even began?"**

The man shook his head slowly, his face softening in a mixture of sorrow and regret. **"You're not the first one to think that. Trust me, I was like you once—full of hope, thinking that with the right knowledge, we could fix everything. But I learned the hard way that time isn't a tool you can just use at will. It's not something you can just *bend* to your will."**

Rick clenched his fists, frustration building. **"Then what do I do? Just walk away? Let everything stay the way it is?"**

The man's eyes grew hard again. **"No, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that you need to understand the weight of what you're dealing with. If you make a choice to alter the past, you might find yourself in a world you never imagined. One that's even worse than the one you're trying to fix. And once you make that choice, there's no going back."**

Rick's mind was reeling. He felt torn, caught between the desire to rewrite history and the warning of the man in front of him. Could he really trust himself with this kind of power? Could anyone?

He looked down at the device in his hand—the small, glowing object that had led him here. It hummed with energy, pulsing as if it, too, was alive. Was it truly the key to unlocking everything, or was it simply a way to trap him in a cycle of mistakes, a path from which he could never return?

The man took a step forward, his tone softening. **“Rick, listen to me. I’ve seen the consequences of tampering with time. The people who tried to change things, who tried to alter history—they’re gone. The machine they used is still here, but they never came back. You can’t control time, Rick. You can only live in it. Let the past stay where it belongs, and don’t let your curiosity destroy the present.”**

Rick didn’t answer immediately. His eyes were still locked on the machine, but his mind was elsewhere—on the future, on the world he had known, on the dark truths that were hidden beneath the surface of everything.

The silence between them was thick, heavy. The man was right about one thing: if Rick used the machine, if he went back and changed the past, he couldn’t predict the outcome. He couldn’t see the ripple effect of his actions, or how it would affect the world he had always known.

But could he live with himself if he didn’t at least try? Could he stand by and watch as the world continued down a path of destruction, knowing that he had the ability to stop it?

The weight of the decision was unbearable. Rick’s hands trembled, his mind swirling with possibilities. **“I have to try,”** he whispered, almost to himself.

The man’s face darkened, but he didn’t try to stop him. He knew that once someone made up their mind, there was no turning back.

“You’re making a dangerous choice, Rick,” the man said softly. **“But if this is what you truly want, I won’t stop you. Just remember, once you step into that machine, there’s no undoing it.”**

Rick nodded, his jaw set with determination. **“I have to do this. I have to know the truth. I have to change it.”**

With one final look at the man, Rick turned and walked toward the machine, his steps slow but steady. He felt the weight of history bearing down on him, but it no longer seemed like an insurmountable burden. The machine was the answer—his answer.

He placed the device in the small slot on the side of the machine. Instantly, the room was filled with a low hum, the energy in the air becoming charged. The machine's lights flickered, and the portal in the center of the room began to glow with an intense, otherworldly light.

Rick took a deep breath. There was no going back now. He stepped forward, his body trembling with fear and excitement. As the portal's light enveloped him, he felt his body being pulled, twisted, and stretched in ways he couldn't begin to understand. The world around him dissolved, leaving only the sensation of falling through an endless void.

Time itself seemed to bend, shift, and warp around him. He had no idea where—or when—he was going, but for the first time, Rick felt like he was in control.

And with that, the world he knew was left behind.

To Be Continued...

A NEW WORLD

Rick's body felt as though it was being ripped apart and put back together all at once. The intense pull of the vortex continued to twist and stretch him, as if reality itself had dissolved into a chaotic dance of light and sound. He closed his eyes tightly, bracing himself for what he imagined would be an impossible landing.

The sensation seemed to last forever, but it only took a matter of seconds before the turbulence around him started to subside. Slowly, the world around him began to settle into a quiet stillness. When Rick opened his eyes, he was no longer in the lab. He was somewhere else entirely.

The air was thick and cold, the kind of chill that cut through even the warmest clothes. He looked around, trying to get his bearings, but all he saw was a dense, gray fog. His heart raced as the silence grew heavier with every passing second. He couldn't even hear the hum of the machine anymore, as if it had faded away entirely.

Where am I? Rick thought, his mind reeling. He took a cautious step forward, his boots crunching softly against something brittle underfoot. The fog around him was so dense that he couldn't see more than a few feet ahead.

Suddenly, a flicker of light broke through the haze in front of him. Rick squinted, straining to make sense of the outline. It was a figure, moving through the mist. The figure looked human, but the way it moved... it seemed almost unnatural, as though it was gliding instead of walking.

Rick's heart skipped a beat. Could it be? Was he truly in the past?

He took a few steps closer, curiosity overriding his fear. The figure continued to move steadily through the fog, and Rick followed cautiously, keeping his distance. His thoughts were a jumble—so many questions. How far back had

he gone? What was this place? Was it Earth? Or had he ended up somewhere completely different?

As he moved forward, the fog seemed to thin, and Rick could make out more details. The ground beneath him had turned from brittle and dry to soft, almost spongy, like moss. The air had a strange, acrid scent to it, a mix of decay and something chemical, like the remnants of a long-forgotten experiment. The figure ahead of him continued to glide, oblivious to Rick's presence.

Rick's steps slowed as he realized that the world around him was not only different in appearance—it was...wrong. There was no sign of life, no birds, no animals, not even the faintest rustle of wind. The only sounds were his own breath and the distant, eerie hum that seemed to reverberate from the ground itself.

The figure in front of him finally stopped. Rick froze, unsure of what to do. Was he being watched? Had the figure sensed his presence? The man—or whatever it was—turned slowly, its face hidden in shadows. It was difficult to tell whether it was human or not, but something about the way it moved made Rick instinctively take a step back.

For a moment, everything was still. Then, the figure spoke in a language Rick couldn't understand. The words were alien, distorted by a static-like distortion in the air. But there was no mistaking the intent in the voice—it was not friendly.

Rick's heart raced. *What is going on?* His mind screamed at him, but he couldn't make sense of anything.

Without warning, the figure raised its hand, and Rick felt a powerful force push him backward. He stumbled, struggling to keep his balance, but the energy was too much. The world around him swirled again, and suddenly, he found himself falling through what seemed like an endless tunnel of light and shadow.

When the sensation stopped, Rick found himself back on solid ground. He was no longer in the foggy, barren world but standing in a lush, green landscape. It was almost surreal, like a scene from an old Earth documentary, with towering trees that seemed impossibly tall and flowers that glowed with an unnatural luminescence. The sky above was a deep violet, casting an eerie light over everything below.

Rick looked around, trying to make sense of his surroundings. It was beautiful, yes, but it was also completely alien. This wasn't the Earth he knew, not even close. This place seemed to have been abandoned long ago. The environment was pristine, untouched, as though the planet had once been thriving but had since fallen silent.

A new thought struck him—*What if I've gone too far? What if I've traveled to a point where Earth no longer exists?*

His head swam with a hundred possibilities. This wasn't the Earth of his childhood. The people, the cities, the buildings—none of it was here. The technology, the inventions, the life he knew—it was all gone. All of it was just a distant memory.

Rick started walking, his feet crunching softly over the unfamiliar terrain. He had no idea what was happening or how he had ended up here, but one thing was clear: he couldn't stay here. He didn't belong in this world, this time, or whatever it was.

As he moved forward, the strange alien world around him began to take on more complexity. There were signs of past civilization here, but it was a civilization that seemed to have collapsed. Some of the trees had metal supports twisted into them like old, rusted scaffolding, and the flowers seemed to pulse with an unnatural, mechanical rhythm. The further Rick walked, the more it became apparent that whatever had happened here was far worse than he could imagine.

His mind raced with possibilities. *Had he traveled so far back in time that this was the world before the fall of human civilization?* Or had he stumbled

upon an alternate version of Earth, one that had been completely forgotten?

The answers didn't come easily. The more Rick explored, the more he realized that there was something wrong with this place—something beyond just the decay of time. The air was thick with a sense of dread, as though he were being watched by something far older than humanity.

He reached the edge of a vast, dry riverbed, where he found something truly bizarre—a small, spherical object half-buried in the sand. He knelt down to examine it, his hands trembling as he brushed the dust away. It was a device, something that looked familiar but also alien. It had the same kind of energy pulsing through it as the machine back at the lab.

Could this be another part of the time-manipulation technology? Rick wondered. He reached out cautiously to touch the object.

The moment his fingers made contact, the world around him seemed to ripple again, and the eerie hum filled the air once more. The ground beneath him trembled.

Rick jerked his hand back, his heart pounding in his chest. This place was dangerous. More than dangerous. It felt like a trap.

But there was one thing he knew for certain: there was no turning back now. He had already made his choice. He had crossed into this strange world, and now he needed to understand it, even if it meant confronting the dark history of Earth. Whatever had happened here, whatever he had uncovered, it was all tied to the secrets buried deep in time.

As he stood there, gazing out at the alien world before him, Rick realized that his journey had only just begun. He wasn't sure where this would lead, or what he would discover next, but there was no going back.

The only way forward was to uncover the truth.

To Be Continued...

THE WHISPERING SHADOWS

The cold air prickled Rick's skin as he wandered through the mysterious, alien forest. Each breath he took was sharp, as if the atmosphere itself was heavier here. The eerie glow from the bio-luminescent plants illuminated the path ahead with soft hues of blue, green, and violet. Shadows danced and flickered as the plants swayed, almost as if they were alive.

Rick moved cautiously, his eyes darting from side to side. Every rustle of leaves, every distant snap of a twig, sent a jolt of adrenaline through him. *Stay calm. Stay sharp.* he told himself. But it wasn't easy. This wasn't like the peaceful lake near his house or even the busy streets of his city. This was something ancient, something... wrong.

"Okay, Rick," he whispered to himself, gripping a small, broken tree branch he'd picked up for protection. "You're in an unknown place, probably not on Earth—or maybe you are but in the wrong timeline. Great. Just... just don't die, okay?"

He heard a sound behind him—a low hum, like an old engine struggling to start. Rick spun around, his heart pounding. His eyes searched the fog-covered path, but there was nothing there. Just more trees, fog, and shadows.

"Dog Bot," he muttered quietly, his voice tinged with hope. "I wish you were here, buddy. You'd know what to do."

He didn't expect a reply, of course, but somehow, talking to Dog Bot, even if only in his mind, helped him feel less alone.

The humming grew louder.

“Okay, not good,” Rick muttered, taking a step back. The sound wasn’t coming from a machine. No, it was different—it was a low, guttural vibration that echoed through the ground beneath his feet.

Footsteps?

His eyes widened. He knew that sound. He’d heard it before, but not from a person. No, it was deeper, heavier, more deliberate. *Something big.* He crouched low behind a tree, heart thudding in his chest like a drum. His breathing grew shallow as he tried to make himself as small as possible.

Then he saw it.

Through the fog, he spotted a pair of glowing red eyes. They weren’t human. No human eyes glowed like that. The fog shifted, revealing a hulking figure. It was tall—too tall. At least eight feet. It had elongated limbs, and its silhouette looked jagged, like it had too many joints. The creature’s head tilted unnaturally, like it was scanning its surroundings. Rick covered his mouth to keep himself from making a sound.

The creature moved slowly, each step calculated, deliberate. Its long arms swayed like pendulums, and it sniffed the air, as though it could sense him. Rick gripped the branch tighter. *Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.*

But then, a soft "snap" echoed beneath his foot. A dry twig.

Rick's heart stopped.

The creature’s head snapped in his direction, eyes narrowing like lasers focused on a target. It let out a guttural snarl—a low, vibrating growl that seemed to come from deep within its chest. For a second, everything was still.

Then it charged.

“RUN!” Rick screamed, bolting from behind the tree. His legs moved faster than he ever thought possible. The branches of the trees whipped at his

arms and face as he ran, his heart pounding so loudly he could hear it in his ears. The ground was uneven, and more than once he nearly tripped on twisted roots and vines. But he didn't stop. He *couldn't* stop. The heavy thudding footsteps behind him were getting closer, each one like a thunderclap.

Don't look back. Don't look back. Keep running!

The creature let out a roar, so loud it rattled Rick's skull. He knew it was close. Too close. Desperation surged through him. His lungs burned as he pushed his body harder, faster. His legs ached, but his survival instincts overrode the pain.

Ahead, he spotted something unusual. A metallic structure embedded in the side of a hill. It looked like a bunker or an old facility. Its surface was covered in rust, and strange symbols were etched into the metal. *A way out?* he thought. *Please be a way out!*

He ran straight toward it. As he approached, he saw a circular metal hatch—an entrance. He reached for it, grabbing hold of a large, rusted handle. He pulled as hard as he could, gritting his teeth. The hatch barely moved.

“Come on, come on, COME ON!” he shouted, throwing his weight into it.

With a loud creak, the hatch finally gave way. It opened just enough for Rick to squeeze through. He dove inside, yanking the door shut behind him with all his strength. The door slammed closed with a metallic *clang*.

He heard the creature slam into the door from the outside, its claws scraping against the metal with a terrible screech. Rick stumbled backward, breathing heavily, his heart still racing. He stayed there, sitting on the cold, metal floor, eyes locked on the door.

The creature roared again. Bang. Bang. It pounded on the hatch, but it didn't open. The metal held strong. Rick let out a breath of relief and collapsed against the wall, his body trembling with exhaustion.

“Not today, big guy,” he muttered, still panting.

The creature continued to scratch and slam against the door, but it wasn't getting through. After what felt like an eternity, the sounds faded. Rick's muscles finally relaxed. *Safe. For now.*

He leaned his head against the wall, catching his breath. The air in the bunker was damp and cold. He smelled rust and something like stale chemicals. Slowly, he got to his feet, wincing as his muscles ached from the chase.

The interior of the bunker was dimly lit with flickering blue lights that lined the floor. Strange symbols were engraved into the walls—symbols he didn't recognize. He walked cautiously, his hands brushing against the cold metal walls. It was like being in a spaceship from one of those old sci-fi movies.

“What... is this place?” Rick whispered.

He moved further down the narrow hallway, the flickering lights casting long shadows. The air grew colder with each step. He turned a corner and found a large room at the end of the hall. Inside, he spotted something that made his jaw drop.

It was a control center. Several large screens flickered with static, and strange, alien-looking consoles were lined up along the walls. Buttons, levers, and holographic interfaces floated in mid-air. He took a step forward, gazing at the surreal sight. Some of the screens were showing maps—planetary charts. *Planets?*

His eyes focused on one screen in particular. It showed a map of a planet he knew all too well.

“Earth...” Rick's voice was barely a whisper.

It was Earth, but something was wrong. The continents looked different, distorted. There were red zones marked on the map, entire sections of the planet highlighted with warnings. One label stood out.

“QUARANTINE ZONE 05 – ACCESS RESTRICTED”

“Quarantine?” Rick tilted his head. “What are they quarantining? What happened here?”

He scanned the other screens. One of them showed video footage. It was grainy, but he could make out figures moving on the screen. They were people—or at least, they looked like people. But they moved strangely, twitching unnaturally, their eyes glowing faintly red.

Wait... those eyes...

The connection hit him like a punch to the gut. The creature outside. The glowing red eyes. The same eyes on the screen.

“Oh no,” Rick breathed, taking a step back.

Then, something even more terrifying happened. The figure on the screen *turned to face the camera*—as if it was aware it was being watched. It tilted its head slowly, just like the creature had done in the fog. Rick’s breath hitched in his throat.

Suddenly, the screen flickered. The figure disappeared.

And then, a voice echoed from the bunker’s intercom system.

"System rebooting... Accessing data logs... New anomaly detected. Welcome, Rick."

Rick froze. The lights flickered rapidly, casting long, dancing shadows across the room.

"How... how do you know my name?" Rick asked, his voice shaky, his eyes darting around the room.

"We’ve been waiting for you," the voice replied coldly.

The lights cut out completely, and Rick was left in total darkness.

All he heard was the slow, deliberate thudding of footsteps.

They were coming from behind him.

To Be Continued...

THE MAN IN THE DARK

Rick's breath was shallow, his eyes straining to see through the pitch-black darkness. The soft hum of machinery filled the air, an eerie reminder that this place was very much alive. *"We've been waiting for you."* Those words echoed in his mind like a haunting melody on repeat.

His heart raced as he slowly backed away from where he thought the footsteps were coming from. Each thud echoed louder, growing closer, heavier. It was deliberate—like whoever or *whatever* it was, wanted him to know it was approaching.

"Hello?" Rick called out, his voice barely above a whisper. His throat was dry, his voice cracked with fear. "Who's there?"

Silence.

Don't panic, Rick. Don't panic. He turned slowly, arms outstretched in front of him, fingers searching for the wall. His breathing grew uneven. He bit his lip, trying to keep himself quiet, but the feeling of being *watched* was unbearable. His fingers brushed against something cold and hard—the metal wall.

Okay, okay, stay calm. he thought. *If I can find a control panel, maybe I can turn on the lights or something.* He moved along the wall, his hands searching for any kind of switch, button, or console. His fingers brushed over rough, rusty grooves, then smooth metal. Finally, his hand hit something smooth and raised—a screen.

"Please work, please work," he whispered, running his hands along it. His fingers found a button. He pressed it.

A loud *click* echoed.

Suddenly, dim blue emergency lights flickered on, bathing the room in a cold, sterile glow. Shadows stretched long and jagged across the floor. His eyes darted around, scanning every corner, every crevice.

There was no one there.

But I heard it. I know I heard it.

He swallowed hard, slowly stepping away from the wall. The glow from the consoles was brighter now, several of them flashing strange symbols he couldn't understand. One of the larger monitors at the center of the room flickered to life. The static crackled, and slowly, a figure appeared on the screen.

It wasn't clear at first. The image was distorted, blurry—like an old, corrupted video file. But as the static faded, the figure became clearer. It was a man.

He wore a sleek, black bodysuit with glowing blue circuits running along his arms and chest. His face was partially hidden beneath a hood, but his eyes... *those eyes*. They weren't glowing red like the creature's. They were sharp, silver-blue, and they stared directly at Rick—through the screen—like he could see him.

"Rick," the man said. His voice was low but firm, like he was used to being in charge.

Rick froze, his body locking in place like a statue. His brain scrambled to understand what was happening. "Who... Who are you?" he stammered, his eyes glued to the man on the screen.

The man tilted his head slightly, much like the creature had. "I go by many names," he said, his tone cryptic. His silver-blue eyes narrowed as he leaned forward, his face taking up most of the screen. "But for now, you can call me... *The Broker*."

The Broker? Rick's mind spun. *What kind of name is that?*

“What do you want from me?” Rick asked, his voice louder now, braver than before. He had no idea where the courage was coming from, but the fear of the unknown was worse than facing it head-on. “How do you know my name?”

The Broker smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile. It was cold, calculated.

“Because I've been watching you, Rick,” he said. “From the moment you built your first invention—your so-called *Dog Bot*—I've been watching. Observing. Analyzing.”

“W-why? I'm nobody,” Rick said, shaking his head. “I'm just a kid!”

The Broker leaned back, his hood falling further over his face, shrouding it in darkness. “Oh, Rick, you're *far* from ordinary. You've done something no one else has.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You created *possibility*,” The Broker said, his voice calm but sharp like a knife. “And that makes you dangerous. To them. To me.”

Rick's fists tightened. “I didn't do anything wrong!” he snapped. “I just wanted to make things. I'm not dangerous!”

“Oh, but you are,” The Broker replied, his eyes glowing faintly blue now. “You're more dangerous than you realize. And that... is why *they're coming for you*.”

The lights flickered. A loud bang echoed from the hall outside the room. Rick spun around, his heart nearly jumping out of his chest. It sounded like something had smashed into the wall. *No. Not again. Not that thing.*

The thudding footsteps were back. *Closer. Louder.*

“Listen to me, Rick,” The Broker’s voice snapped him back to the screen. “You’re out of time. They’ve already found you. They’ve been tracking you since you left the forest.”

“Them?” Rick asked, his breathing quickening. “You mean... the red-eyed thing?”

“No,” The Broker said coldly. “*Worse.*”

The screen flickered, and the Broker leaned in, his silver-blue eyes piercing into Rick’s soul. “You need to run. Right now.”

Another loud *bang* echoed through the bunker, closer this time. The walls rattled.

“They’ll breach the door in less than 30 seconds,” The Broker continued, his tone more urgent now. “You have to trust me, Rick. Go down the hall. At the end, there’s a hatch. It will lead you to the lower tunnels. Do *not* stop. Do *not* turn back.”

“Why are you helping me?” Rick demanded, his eyes darting between the screen and the door.

“Because,” The Broker said, leaning back once more, his eyes hidden beneath the shadow of his hood. “*You’re worth more to me alive than dead.*”

Another *bang*. This time, the sound of metal bending echoed through the hall.

“RUN!” The Broker barked.

Rick didn’t think. He just ran. His legs moved on instinct, fueled by adrenaline and raw terror. He sprinted down the corridor as fast as he could. His breaths were short and sharp. His heart pounded so hard, it felt like it would burst out of his chest.

Just keep running. Don't stop. Don't stop.

The thuds grew louder. It wasn't one set of footsteps anymore. There were *many*.

He spotted the hatch ahead—a large, round wheel-shaped door at the end of the hallway. “Please, please, please,” he muttered under his breath. He reached it and spun the wheel, his hands trembling as he pulled with all his strength.

Another bang echoed from behind. He could hear the metal tearing. *They're in.*

The hatch finally groaned open, just enough for him to slide through. He squeezed his body into the tight crawlspace beyond, pulling the hatch shut as fast as he could. He locked it, twisting the wheel until it wouldn't budge.

He sat there, breathing hard, his chest rising and falling rapidly. The cold metal of the hatch vibrated as something *slammed* against it from the other side. It hit again. And again. Each slam was heavier, more violent than the last.

Tears welled up in Rick's eyes as he sat against the hatch. His hands shook uncontrollably. *What do they want from me?* he thought. *Why me?*

Then, everything went quiet.

Rick didn't trust the silence. He pressed his ear against the hatch, straining to hear any sound.

Nothing.

He exhaled slowly, his eyes staring into the dimly lit crawlspace. The air smelled of old metal and dampness. He wiped the sweat off his forehead, still catching his breath.

A soft beep echoed from his pocket. Confused, Rick reached inside and pulled out his communicator.

There was a message on the screen. Just one line of text.

"See you soon, Rick. — The Broker"

His heart sank.

Suddenly, from the darkness of the crawlspace ahead of him, he heard something that froze his blood.

A slow, deliberate tap.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It was coming from up ahead.

"Welcome, Rick," a voice echoed from the darkness. It wasn't The Broker's voice. It was something... *worse*.

And it was coming closer.

To Be Continued...

THE SECRETS BENEATH

Rick's breath echoed in the cramped crawlspace. The air was damp and metallic, the kind of smell that made him feel like he was trapped in a rusted coffin. His heart still pounded in his chest from the chase, his mind replaying every bang and thud on the hatch behind him.

But that wasn't the worst part.

It was the sound ahead of him.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The steady rhythm echoed through the narrow tunnel. It wasn't hurried. It wasn't random. It was deliberate. Calculated.

Rick's entire body tensed as he pressed his back against the cold metal wall of the tunnel. He could barely see anything up ahead. The emergency lights from the previous room didn't reach this far. The darkness ahead was absolute.

His fingers brushed against the cold metal of his Dog Bot's head, which was still clipped to his belt. "Wake up, Dog Bot," Rick whispered, his voice barely louder than a breath. "Come on, buddy, I need you right now."

Dog Bot's eyes flickered dimly, glowing blue for a moment before fading.

"Not now," Rick hissed, shaking the small bot. "Don't do this to me!"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound was closer. It wasn't a mechanical sound. It was something organic. It reminded Rick of knuckles tapping on a door. Slow. Patient. *Hungry.*

Rick swallowed hard. He glanced back at the hatch behind him, the one he'd just locked. *I can't go back.*

He looked forward, heart racing. *I can't stay here.*

His breath came in quick, short bursts. *Move, Rick. Move now.*

He crawled forward, his hands and knees scraping against the cold metal floor. Each movement was slow, deliberate, and quiet. He pressed his weight down carefully, afraid that even the smallest clanging noise would give him away.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound stopped.

He froze. His breath caught in his throat. His fingers hovered just above the ground. His heart was a wild drumbeat in his ears.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Silence.

Rick glanced down the tunnel. His eyes adjusted to the faint shadows, and he squinted, trying to see *something*. His fingers brushed against his pocket, feeling for his small toolset. Maybe he could use the screwdriver as a weapon. *Yeah, because a screwdriver is going to stop whatever THAT is,* he thought sarcastically.

Then, something shifted in the darkness.

At first, it was just a blur. A flicker of movement. But then he saw it—a figure hunched over in the distance. It wasn't walking. It was *crawling*. Hands and feet pressed to the ground like an animal. Its limbs moved in unnatural, jerking motions, almost like it was glitching.

Click-click-click. Its joints popped with every movement.

Rick's body went cold. His instincts screamed at him to run, to turn back, to do *anything* other than just sit there. But his legs wouldn't move. His breath was shallow. His eyes locked on the figure.

It stopped.

Its head jerked up. Slowly, very slowly, it tilted its head to one side—like a predator sniffing the air.

Then it turned its head toward him.

Rick's heart stopped.

The creature's face was not a face at all. It was a smooth, featureless surface. No eyes. No nose. No mouth. Just a blank, gray, oval surface where a face *should* be.

It sees me.

Somehow, somehow, Rick *knew* it could see him.

Suddenly, it moved. Fast. Too fast. It went from a crawl to a sprint, its body folding and unfolding unnaturally as it ran. The clicking of its joints echoed loudly, like bones snapping in quick succession.

RUN!

Rick scrambled forward, panic surging through him. His arms and legs moved as fast as they could, his palms scraping on the cold metal floor, but he didn't care. He just needed to get *away*. The air was colder now, sharper, like every breath stabbed his lungs.

Behind him, the rapid *click-click-click* of the creature's movements echoed louder and louder. It was gaining on him.

"Come on, come on!" Rick gasped, pushing himself harder. His legs burned, his arms ached, but he didn't stop. He couldn't stop. The sound of that thing crawling after him was too close now.

Suddenly, the tunnel shifted downward, sloping steeply like a slide. Rick's hands slipped, and he lost his grip. His body slid forward uncontrollably, tumbling headfirst down the slick metal surface.

"AHHH!" Rick screamed as he twisted in the air, tumbling end over end. His back hit something hard, and he rolled down faster. His hands clawed at the walls, but the slope was too smooth, too steep. The air rushed past him.

BOOM!

He crashed into a metal floor, face-first. Pain shot through his body, his nose stinging, his forehead throbbing.

"Ugh," Rick groaned, rolling onto his back. His head was spinning. He blinked slowly, trying to focus his vision. His body ached. His legs felt like jelly.

He lay there, gasping for air. The world spun around him, but the only thing on his mind was the one question that wouldn't go away.

Where is it?

He forced himself to sit up, clutching his ribs. His eyes darted toward the opening he'd just fallen from—a wide metal chute about 15 feet above him. He held his breath, eyes locked on the edge.

Is it coming?

Silence.

Nothing crawled out. No sounds. No taps.

He exhaled a long, shaky breath. His entire body was covered in cold sweat. He wiped his forehead, heart still racing. His legs trembled as he got to his feet.

"Get up, Rick," he muttered to himself. "Get up before it finds you."

He scanned the room he was in. It was much larger than the tunnel—maybe some kind of maintenance chamber. Blue emergency lights flickered, illuminating pipes and valves that lined the walls. Steam hissed from vents, making it hard to hear anything else.

“Dog Bot?” he called out softly. He unclipped the Dog Bot from his belt and shook it. “Please, buddy, I need you. Wake up.”

Dog Bot’s eyes flickered again, and this time, they stayed on. Its small, robotic tail wagged slightly.

“Finally,” Rick sighed with relief. “Status report, Dog Bot.”

“System reboot complete.” Dog Bot’s voice was slow but steady. *“Energy reserves at 12%. Emergency mode activated.”*

“Yeah, yeah, emergency mode,” Rick muttered, looking around. “Scan the room. Any lifeforms detected?”

Dog Bot’s eyes blinked as a soft, scanning *beep* echoed around them.

“Scanning...”

Rick’s eyes stayed locked on the hatch above. *Please say no. Please say no.*

“No immediate lifeforms detected.”

“Thank you,” Rick sighed, leaning against the wall. He was exhausted, sore, and terrified. But at least, for now, he was safe.

Dog Bot’s eyes flickered, and it tilted its head. *“Correction. Movement detected.”*

Rick froze. His heart dropped. “W-what?”

Dog Bot’s eyes glowed a deep orange. *“Non-human movement detected. 25 meters. Approaching fast.”*

“No, no, no,” Rick whispered. He spun around, eyes darting everywhere. *Where?! Where is it?!*

The clanging sound of metal footsteps echoed from a distant hallway. The sound grew louder, faster.

“Dog Bot, lights off, NOW!” Rick hissed. Dog Bot’s lights dimmed instantly, and they both crouched low behind a large metal crate.

The footsteps got louder. Slow. Heavy. Not like the clicking of the other creature. No, these were boots. Metal boots.

The air grew colder, like all the warmth had been sucked out of the room.

Rick squeezed his eyes shut, hoping—*praying*—that whoever it was wouldn’t see him. His fingers dug into Dog Bot’s metal frame, gripping tightly.

The footsteps stopped.

Rick held his breath, heart pounding in his ears.

A low, mechanical voice echoed through the chamber. **“Rick West. Identified. Extraction authorized.”**

His eyes snapped open. His mind screamed a single word.

RUN!

To Be Continued...

EXTRACTION PROTOCOL

Rick's muscles tensed like coiled springs. The cold, metallic voice echoed in his ears:

"Rick West. Identified. Extraction authorized."

His breath caught in his throat. *Extraction? What do they mean by extraction?!*

He pressed his back against the cold metal wall, clutching Dog Bot tightly. The chamber was dim, with faint blue lights flickering like a dying heartbeat. The footsteps were steady and deliberate, crunching against the grated floor. The sound echoed, bouncing off the walls, making it impossible to tell where it was coming from.

Think, Rick. THINK! he told himself, his eyes darting around the room. He scanned for exits, crawlspaces, anywhere he could slip into unnoticed. His heart pounded harder with each step that drew closer.

"Dog Bot, infrared scan! Tell me where they are!" he whispered frantically.

Dog Bot's eyes flickered red as it activated its scan. A small, transparent display projected in front of Rick's face. His eyes widened as he saw the figure's silhouette walking steadily toward him from the east side of the chamber. The figure moved with military precision — no hesitation, no wasted movement.

"Distance: 20 meters. Approach speed: steady."

I have to move. Now.

He crouched low and moved silently along the edge of the room, staying in the shadows as much as possible. His body was sore, and every muscle

ached from his earlier fall, but he pushed through the pain. His eyes stayed locked on the display from Dog Bot, tracking the figure's every step.

The footsteps grew louder. Clang. Clang. Clang.

Suddenly, a mechanical hum echoed through the chamber. It was a sound Rick had only heard once before — the sound of a *phase disruptor*. His heart raced.

“Target acquired. Initiating phase-lock.”

No, no, no, not that! Rick's eyes went wide. He knew what "phase-lock" meant. It was a containment technique used by the military to trap fugitives in an energy field, freezing them in place like a bug in amber.

“Dog Bot, disrupt their signal!” Rick whispered with urgency.

“Processing... Hacking security frequency...” Dog Bot's eyes flickered rapidly as it worked.

Rick's heart pounded in his chest. He could see the glowing red lines beginning to crisscross the room — the telltale signs of the phase-lock net being activated. He had maybe ten seconds before it fully formed.

“Come on, Dog Bot, faster!” he hissed.

“Unauthorized tampering detected. Countermeasures activated.”

A sharp, high-pitched *ZAP!* filled the air, and sparks shot from Dog Bot's head.

"AHH!" Rick yelled as the shock traveled up his arm. He dropped Dog Bot, who hit the floor with a loud *clang*.

“Tampering failed. Locking target in 5... 4...”

“No, no, no!” Rick scrambled to his feet, eyes darting around the room. *Where do I go?!* The net of glowing red lines closed in around him.

3...

There! A vent!

He spotted a circular vent cover near the base of the far wall. It was small, barely large enough to squeeze through, but it was his only shot. His legs burned as he sprinted for it, sliding on his knees like a baseball player. His fingers dug into the edges of the vent cover.

2...

“Come on, come on!” he grunted, pulling with every ounce of strength. The screws groaned in protest, but he didn’t have time to be gentle. He yanked with all his might. *POP!* The cover came loose.

1...

The phase-lock energy net snapped into place behind him with a loud *CRACK!* — but Rick was already halfway into the vent.

“Target lost. Searching...”

His chest heaved as he crawled deeper into the vent, pulling Dog Bot along with him. The sound of metallic boots echoed in the chamber behind him.

“Subject evaded capture. Scanning for movement.”

Rick squeezed through the narrow passage, his arms and legs aching with every movement. The air in the vent was stale and suffocating, but he didn’t stop. He crawled deeper, his body wriggling like a snake. Sweat dripped from his forehead, and his breathing was shallow, but he didn’t care.

Get away. Get away. Get away!

The voice echoed from behind him. **“Continue pursuit. Do not let him escape.”**

Rick's fingers trembled as he pulled himself forward. His knees scraped against the rough edges of the vent. His heart felt like it would burst from his chest. He glanced back just in time to see a red glow shining through the vent behind him.

They're scanning the vents!

"Dog Bot, EMP! Right now!" Rick gasped.

Dog Bot's eyes flashed bright blue. **"EMP discharge activated."**

BZZZZZZT!

A pulse of blue energy shot out from Dog Bot's body, and the red glow behind him flickered, then died.

"Visual sensors disrupted. Switching to manual pursuit."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Rick muttered, crawling as fast as his arms would allow. His eyes locked onto a faint light ahead. *An exit!*

He crawled faster, gritting his teeth against the pain. The light grew brighter. The air was cooler, fresher. He reached out, his fingertips brushing against open space. *Almost there...*

With one final push, he tumbled out of the vent, landing hard on cold, wet concrete. His knees buckled, and he hit the ground with a thud.

Fresh air. He breathed it in deeply, coughing as he sat up. *I'm out. I'm out.*

But his relief didn't last.

He glanced around, realizing he was no longer in the underground chamber. This wasn't the forest. This wasn't home.

He was on a street.

But it wasn't like the streets of New York. The skyline was wrong. The lights were dimmer. The architecture had a twisted, warped look, like a surreal painting. Metallic towers stretched high into the foggy sky, their surfaces reflecting distorted images of everything around them. The people walking down the street weren't people at all. Their bodies were long, thin, and inhuman. Their faces were blank and featureless — just like the face of the figure from the crawlspace.

Rick's stomach dropped. *Where am I?*

Dog Bot rolled over and sat up, his sensors blinking. *"Location unknown. Anomalous energy detected. This environment does not match Earth coordinates."*

Rick stood slowly, his eyes darting around. "This isn't Earth," he muttered, eyes wide with disbelief. *This isn't Earth. This is somewhere else.*

The people on the street turned toward him. All of them. Every single one of them stopped moving and turned to look at him in unison. Their blank, gray faces tilted, as if studying him.

His breathing got shallow. His chest felt tight. "Dog Bot..." he whispered, his voice cracking. "Tell me you have an idea where we are."

Dog Bot's eyes flickered. **"Temporal displacement detected. Reality shift probable. Coordinates do not match any known location in human records."**

Temporal displacement.

Time.

The word echoed in his head like a siren. *This isn't just another planet... This isn't another dimension...*

"This is another time," he muttered in horror.

The figures on the street stepped forward, their blank faces tilting as they approached him.

“Nope. No thanks,” Rick said, backing away. His foot hit something solid. He glanced down and saw the cold metal of a *familiar object*.

A vortex generator.

It was the exact same device the man from the forest had used. *He was here.*

Suddenly, one of the blank-faced figures stepped forward, its hand outstretched. Its fingers were long and thin, like sharp wires.

“Rick West. Identified. Extraction authorized.”

His blood turned to ice.

“Not again,” he whispered, grabbing Dog Bot and the vortex generator. Without a second thought, he slammed his fist against the device’s main button.

The air around him distorted with a *WHOOM* as bright blue light engulfed his body. His skin felt like it was being pulled inside out, every molecule vibrating at once.

As his vision faded into a swirling vortex of light, he heard one final sound:

“Target in transit. Lock coordinates.”

Then, everything went black.

To Be Continued...

THE FRACTURED LOOP

Rick's eyes snapped open. Blinding white light flooded his vision, forcing him to squint. His entire body ached like he'd just been tossed through a meat grinder. The air smelled different — fresh, but oddly metallic.

"Ugh... wh-where...?" he mumbled, rubbing his temples as a sharp headache pounded in his skull.

He sat up slowly, his senses gradually coming back online. The ground beneath him was smooth and cold, like polished glass. The sky above him wasn't a sky at all — it was a swirling sea of shifting colors, hues of deep purple, electric blue, and shimmering gold.

He blinked hard, trying to make sense of it. *Where am I now?*

Dog Bot's voice echoed in his ear. **"System reboot complete. Environmental scan in progress."**

Rick turned and saw Dog Bot sprawled on his side like an overturned turtle. He crawled over and flipped him upright. "You good, buddy?"

"All circuits operational. I appear to be... functional."

"Good," Rick muttered, scanning the area. He didn't recognize anything. The place looked like a surreal dreamscape. Giant crystalline structures jutted out from the ground at awkward angles, glowing faintly with an internal light. Trees with metallic bark and leaves made of iridescent glass swayed in a non-existent breeze. The ground was as smooth as a mirror, reflecting the swirling "sky" above.

"Dog Bot, tell me we're on Earth."

Dog Bot's eyes flashed. **"Error. Location mismatch. Planetary designation unknown. Warning: Temporal anomaly detected."**

“Yeah, I figured that,” Rick muttered, getting to his feet. He felt the soreness in his legs and back as if he'd fallen off a cliff. He glanced around, heart pounding in his chest. *No people, no soldiers, no extraction bots... at least not yet.* But he knew better than to let his guard down.

He checked his pocket. The vortex generator was still there, but the light on it was dim, flickering weakly like a dying flashlight. “Great,” he groaned. *Busted. Probably fried it when I used it back there.* He shook it like it was a remote control with dying batteries, but it didn’t respond.

“Dog Bot, any chance you can fix this thing?”

“Analyzing device... Damage detected. Core stabilizer offline. Quantum flux battery depleted by 76%.”

Rick ran his hand down his face. *Of course it's broken.* He sighed deeply. “Can you fix it?”

“Solution: Recharge battery. Repair stabilizer using compatible components.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll just go find some ‘quantum flux batteries’ growing on one of these glass trees,” Rick said sarcastically, glaring at the bizarre foliage.

But something felt off. He could sense it.

He didn’t know how to explain it, but it felt like something was *watching him*. His neck prickled with the eerie sensation of unseen eyes on him. He spun around, scanning the area. No one there. No one visible, at least.

“Dog Bot, scan for lifeforms,” he said softly, his eyes darting around.

Dog Bot’s eyes flashed red. **“Scanning... No lifeforms detected in immediate vicinity.”**

Rick breathed out slowly, but he didn’t feel any safer. *No lifeforms doesn’t mean no danger.*

Suddenly, a soft, mechanical hum filled the air. It was faint, like a distant drone engine. Rick's eyes narrowed, and his heart rate spiked. He'd heard that sound before — it was the sound of a *tracker unit*.

"Nope. Nope, nope, nope," he whispered, backing away from the sound. He couldn't see the source of the noise, but he knew better than to wait around for it to find him. "Dog Bot, we're moving. Now."

He picked up Dog Bot and sprinted toward a cluster of the crystalline structures. His legs burned with exhaustion, but adrenaline kept him moving. He crouched behind one of the jagged crystal spires, heart pounding like a jackhammer.

The hum grew louder.

He peeked around the edge of the crystal. His eyes squinted as he spotted it. A small black orb hovered in the distance, scanning its surroundings with a thin red laser line sweeping back and forth like a searchlight.

"A tracker drone," Rick hissed. "It followed us here?!"

"Tracker drones operate on interdimensional tracking signals. It is possible they marked your quantum signature back on Earth."

"Yeah, thanks, Captain Obvious," Rick muttered. *They're tracking me through time and space now? Great. He bit his lip, eyes darting around. I need to make a plan, fast.*

The tracker drone hovered in place for a moment, its laser sweeping across the crystalline ground. Rick ducked lower, holding his breath.

Please don't see me. Please don't see me.

Suddenly, the laser swept across the crystal Rick was hiding behind. His reflection in the crystal surface flashed for a fraction of a second.

"TARGET LOCATED."

The drone beeped loudly. A piercing siren blared.

“Oh, come on!” Rick bolted from cover, his legs on fire as he sprinted across the open terrain.

“Pursuing target. Extraction unit inbound.”

Rick didn't need to look back to know what that meant. He'd seen it too many times in holo-movies — *the cavalry was coming*.

“Dog Bot, prepare a defensive strategy!” he yelled as he sprinted forward.

“Suggestion: Evade pursuit. Threat level: critical.”

“Wow, thanks for that amazing strategy, Dog Bot!” he shouted, jumping over a fallen crystal branch.

The hum of engines grew louder behind him. He glanced back and saw it. *Not just one drone*. There were now *three* of them, each hovering in a perfect triangle formation. Their red lasers scanned the area like searchlights, focusing on him.

“Stop running, Rick West,” one of the drones said in a mechanical voice.

“Compliance will reduce resistance protocols.”

“Yeah, I'll *definitely* stop running after you tell me that,” Rick yelled sarcastically, pushing himself to run even faster. His breath came in ragged gasps, his lungs burning. His legs felt like jelly, but he kept moving.

I need to lose them. I need to disappear.

He spotted something up ahead — a large crystal cluster with jagged spikes sticking out at odd angles. It looked like a natural maze. *Perfect*.

He dove into the maze of crystals, weaving between the jagged walls. The narrow pathways forced him to slow down, but it also forced the drones to split up.

He could hear them circling above, their lasers scanning each corridor of the maze. He crouched low, trying to make himself as small as possible.

“Thermal scan activated.”

His heart stopped. *Thermal scan?! They can see my body heat!*

Desperation surged through him. He looked around for anything that could block his heat signature. His eyes landed on a small pool of thick, silver liquid at the base of one of the crystals.

That might work.

He didn’t think. He acted. Diving face-first into the pool, he felt the icy cold liquid wrap around his body like syrup. His teeth chattered as the cold numbed his skin. *Please, please let this work.*

The glow of red lasers passed right over the pool, but they didn’t stop.

“Target lost. Searching.”

Rick stayed under for as long as he could hold his breath. His lungs screamed for air, but he didn’t dare move. *Not yet. Just a little longer.*

The drones hovered in silence, their lasers sweeping slowly.

“Target lost. Resuming perimeter search.”

The hum of engines grew softer as the drones drifted away.

Rick burst out of the pool, gasping for air. His body was numb, his clothes soaked in the silver liquid, but he was alive.

He flopped onto the cold ground, coughing and wheezing. “That... was way too close,” he panted.

Dog Bot rolled over to him. **“Observation: Your survival instincts are improving.”**

Rick let out a weak laugh, wiping the silver liquid off his face. "Yeah, well, survival instincts don't mean much if I'm being chased by ghosts from the future."

His eyes wandered to the horizon, and he frowned. *Where am I supposed to go now?*

He pulled out the vortex generator from his pocket. Its light flickered weakly.

"Come on, baby," he whispered, shaking it gently. "Just give me one more jump."

A soft *beep* echoed from the device.

"Coordinates locked. Ready for transit."

Rick grinned. "Yeah, that's more like it."

He pressed the button.

WHOOM.

Light swallowed him whole.

To be continued...

THE PARADOX ENCOUNTER

The blinding flash of light faded, and Rick stumbled forward, landing hard on his hands and knees. His head spun like he'd just been on the wildest rollercoaster of his life. His stomach lurched, and he fought back the urge to throw up.

"Ugh... I'm gonna be sick," he groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. The ground beneath him felt rough and uneven, like cracked concrete. He slowly opened his eyes and blinked away the dizziness.

He was surrounded by towering steel skyscrapers that stretched so high they pierced the clouds. Hovercars zipped through the air like fireflies, their glowing undercarriages painting streaks of blue, green, and red trails in the foggy atmosphere. The city was alive with noise — the hum of engines, distant sirens, and the chatter of people moving through the streets below.

Rick squinted. *Wait a second... this place looks familiar.*

His heart skipped a beat. He knew exactly where he was.

"New York City," he muttered under his breath. "Planet Earth."

Dog Bot's sensors buzzed as he stood up beside Rick. **"Geographical analysis: Confirmed. Location: New York City. Year: 2050."**

"2050?" Rick's eyes widened. *I'm back on Earth... but I'm a year in the future.* His thoughts raced, heart pounding in his chest. *I wasn't supposed to come here. Not like this.* He glanced at the vortex generator in his hand. Its light flickered weakly. "Great. Out of power again," he grumbled.

Suddenly, a loud bang echoed from behind him. Rick spun around, his nerves on edge. The sound came from a narrow alleyway wedged between

two of the massive skyscrapers. A flash of sparks lit up the dark passage like a firecracker.

“Stay close, Dog Bot,” Rick whispered as he crept toward the alley. His heart was in his throat, every step echoing louder than he wanted. The shadows of the alley seemed to shift unnaturally. He peeked around the corner and saw it.

A man.

No, not just any man. *It was him.*

Rick's heart stopped. He stared, unable to believe his eyes. The man was bent over a small device on the ground, sparks flying as he tinkered with it. His hair was wild, and he wore a coat too big for his frame. But that wasn't what froze Rick in place.

The man looked exactly like *him*.

Same face. Same messy hair. Same nervous energy.

It was like looking in a mirror.

Rick's breath hitched. “No... no way.”

Dog Bot's eyes flickered as he scanned the figure. **“Facial recognition: 99.8% match. Conclusion: Subject is Rick West.”**

“Yeah, thanks for confirming what I already know,” Rick hissed. He ducked behind a stack of metal crates, peering at his older self. *What is going on?*

The older Rick grumbled to himself, his fingers moving quickly over the small device. It looked like a portable terminal of some kind, its holographic screen flickering with rapidly changing data.

“Come on, come on, stabilize already,” older Rick muttered. He didn't sound much older — maybe two or three years older at most. His eyes were sharper, though, more focused, like someone who'd seen too much too fast.

Younger Rick's mind was racing. *Do I talk to him? Do I stay hidden? If I talk to him, is that going to mess up the timeline?* He bit his lip. *But wait, if this is my future self, then maybe this already happened. Does that mean I already saw myself?* His brain hurt from all the paradoxes stacking on top of each other.

“Advice: Do not interact with temporal duplicates. Risk of timeline distortion is high,” Dog Bot said.

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Rick muttered. But he couldn't stop staring at the older version of himself. He looked different. Confident. Determined. *What happened to me in the next two years to turn me into that guy?*

Then something strange happened.

Older Rick froze. His eyes darted up. His fingers stopped moving on the terminal. Slowly, he turned his head and locked eyes directly on younger Rick.

Time itself seemed to stop.

They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Older Rick's eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening.

“You can come out,” older Rick said, his voice steady and sharp. “I know you're there.”

Younger Rick's breath hitched. *No way.*

Dog Bot tilted his head. **“Detection confirmed. Tactical advice: Denial is futile.”**

“Thanks, Dog Bot,” Rick grumbled as he stepped out from behind the crates. “How'd you know I was there?”

Older Rick's eyes softened, and for a moment, his face was filled with something that looked like sympathy. "Because I *remember* being there," he said with a small smile.

Rick's heart nearly stopped. "So you *knew* this was going to happen?"

"Yeah, I did." Older Rick stood up, dusting himself off. "And trust me, I was just as freaked out as you are right now." He pointed at Rick's vortex generator. "Looks like you broke it. Again."

"Hey, it's not my fault," Rick said defensively. "I didn't exactly have time to read the manual while being chased by drones."

Older Rick let out a small laugh, his eyes distant for a second, as if remembering something. "Yeah... drones. Forgot about that part." He shook his head and crouched back over his device.

"Wait," younger Rick said, stepping closer. "If you're me... what happens next? How do I get back?"

Older Rick didn't look up. "Sorry, kid, I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because if I do, you'll try to change it. And trust me, you *do not* want to change it."

Rick felt frustration bubbling up. "I'm literally you. Just tell me what's going on."

Older Rick sighed, putting his tools down. He rubbed his temples, looking more exhausted than ever. "Look, I get it. I *remember* how lost you feel. How scared you are. But you're gonna have to figure this one out on your own. I did, and now you have to too."

"That's not fair," Rick snapped.

“Nothing about time travel is fair, kid,” older Rick said, his voice harsher this time. “You’ll learn that the hard way.”

Younger Rick opened his mouth to argue, but the distant hum of drones echoed in the distance. His eyes widened.

“Not them again,” he muttered.

Older Rick’s face turned grim. “They’re tracking you, huh? Same as before.” He pulled a small device from his coat pocket — it looked like a mini EMP grenade. “Alright, listen to me. I know you’re mad, but if you want to live, you’re gonna follow my instructions *exactly*.”

“Why should I trust you?” Rick asked, backing up.

“Because I’m you!” older Rick snapped. His eyes were fierce now, unyielding. “And I know what happens if you don’t.”

The drone hum grew louder. Shadows danced on the ground as the first one appeared in the sky above them.

“You ready, kid?” older Rick said, holding up the EMP grenade. His eyes met Rick’s, and something passed between them — an unspoken understanding.

“Yeah,” Rick said, pulling out his vortex generator. “Let’s do this.”

Older Rick grinned. “Smart choice, kid.” He pressed a button on the grenade. It began to beep rapidly, counting down.

“On my mark,” older Rick said. “Three... two... *one!*”

He threw the grenade into the air. Time slowed. The drones moved in, lasers lighting up the alley. Rick felt his heart pound in slow motion.

BOOM!

The EMP detonated, releasing a pulse of blue energy that rippled across the sky. The drones sparked and fell, lifeless.

Rick stared in awe. “Whoa...”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s cool,” older Rick said, grabbing him by the arm. “Now *run*. We’re not done yet.”

The two Ricks ran side by side, weaving through the alley.

“Hey,” younger Rick gasped as they sprinted. “If you know so much, then tell me one thing — does it get better?”

Older Rick glanced at him, a flicker of something in his eyes.

“No,” he said quietly. “But you get stronger.”

Rick didn’t like that answer. But somehow, he knew it was true.

To be continued...

THE ECHOES OF THE FUTURE

Rick's lungs burned as he sprinted through the narrow alleyways of New York. The neon glow of holographic signs flickered above, casting shifting colors of blue and red on the wet pavement. Every footstep echoed like thunder in his ears. Older Rick was ahead of him, moving with precision like he'd done this a thousand times before.

"Faster, kid!" Older Rick barked. He glanced over his shoulder, eyes sharp as lasers. "They'll be back online in thirty seconds!"

Rick gritted his teeth, his legs burning from exhaustion. *Why is future me so much faster?* he thought, pushing himself to keep up. Dog Bot scurried at his side, his mechanical paws clanging against the metal grates on the ground.

"Analysis: Distance to safety point: 500 meters," Dog Bot announced, his synthetic voice calm as ever. **"Warning: Drone activity resuming in 25 seconds."**

"Yeah, I *know!*" Rick snapped. "I'm running as fast as I can!"

The alley opened into a larger street filled with crowds of people. They wore futuristic outfits that shimmered with embedded LED lights. Their faces flickered with holographic notifications only they could see. The people barely noticed Rick and his older self as they rushed past. The streets of 2050 were crowded, but nobody cared about two kids running for their lives.

The distant hum of drones echoed again, louder this time. Rick's heart thumped in his chest like a drum.

"Here they come!" Rick shouted. He glanced up to see three drones flying high above, their red scanning lights sweeping over the street like searchlights.

“Don’t stop!” Older Rick yelled, weaving through the crowd with the precision of a trained soldier. “They won’t fire in public. Too many witnesses!”

“But what if they do?!” Rick shot back.

“They won’t,” Older Rick replied, his tone absolute. “They *never* do.”

Rick wasn’t so sure, but he trusted himself. Well, his *future* self.

They dashed down another alley, their breathing heavy. Older Rick came to an abrupt stop at a large steel door with a glowing lockpad. He pulled out a small circular device from his coat, placed it on the lockpad, and twisted it sharply. Sparks flew, and the door unlocked with a loud **clunk**.

“In!” Older Rick waved him in.

Rick dashed inside, his heart still racing. Dog Bot followed, and Older Rick slammed the door shut behind them. He pressed a button on the wall, and Rick heard the sharp hiss of magnetic locks engaging.

“Lockdown initiated. Location secure,” Dog Bot confirmed.

Panting, Rick bent over, his hands on his knees. “You... really know... how to make an entrance,” he said between heavy breaths.

Older Rick leaned against the wall, arms crossed, breathing evenly like he wasn’t even tired. “You’ll get used to it.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small capsule. With a flick of his thumb, it transformed into a glowing blue energy drink can. He tossed it to Rick. “Here. Hydrate.”

Rick caught it and stared at it for a second. The label read **“Energex — Recharge Your Future.”** He popped it open, and the drink inside fizzed like soda, glowing faintly blue. He gulped it down, and a surge of energy shot through his body like lightning.

“Whoa!” Rick shook his head. “That... that tastes like blueberries and lightning!”

Older Rick chuckled, stepping toward the center of the room. “Yeah, it’s the only thing keeping me going these days.” He glanced at Dog Bot. “Run a scan, Dog Bot. Make sure we weren’t followed.”

Dog Bot's eyes flickered blue. **“Scanning... No pursuit detected. Drones have not followed. Probability of discovery: 7%.”**

“Good enough,” Older Rick muttered.

Rick looked around, taking in his surroundings. The room was dimly lit by glowing blue panels. It looked like some kind of underground bunker — wires and pipes snaked along the ceiling, and old computer monitors flickered with lines of code. Tools and devices lay scattered on workbenches, some half-assembled. In the corner was a metal cot with a thin blanket.

“Where are we?” Rick asked, his voice still shaky.

“This,” Older Rick gestured around, “is my hideout. Yours too, eventually.”

Rick raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me *I* live here?”

“Not live. *Hide*,” Older Rick corrected. “Big difference.” He sat on the edge of the cot, his face serious now. “You’re probably wondering how everything got this bad, huh?”

“Yeah,” Rick said, folding his arms. “Why are drones chasing me? Who’s after us? Why do you have your own underground lair like some kind of sci-fi Batman?”

Older Rick ran a hand through his hair and let out a tired sigh. “It’s complicated, but you deserve the truth.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes locked on Rick's.

“Listen closely, because I’m only saying this once,” he said, his voice deadly serious. “The invention you’re about to make — the *time machine* — it’s going to change everything.”

Rick blinked. “Yeah, I kinda figured that out.”

“No, you *don’t* get it, kid,” Older Rick said sharply. “It’s going to make you a target. A *huge* target. Everyone’s gonna want it. Corporations. Governments. People you haven’t even met yet.” He leaned closer. “That man you saw at the lake? The one who made that vortex?”

Rick nodded slowly, his stomach twisting into knots. “Yeah... he knew me somehow. He said I was ‘out of his league in the future.’”

Older Rick’s eyes darkened. “That man is called *The Broker*. He’s not just some random guy. He’s from *beyond time itself*.”

“Beyond time?” Rick frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” Older Rick said, his tone grim, “that he exists outside of the past, present, and future. He’s like a... like a phantom who moves freely between timelines, doing whatever he wants. And guess what?” He jabbed a finger at Rick. “He wants *you*.”

“Me?” Rick felt a chill run down his spine. “Why me?”

“Because you’re going to build the first functional time machine,” Older Rick said, tapping the side of his head. “And once you do, you become the only person in history who can stop him.”

Silence filled the room. Rick felt like his heart had been dropped into a pit of ice. He shook his head. “No. No, that’s not possible. I’m just a kid. I’m not... I’m not some ‘savior of time’ or whatever you’re calling me.”

Older Rick leaned forward, his eyes hard as steel. “You think I didn’t say the *exact* same thing when I was you?” He grabbed Rick by the shoulders, his

grip firm but not harsh. “You *are* that person, whether you like it or not. And if you don’t believe me, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Rick pulled away, his mind racing. “So what am I supposed to do? Just hide down here forever?”

“No,” Older Rick said. He stood up, walking over to the workbench. He picked up a sleek, silver wristband with glowing green lights. “You’re going to get stronger.” He tossed it to Rick, who caught it with both hands.

“What is this?” Rick asked, eyeing the device.

“Your training tool,” Older Rick said with a grin. “Think of it as a ‘Time Sync.’ It helps you track time distortions and—”

Before he could finish, the bunker shook violently. Dust and debris rained down from the ceiling. Alarms blared, red lights flashing.

“ALERT: Bunker breach detected. Source: External.” Dog Bot's voice rang out. **“Three drones approaching.”**

Rick’s eyes went wide. “You said they wouldn’t find us!”

“I said it was a 7% chance!” Older Rick shouted, pulling out a makeshift blaster from the workbench. “Looks like we hit the unlucky roll!”

“Great!” Rick groaned. “What now?”

Older Rick grinned as he raised the blaster. His eyes glowed with that sharp, determined look Rick had seen before.

“Now,” he said, charging the weapon, “*we fight.*”

The sound of metal scraping echoed from the hallway.

“Rick, take cover!” Older Rick shouted.

Rick dove behind a crate just as the steel door was ripped clean off its hinges.

The shadows of three drones loomed large. Their glowing red eyes pierced the darkness like fiery stars.

And then, they opened fire.

To be continued...

THE RIFT OF RECKONING

The world exploded in flashes of red and blue light. Sparks showered from the ceiling as laser bolts sizzled through the air. The metallic clang of drones echoed off the bunker walls. Each impact sent a jolt through Rick's body. He ducked lower behind the steel crate, heart pounding in his ears.

“Stay down, kid!” Older Rick barked as he unleashed a volley of energy blasts from his makeshift blaster. Bright orange streaks shot through the air, slamming into one of the drones with a resounding **BOOM!** The drone spun out of control, smashing into a wall and crumpling like paper.

“Two left!” Dog Bot announced, his glowing eyes flickering as his sensors tracked enemy movement. **“Warning: Advanced combat protocols detected in drones. Risk level: HIGH.”**

“No kidding!” Rick yelled, covering his head as a laser blast scorched the crate he was hiding behind. The heat was intense, like standing next to a bonfire. His heart raced with panic, and for a moment, he thought he might pass out.

“Calm down, kid! Panic gets you killed!” Older Rick shouted as he dashed to a better position, flipping over a table like it was weightless. His movements were quick, efficient — too efficient for someone who looked like *him*. Rick couldn't help but wonder, *How did I get this cool in the future?*

“Rick, listen up!” Older Rick called over the chaos. “You see that wristband I gave you? Tap the green light!”

Rick glanced down at the device on his wrist. It hummed softly, its green glow pulsing in a rhythmic beat. He tapped it hesitantly.

“Time Sync activated,” the wristband's voice announced. **“Neural link established. Preparing cognitive enhancement.”**

“Cognitive what—?” Rick's words cut off as a jolt of electricity surged through his arm. His vision blurred for a second, his senses flickering like an old TV struggling to tune in. Then, suddenly — **clarity**.

His eyes widened. He could see everything — the path of each laser shot, the angle of the drones' flight, even the faint hum of their repulsor engines. Time itself didn't slow down, but his *mind* had accelerated. Every second felt like five.

“What... what is this?” Rick muttered, looking at his hands like he was seeing them for the first time.

“Welcome to the *Flow State*, kid!” Older Rick shouted, landing a shot that hit the second drone square in its core. It sparked and dropped to the ground, limbs twitching. “Use it to anticipate their moves! Predict, react, survive!”

The last drone whirred loudly, hovering in place for a moment. Its eye flickered, locking onto Rick's position.

“Uh-oh,” Rick said, eyes going wide.

“**Target locked,**” the drone's robotic voice buzzed.

“Move!” Older Rick roared.

Rick didn't think. He *moved*. His legs kicked off with so much force that he surprised himself, rolling behind another workbench just as a searing red beam cut through the space where he had been. The concrete wall behind him exploded into chunks, dust filling the air.

“**Tactical shift detected. Drone activating suppressive fire,**” Dog Bot warned.

“Suppressive what?!” Rick shouted, ducking as rapid-fire lasers shredded everything around him. Bolts of red energy blasted through the room, leaving glowing craters in the walls and floor. Sparks flew everywhere like a firework show gone horribly wrong.

“Don’t freeze up, kid!” Older Rick growled, reloading his blaster with a quick twist of the handle. “Use that Flow State! *See where it’s going before it moves!*”

Rick squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, focusing. The hum of the wristband synced with his heartbeat. He breathed in. *See where it’s going before it moves.*

He opened his eyes.

Everything shifted. The drone’s flight path became *predictable*, like it was moving on a track. Rick could see where it was about to go next — left, up, spin, attack. It was like watching a dance routine that he’d seen a hundred times before.

“Alright,” he whispered, gripping a loose metal pipe from the ground. “If I can see where you’re going...”

The drone shifted left.

Rick spun out from behind the bench, twisting his body at just the right angle. His heart raced, but his mind was calm. The drone’s scanning beam flicked to the right, but Rick had already predicted it. He *moved before it moved.*

WHACK!

The metal pipe smashed into the drone’s side, sending it spiraling. Sparks flew, and its stabilizers failed. It wobbled in mid-air, struggling to regain control.

“Dog Bot, NOW!” Rick yelled.

“**Executing attack maneuver.**” Dog Bot’s small thrusters activated, launching him at the flailing drone. His metal jaws latched onto the drone’s power core. With a mechanical **CRUNCH**, sparks flew, and the drone’s lights dimmed to black.

“Systems... failing...” the drone buzzed as it fell to the ground with a thud.

The bunker fell into silence, the only sound being the distant hum of older Rick’s blaster powering down.

“Not bad, kid,” Older Rick said, wiping sweat from his brow. “Not bad at all.”

Rick dropped the pipe, panting hard. His legs felt like jelly, and his heart pounded in his ears. “I thought you said 7% chance! *Seven percent!*”

“Yeah, well,” Older Rick shrugged, “sometimes you roll a one.”

Rick slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor. His breathing was ragged, and he could feel his arms shaking. “If this is what saving the world is like, I quit,” he muttered.

Older Rick crouched next to him, his face uncharacteristically serious. “You think this is bad? This is *nothing*, kid.” He pointed to the broken drones on the ground. “These things? They’re the small fry. The Broker’s got bigger toys, smarter hunters, and worse things waiting for you.”

Rick frowned. “Why is he after me? Why not just steal the time machine for himself?”

Older Rick shook his head. “He *can’t*. The time machine’s genetic-locked. Only you can activate it. Only *you* can control it.” He tapped Rick on the chest. “That’s why he wants you. You’re the *key*, Rick.”

Rick stared at his future self, the weight of everything sinking in. He felt like he was being crushed by a mountain. “I didn’t ask for any of this,” he muttered. “I just wanted to invent stuff, y’know? Make cool gadgets. Not... this.”

“I know,” Older Rick said softly, his eyes distant. “But sometimes, you don’t get to pick your story.” He stood up and walked toward the central console. “Come on. We need to move.”

“Move?” Rick groaned, still sitting on the floor. “Can’t we just... stay here? Hide for a while?”

Older Rick glanced back at him, eyes sharp like a blade. “There’s no hiding from *him*, Rick. You know that now.”

Rick sighed and forced himself to his feet. His legs wobbled, but he didn’t fall. The pulse from the wristband had faded, and everything felt normal again. He didn’t like it. Normal felt slow.

“Where are we going?” he asked, brushing dust off his jacket.

Older Rick pressed a button on the console. The wall across from them began to shift, grinding open to reveal a glowing blue chamber with circuits running along its surface. The air around it shimmered with an otherworldly glow.

“We’re going *forward*,” Older Rick said, nodding toward the chamber. “You wanted to know what happens next, right? Well, it’s time you see it for yourself.”

Rick’s eyes went wide. He recognized it. The shape, the glow, the way the air around it felt heavy.

“A... vortex,” he whispered.

“Not just any vortex,” Older Rick said with a grin. “*Your* vortex.”

Rick hesitated, his heart thudding in his chest.

Am I really ready for this?

Older Rick stepped inside the vortex chamber, holding out a hand. “You coming or what, kid?”

Rick took a deep breath, glanced at Dog Bot, and nodded.

“I’m coming.”

With a racing heart and a head full of fear, Rick stepped forward, his feet crossing the edge of time itself.

And the world shifted once more.

To be continued...

INTO THE HEART OF THE PARADOX

The swirling blue glow of the vortex surrounded Rick like a living storm. The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It wasn't just moving through space — it felt like he was being stretched, compressed, spun, and still somehow perfectly still.

His breath caught in his throat as flashes of images streaked past him. **Familiar sights. Unfamiliar places. Faces he'd never seen but somehow recognized.** He saw himself older, wearing armor with glowing circuits. He saw Earth, but it wasn't the Earth he knew — it was cracked like a broken glass ball, floating in the void. **A shadowy figure with red glowing eyes stared directly at him through the vortex, grinning.**

"He sees me," Rick realized with a gasp.

"Focus, kid!" Older Rick's voice snapped him out of it. "The vortex shows you glimpses, echoes of timelines that haven't been written yet. It's like listening to a thousand songs all at once. Focus on *our path!*"

"Easier said than done!" Rick shouted as a ghostly image of himself passed by, screaming in terror. He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut. *Don't lose focus. Don't lose focus.*

He felt Older Rick's hand grab his shoulder, grounding him. The chaotic swirl of the vortex began to calm, the world tilting back into place. His vision sharpened, and suddenly the storm of lights condensed into a single **bright flash.**

They landed with a thud.

The smell of burning metal and ozone hit Rick's nose first. Then the sound of distant sirens, blaring horns, and mechanical whirs. He blinked hard, his eyes adjusting to the dim red glow. The ground was cold, metal, and slightly slick. His knees felt the rough texture of grates beneath him.

"Welcome to *Nexus District, Sector-6*," Older Rick said, pulling Rick to his feet.

Rick's jaw dropped. The city before him was like something out of a nightmare version of New York. **Towering skyscrapers hovered mid-air, their foundations glowing blue from anti-gravity stabilizers.** Cars flew in the air along designated flight paths, weaving between enormous holographic billboards advertising everything from "Neuro-Boost Chips" to "Immortality on Sale: Limited Offer."

But that wasn't what caught Rick's attention. **Everywhere he looked, cameras floated on drones, watching every move.** People in gray uniforms walked in tight lines, their faces blank, their eyes glowing faintly green. Each one wore a sleek silver band around their necks like a collar.

"Where... where *are* we?" Rick's voice was shaky as he took it all in. "This isn't Earth, right?"

"Nope," Older Rick replied, checking his wrist device. "This is Earth-7. Or at least, it used to be."

"Earth-7?" Rick repeated, still processing it. "Wait, wait, wait. You're telling me there's more than one Earth?"

"Yeah, kid. 250 versions to be exact," Older Rick said flatly, tapping his wristband. "Each one evolved a little differently. Some are utopias, some are wastelands, and some..." He nodded toward the blank-faced people walking like zombies. "Some didn't turn out so great."

Rick's stomach churned. "This... this is what happens to Earth? People walking around like robots?"

“Not *our* Earth,” Older Rick corrected. “But it could be if we screw this up.”

A loud clang echoed from an alley nearby. Rick spun toward the sound, heart pounding. His eyes darted left and right, scanning for movement.

“Relax,” Older Rick said, keeping his eyes forward. “Probably just a Scrapper looking for parts.”

“Scrapper?” Rick asked, still on edge.

“People who live outside the system. People who *resist*,” Older Rick explained. “They don’t wear collars. That makes them enemies of the Broker.”

At the mention of the Broker, Rick’s chest tightened. “Wait... you mean *he’s* here?”

“Not exactly,” Older Rick muttered. “He doesn’t need to be. His drones are everywhere.” He pointed up at the sky, and Rick followed his gaze. Far above, between the floating skyscrapers, he saw **massive hexagonal drones with glowing red eyes, silently patrolling the air.**

“Oh, come on,” Rick groaned. “You brought me here? *Here?! This place is literally begging to get us caught!*”

“You needed to see it,” Older Rick said firmly. “You needed to understand what’s at stake.” He crouched behind a stack of old metal crates, motioning for Rick to follow. “The Broker isn’t some random villain-of-the-week. He’s already won. Not just here — but in *dozens* of timelines. If we don’t stop him, *he wins everywhere.*”

Rick swallowed hard. **Everywhere.**

They crept down the narrow alley, ducking under hanging wires and dodging the eerie glow of surveillance cameras. Dog Bot hovered silently behind them, his sensors scanning for movement.

“Dog Bot,” Rick whispered. “Any signs of incoming drones?”

Dog Bot’s eyes flickered orange. “**Detecting patrol routes. Two air units approaching from the south. Estimated time of arrival: 45 seconds.**”

“South?!” Rick hissed. “That’s *this way!*”

“Calm down,” Older Rick said, pressing his palm against the wall. The metal panel hissed, shifting aside to reveal a hidden hatch. “We’re going underground.”

They slipped inside just as the drones' red searchlights scanned the alley.

The hatch sealed behind them with a quiet hiss, leaving them in near-darkness. Faint blue lights flickered to life on the walls. **Underground tunnels stretched out in every direction.** The air was stale, heavy with the scent of rust and oil.

“Where are we now?” Rick asked, coughing from the air.

“Sub-Grid. Old sewer network,” Older Rick said, leading him through the tunnels. “No cameras, no drones. Only place we’re safe.”

“Safe,” Rick muttered. “Doesn’t *feel* safe.”

They walked for what felt like hours, the silence only broken by the distant drip of water. Rick’s mind was racing. **250 Earths. Time vortexes. The Broker.** It was all too much.

“Hey, uh,” Rick started, his voice echoing in the tunnel. “Back in the vortex... I saw something. It was *me* but older. Screaming.”

Older Rick’s steps slowed.

“You see stuff like that all the time in the vortex,” he said quietly, not looking at Rick. “Doesn’t mean it’s your future. Just one possibility.”

Rick wasn’t convinced. The image was too vivid. Too real.

As they rounded the corner, a large, open chamber came into view. **Tables covered in scrap parts, holographic screens filled with blueprints, and a massive generator in the center humming with blue energy.**

“Welcome to the *Forge*,” Older Rick announced, throwing his arms out.

“Whoa,” Rick muttered, walking toward the generator. He saw sketches of armor, weapon schematics, and something else that caught his eye.

Blueprints of a time machine. His heart skipped a beat. “This... this is *my work*.”

“Not just yours,” Older Rick said, pulling up a holo-screen. “Ours.”

Rick ran his fingers along the blueprints, eyes tracing every detail. *This is it. This is the thing that started it all.*

“Hey,” Rick said, voice trembling. “When do I build this?”

Older Rick hesitated, glancing at him with a hard expression. “You already have.”

Rick blinked. “What?”

“You think the Broker’s hunting you for *fun*? No, kid.” Older Rick tapped the screen. “You build it. And you’re going to use it to do something *big*. Something the Broker can’t allow.”

“What did I do?” Rick asked, eyes wide.

Older Rick’s eyes narrowed. “You broke the rules of time, kid. And once you do that, *time fights back*.”

Just then, the room’s power flickered. A deafening **CLANG** echoed from above. Dog Bot’s eyes flashed red.

“Breach detected.”

Older Rick spun around, grabbing a blaster from the table. **“They found us.”**

A robotic voice echoed through the chamber.

“Target identified: Rick Sanchez. Surrender immediately.”

Red lights filled the chamber. Rick’s blood ran cold.

“They’re here,” Dog Bot warned. **“And they brought friends.”**

The door exploded inward. **The Broker’s Enforcers had arrived.**

To be continued...

THE SIEGE OF THE FORGE

The world exploded in a flash of red and white light. Metal shrapnel shot through the air, clanging against the walls of the Forge. **Smoke filled the room, twisting in the glow of flashing warning lights.** Rick's ears rang with the high-pitched whine of the explosion. His heart pounded like a drum.

"Get down!" Older Rick yelled, shoving him behind an overturned table. Sparks rained down as the blast doors crumpled inward, revealing shadowy figures lined with glowing red lights.

Rick coughed, his lungs burning from the smoke. His eyes darted toward the doorway. **Six armored Enforcers stepped in, their visors glowing blood-red.** Each carried an energy rifle that hummed with a low, menacing buzz. They moved with precision, scanning the room like hunting machines.

"Target confirmed. Engage protocols active," one of them said in a cold, synthetic voice. Their heads moved in sync, locking on to Rick and his older self.

"Dog Bot!" Rick shouted, his voice cracking with fear. "What do we do?!"

"Combat mode activated," Dog Bot replied, his eyes shifting to a bright red glow. His sleek body reconfigured, his front paws extending into sharp claws. **"Engaging hostiles."**

Dog Bot lunged forward like a bolt of lightning, zigzagging toward the Enforcers. Sparks flew as his claws scraped across their armor. **One of them raised a rifle to aim at Dog Bot, but the little bot was too fast, springing onto its back and tearing at the exposed wiring.**

"Nice move, buddy!" Rick cheered.

But it didn't last. The Enforcer spun wildly, throwing Dog Bot off. Another Enforcer raised its rifle and fired. **A pulse of blue energy struck Dog Bot mid-air, sending him crashing into a wall with a metallic thud.**

"DOG BOT!" Rick yelled, his chest tightening.

"Focus, kid!" Older Rick barked, dragging him deeper behind the table. **"We can't save anyone if we're dead!"** He slammed a cylindrical device onto the ground. **A blue energy dome flickered to life, forming a temporary shield around them.**

Energy blasts pounded against the shield like hail on glass. Each impact sent ripples of light through the barrier. It wouldn't last long.

"Okay, okay," Rick said, trying to catch his breath. "We're pinned, Dog Bot's down, and there's six armored guys with laser guns. You have a plan, right? Please tell me you have a plan."

Older Rick was already working, swiping at his wristband. **Blueprints and 3D holograms flickered in the air.** His eyes darted back and forth, analyzing data like a man possessed.

"Yeah, I got a plan," he said, pulling a device from his belt. It looked like a small metal sphere with glowing circuits. He pressed a button, and it started to hum.

"What's that?" Rick asked, staring at the ball.

"*EMP pulse.* Electromagnetic burst. Fries all electronics in a short radius," Older Rick explained, tossing it in the air and catching it. "Problem is, it'll knock out *everything*. That means Dog Bot, my wristband, and your fancy flashlight collection back home."

"...So what's the *good news*?" Rick asked, frowning.

"*They'll be knocked out too,*" Older Rick grinned, nodding toward the Enforcers. "But we need to time it right."

Suddenly, the shield flickered, and a sharp *CRACK* echoed through the room. The Enforcers were adjusting their aim, focusing all their fire on a single spot.

“They’re going to breach!” Rick said, his panic rising. “We need to throw that EMP now!”

“Not yet,” Older Rick replied, his eyes locked on the shield. “Wait for it... wait for it...”

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! The shield fractured like broken glass.

“NOW!” Rick screamed.

Older Rick tossed the EMP sphere into the center of the room. It beeped once. Twice. **Then—**

BOOOOM!

A burst of blue energy exploded in all directions. The walls vibrated, lights dimmed, and sparks rained from the ceiling. The glowing red visors of the Enforcers flickered once, then went dark. **Their bodies slumped like puppets with cut strings.**

The silence was deafening.

Rick blinked, his heart racing. “Did... did it work?”

“Yeah,” Older Rick said, breathing heavily as he sat back. “But we gotta move, kid. That pulse triggered every alarm in this sector. We’ve got three minutes, tops, before reinforcements show up.”

Rick ran to Dog Bot, who lay still on the ground. “Dog Bot! Come on, buddy, wake up.” He shook the small bot’s metal frame, but nothing happened. His eyes remained dim.

“Dog Bot?” Rick’s voice cracked.

“I told you, kid,” Older Rick said softly, walking up behind him. “EMP fried everything. He’ll be fine when we get him to a charge station, but right now? He’s gone.”

Rick’s hands trembled. “No, no, no. He’s not ‘just a bot,’ he’s—”

“He’s family,” Older Rick finished for him. “Yeah, I know. But if you stay here, you’ll be joining him in shutdown mode. Now *move*.”

Reluctantly, Rick nodded, wiping his face. He followed Older Rick, glancing back one last time at Dog Bot’s motionless frame.

The two of them ran deeper into the Forge, vaulting over workbenches and ducking under low-hanging wires. Older Rick led him to a large vault-like door. It hissed as it opened, revealing a hidden chamber.

Inside was something Rick never expected to see.

Another time machine.

It wasn’t like the ones from his dreams or the one in his blueprints. **This one was sleek, almost like a futuristic motorcycle with glowing blue lines running down its frame.** It hovered a foot off the ground, humming softly.

“You built *another* one?” Rick gasped.

“Not me,” Older Rick muttered. “This one’s from another timeline. Earth-16. Built by you — or a version of you, anyway.”

“Wait... *I built this?*” Rick stepped forward, eyes wide in awe.

“Technically, yeah,” Older Rick said, pulling up the holographic interface on the side of the machine. “Long story short, every version of you builds it eventually. Sometimes you do it to save your mom, sometimes to get rich, sometimes...” He gave Rick a look. “Sometimes it’s revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” Rick asked cautiously.

Older Rick shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Not yet.”

They climbed onto the machine, Rick in the passenger seat, clutching the side as it hummed louder. Lights danced on its control panel. Older Rick tapped a few buttons.

“Where are we going?” Rick asked nervously.

“*Earth-1*,” Older Rick replied. “Home base. The original. If we’re gonna take down the Broker, we need to start where it all began.”

The chamber around them began to spin. Rick could feel it again — that strange, gut-wrenching pull of time and space being rewritten. The room blurred into streaks of light.

“Hey, Rick,” Older Rick said over the roar of energy.

“Yeah?” Rick gripped the handles tighter.

“*Remember what you saw in the vortex. The shadow with red eyes?*”

Rick's heart skipped a beat. “Yeah... what about him?”

“He’s not a vision,” Older Rick said darkly, his eyes narrowing. “He’s real. And he’s hunting you.”

Before Rick could respond, the world dissolved into blue light.

Far away, in a control room of flashing red lights, a figure sat in a high-backed chair, tapping the armrest with metallic fingers.

“Status report,” it said in a calm, mechanical voice.

“Unit 47 reports loss of contact,” a drone replied. “EMP surge detected. They escaped.”

The figure leaned forward, its red eyes glowing like two burning coals.

“Predictable,” it muttered, a grin forming on its face. “The boy always runs.”

The figure stood, its shadow stretching across the wall like a storm cloud. **It lifted its metallic hand, fingers flexing like claws.**

“Prepare the trackers,” it ordered. **“Send them to Earth-1. I’ll deal with him myself.”**

Red lights flashed brighter. Sirens echoed. The Broker had entered the hunt.

To be continued...

THE BROKER'S PURSUIT

The hum of the time machine was all Rick could hear as it hurtled through the void. His stomach twisted, and his hands gripped the side rails of the sleek craft, knuckles white. The blue lights flashing all around him blurred into a swirling vortex of time and space. **He was scared.** More scared than he'd ever been before. Not just for himself, but for what he'd uncovered—what was about to come.

"How much longer?" Rick asked, trying to steady his breath, his voice trembling.

Older Rick glanced at him, his expression unreadable. "We're almost there," he said, voice steady, though there was a faint unease in his eyes. "Earth-1. The original Earth, the cradle of everything we've come to know. It's a place we all must go. But not everyone is as eager to meet it."

The machine rattled, and the fabric of reality seemed to strain as they entered the final stretch. The world outside swirled with chaotic energy. Time was stretching, bending, and twisting around them like an elastic band. Rick's mind raced—he couldn't focus on the swirling vortex anymore. His thoughts kept going back to what Older Rick had said: the shadowy figure with red eyes, the one that had followed them from the vortex.

It was the Broker. He was real, and he was coming for them.

"You said something about the Broker hunting me," Rick said quietly. "What exactly did you mean?"

Older Rick hesitated for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. "I don't know how much you're ready to understand, but... you need to listen. The Broker isn't just some guy. He's a force—something beyond us, beyond time itself. He can manipulate it. He's had a hand in shaping your life in ways

you can't even imagine. He controls the flow of history. He's the reason we don't know what happened to Earth's past."

Rick furrowed his brow. "You're telling me this guy has been controlling history? But why? Why would someone do that?"

"Because," Older Rick said, his voice growing harder, "he's after something—something dangerous. It's why he's so determined to keep Earth's history hidden. The secret of what happened to this world... it's the key to everything. And once he unlocks it, everything we've built—everything humanity's ever achieved—will unravel."

Rick swallowed hard, trying to take in what Older Rick was saying. The fear, the urgency, the power of the Broker—it was too much to process all at once. They were heading to Earth-1, the birthplace of it all, the place where humanity had begun its journey. The place where the answers lay. But they were being pursued. There was no escaping the Broker now.

The time machine suddenly jerked, and the flashing lights outside became blinding, signaling that they were nearing their destination. The vortex of energy dissipated, and Rick's stomach lurched as the machine shot out into the calm of space.

The view in front of them was breathtaking. Earth-1, the original Earth, gleamed in the distance, a vibrant blue and green sphere, teeming with life. But Rick's wonder was short-lived. A shadow flitted across the surface of the planet, moving too quickly to be natural. He felt it again—a chill running down his spine.

The Broker was close.

Rick's eyes narrowed. "Is that him?"

Older Rick's gaze turned grim as he stared at the planet below. "No. But he'll be here soon. We don't have much time."

The time machine descended toward Earth-1's atmosphere, the world below growing larger, more detailed with every passing second. Cities stretched across the surface, but there was an eerie stillness to them. **Everything seemed far too quiet.**

They landed outside a vast, metal compound nestled on a rocky cliffside. It was an isolated area, surrounded by high, impenetrable walls and guarded by drone sentries. The compound seemed to pulse with an unnatural energy, a force that Rick could feel deep in his bones.

"Where are we?" Rick asked as the machine powered down.

"This is the original Forge," Older Rick said, his voice low. "The place where the first time machine was built. This is where everything began. The answers you're looking for... they're here."

Rick stared at the compound. The very thought of stepping foot inside filled him with both dread and excitement. The Forge—where it all started.

Where the truth about Earth's lost history would be revealed.

But as they stepped out of the machine and onto the cold, rocky ground, the sense of unease grew. The air around them was thick, heavy with tension. Rick felt like they were being watched. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"Keep your guard up," Older Rick whispered. "The Broker's agents have eyes everywhere. The second we enter that place, we'll be exposed."

Rick nodded, his heart hammering in his chest. He had never been this close to finding the truth. But something about this place felt off.

They approached the compound, their footsteps echoing in the eerie silence. **The walls were adorned with strange symbols, carved into the metal like an ancient language lost to time.** Rick's eyes scanned the intricate designs. He had seen symbols like these before, but never in a place like this. There was something far more sinister about them than he had realized.

Older Rick tapped a panel on the side of the compound, and the massive doors slid open with a soft hiss. They slipped inside, and the temperature inside was noticeably cooler. The air smelled of metal, dust, and something else—something like static electricity.

As they walked through the dark corridors, Rick felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. **Every shadow seemed to move, every corner hid something just beyond sight.**

They reached a large, circular chamber. **At the center stood a glowing, transparent orb, suspended in mid-air by an intricate framework of wires and glowing energy conduits.** This was it—the heart of the Forge, the core of all their technology, the place where the original time machine had been built.

Rick stepped forward, his breath catching in his throat. It was beautiful, in a terrifying way. But before he could get any closer, a voice echoed through the chamber, cold and haunting.

“Well, well... What have we here?”

The hairs on Rick's arms stood on end. He turned sharply, eyes scanning the darkness. The voice was familiar, but it took him a moment to place it.

Out of the shadows stepped a figure—a tall, gaunt man with pale skin and glowing red eyes. His lips twisted into a smirk. **The Broker.**

Rick's stomach churned. "You... you're him," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The Broker's grin widened. "I see you've finally figured it out. How disappointing. I had hoped for a bit more of a challenge." His voice was smooth, almost too smooth, like it had been honed over centuries.

Rick stepped back instinctively. "Why? Why do you want to hide the truth about Earth's history? What are you after?"

The Broker's expression darkened, and his eyes glowed with an unsettling intensity. "The truth, my boy, is that Earth is a lie. Everything you think you know about your home, your origins—it was all engineered. A façade to protect humanity from the inevitable. But I have the power to reveal the truth. And once I do, nothing will ever be the same."

Rick felt his pulse quicken. The Broker's words chilled him to the bone. This wasn't just about hidden history. It was about the very fabric of reality, of everything Rick had ever known.

"We won't let you," Older Rick spat, stepping forward to stand beside Rick. "We're going to stop you, Broker. Right here, right now."

The Broker chuckled, his eyes glinting with amusement. "You think you can stop me? How cute."

And with that, the Broker raised his hand. **A surge of energy crackled through the room, and the walls around them began to close in, trapping them inside.**

Rick's heart raced. The Broker was far too powerful, but they couldn't stop now. Not after everything they'd been through.

The final battle for Earth's truth had begun.

To be continued...

THE BATTLE FOR TRUTH

The walls of the Forge chamber groaned and shuddered as the Broker's energy surged through the room. A series of metal panels slid shut, sealing off every exit. Rick's heart pounded in his chest, his breaths quick and shallow. There was no way out.

The Broker's red eyes gleamed with malice as he stepped closer. His voice echoed through the chamber, sharp and mocking. "You think you can stop me, but you're nothing but ants under my boot. The truth, young Rick, has been hidden for far too long. I will show you the real power of the world, the real secret behind Earth's history. And once you see it, there will be no turning back."

Rick clenched his fists, trying to steady himself. **The Broker was powerful.** He had just felt the energy surge through the walls, and it had been unlike anything Rick had ever experienced. It was as if the very air itself was charged with an unnatural force. But he couldn't afford to be scared. Not now. **He had to fight.**

Rick's eyes darted to Older Rick, who stood by his side, his expression focused and determined. There was no fear in the older version of himself, just a deep-seated resolve. They had been through so much together. They weren't about to let the Broker win.

"This isn't about power, Broker," Older Rick said, his voice steady despite the intensity of the situation. "This is about the truth. And the truth is that you've been manipulating humanity for far too long. You've kept us in the dark. But that ends now."

The Broker's smile widened, though it held no warmth. "Truth? You think you can handle the truth? You, who barely understand it yourself? No, Rick. You're not ready. None of you are."

With a swift motion, the Broker raised his hand, and the chamber crackled with an ominous energy. **The air vibrated violently**, and the floor beneath them began to tremble. Rick barely had time to react before the first wave of energy slammed into him, sending him crashing against the far wall.

“Rick!” Older Rick shouted, but his voice was barely audible over the storm of energy tearing through the room.

Rick pushed himself up, his body aching from the impact. He had to fight. The Broker’s power was overwhelming, but he couldn’t let that stop him. Not now, when they were so close.

The walls of the chamber seemed to close in even tighter, the Broker’s energy warping the space around them. **Reality itself felt unstable**, as if time and space were bending and folding around the man’s will. Rick stumbled, disoriented, but he fought to stay focused.

“Older Rick, what do we do?” Rick shouted, his voice strained.

Older Rick’s eyes flicked to the glowing orb at the center of the room. It was pulsing with energy, and Rick could feel its pull, its connection to the very fabric of reality itself. That orb was the key to everything. It was what the Broker wanted, and if they didn’t destroy it, they would lose.

“We have to destroy it,” Older Rick said, his voice filled with urgency. “That’s the heart of everything. If the Broker controls it, he controls time, space, and the future. We cannot let him.”

The Broker’s laughter echoed, dark and hollow. “You think you can stop me? That orb is my power. It is beyond your comprehension. I’ve spent centuries building this machine, perfecting it. You have no idea the force you’re up against.”

Rick gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the growing sense of dread creeping up his spine. The Broker was powerful, but they still had a chance. **He wasn’t going to let the truth slip away. Not after everything.**

Rick's gaze locked on the orb. It was beautiful in its cold, mechanical perfection, yet something about it felt wrong, unnatural. It was as if it was alive, pulsing with a heartbeat that didn't belong in the world.

He had to destroy it.

"Older Rick, we have to get to the orb!" Rick shouted, his voice barely carrying over the roar of energy.

Older Rick nodded, his eyes determined. "Stay close. And don't stop moving. We have to disrupt the energy field around it before the Broker can react."

Rick nodded, his pulse racing. The Broker's laughter intensified, but Rick blocked it out. **They could do this.**

The two rushed toward the center of the room, dodging bolts of energy that the Broker sent their way. Each bolt seemed to tear at the very fabric of the room, creating violent flashes of light and intense heat. But Rick kept his focus on the orb. It was the only way.

As they neared the center, the Broker's voice rang out again. "You're too late. You don't understand. This is bigger than you. Bigger than all of you."

Suddenly, the Broker raised his arms, and the ground beneath them trembled violently. **An explosion of energy erupted from the orb**, sending a shockwave of force that threw both Ricks off their feet and sent them skidding across the floor.

Rick's head spun, his vision blurry. He could barely breathe through the force of the impact. But through the haze of pain, he could see the Broker, standing tall and unscathed, his eyes glowing brighter than ever.

"This is it," the Broker declared. "The end of the line for you. And the beginning of a new era."

Rick scrambled to his feet, his body sore but not broken. He was running out of time. They couldn't lose. They couldn't let the Broker win.

With a fierce determination, Rick pushed himself toward the orb again, his movements shaky but fueled by adrenaline. “We have to do this now, or we lose everything!”

Older Rick was already on his feet, already moving toward the orb as well. Together, they reached the center of the room, where the orb pulsed with deadly energy.

Older Rick turned to Rick. “We can’t destroy it with brute force. We have to disrupt its core, weaken it from the inside.”

Rick looked at the glowing orb, the swirling lights reflecting in his eyes. **This was it.**

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small device he had been working on for months—an invention he never thought he would need. The device hummed to life in his hand, a small but powerful electromagnetic pulse generator.

“I think this will work,” Rick said, his voice steady, even as the chaos swirled around them.

Older Rick nodded. “Let’s hope it’s enough.”

Rick slammed the device against the orb, and an electric shockwave radiated outward, sending ripples of energy through the chamber. For a moment, the orb seemed to resist, glowing brighter, the pulse intensifying.

Then, with a deafening crack, the orb shattered, sending a massive explosion of light and energy through the room.

Rick and Older Rick were thrown backward, the room spinning wildly around them. But even as they tumbled to the floor, the Broker let out a horrible, guttural scream.

“No! You can’t do this!”

The energy around them began to dissipate. The walls, the floor, everything was beginning to crack and break apart. **The Broker's power was crumbling.**

Rick stumbled to his feet, gasping for air. The Broker's form flickered, his body flickering in and out of existence. He was losing control.

"Rick," Older Rick called, his voice urgent. "We need to leave. Now."

Rick nodded, but he couldn't help but look at the Broker one last time. His form was fading, his power unraveling. The truth about Earth's history—everything humanity had been kept in the dark about—was finally being revealed.

And the Broker was no longer a threat.

As the time machine powered up and the room began to collapse, Rick felt a sense of relief wash over him. **They had won.**

But even as the machine lifted them out of the collapsing Forge, Rick couldn't help but wonder: **What else would they uncover? What other truths were waiting for them in the ruins of Earth's past?**

The journey was far from over. But for now, they had won the first battle.

And the Broker was no more.

To be continued...

A NEW BEGINNING

The last remnants of the Forge crumbled into nothingness behind them as the time machine surged through the rift, leaving the chaos of the destroyed chamber far behind. The air inside the machine was heavy, filled with the hum of ancient technology and the distant echoes of collapsing worlds.

Rick leaned back in the seat, his breath coming in shallow gasps. The events of the last few hours replayed in his mind in fragmented bursts, like pieces of a shattered mirror. The Broker was gone, his hold on humanity shattered. But what did that really mean? The truth had been revealed, but what truths had they yet to uncover? Rick's mind buzzed with questions, too many to count.

Beside him, Older Rick was still staring ahead, his eyes fixed on some unseen horizon. There was no victory in his expression, only the quiet solemnity of someone who had lived through it all before. Rick glanced over at him, wondering just how much Older Rick knew. **How much did he have to go through to get to this point?**

After a few moments of silence, Older Rick spoke, his voice calm but tinged with exhaustion. "It's not over yet, kid."

Rick looked at him, confused. "What do you mean? We beat the Broker. We stopped him from controlling everything."

Older Rick sighed, rubbing his temples. "The Broker may be gone, but there's still a lot we don't know. The truth we uncovered? It's just the tip of the iceberg. There's so much more out there, Rick. We've only scratched the surface."

Rick frowned. "But we—"

“No, listen,” Older Rick interrupted, his tone serious. “We just exposed the lies of the past. We uncovered the truth about Earth, about how it was manipulated, about the secrets the elites tried to bury. But that doesn’t mean everything is fixed. It doesn’t mean the universe is suddenly free of corruption. There’s a reason the Broker was able to do what he did for so long. We might have stopped him, but others will rise in his place. There will always be someone who wants to control the truth.”

Rick’s mind raced. It was true. The Broker’s downfall had been just one chapter in a much larger story. They had won a battle, but the war was far from over.

“What happens now?” Rick asked, his voice a mix of uncertainty and determination. “What’s next for us? For Earth? For the universe?”

Older Rick paused, then looked at him with a small smile. “Now we do what we should have done all along. We continue the fight. We make sure the truth doesn’t get buried again. We expose the lies, and we help others see the world for what it truly is. The universe may be vast, but it’s not beyond saving. As long as there are people like us who refuse to turn a blind eye, there’s hope.”

Rick’s heart swelled with a sense of purpose. It was overwhelming, but he knew what he had to do. He had a mission now—not just for himself, but for everyone.

He turned toward the controls of the time machine, his fingers hovering over the buttons. “Where are we going?” he asked, his voice steady.

“Wherever the truth takes us,” Older Rick replied with a nod. “We still have a lot to learn, and we still have a lot of work to do. But we’ll face it together, kid. We’re not alone in this.”

The machine hummed as Rick punched in the coordinates for a new destination. He didn’t know exactly where they were headed, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that they were moving forward.

As the time machine hummed to life and the familiar rift opened before them, Rick felt a sense of finality, but also a sense of hope. They had been through so much, faced impossible odds, and yet here they were—still standing, still fighting.

The universe had no shortage of mysteries, and there were still many secrets to uncover. But now, with the Broker's power gone and the truth finally beginning to surface, Rick knew one thing for sure: **the fight was just beginning.**

As the time machine hurtled through the vastness of space and time, Rick felt an overwhelming sense of possibility. There were countless worlds to explore, countless people to help, and countless truths to uncover.

And wherever they went, Rick knew one thing: **He would never stop searching for the truth.**

The future was uncertain, but with the lessons of the past and the strength of those who fought alongside him, Rick was ready to face whatever came next.

After all, the universe was vast, and there was no telling where the journey would take him. But one thing was for sure: **Rick would never stop being the Memory Broker.**

To be continued...

THE ENDLESS HORIZON

The time machine slowed, its humming energy slowly dissipating as the rift ahead began to close. Rick leaned forward, staring out of the window, his heart pounding with anticipation. The world outside was different from anything he had ever seen before—a landscape neither alien nor familiar. It was as though time itself had folded in on itself, creating a place where the past and future could collide.

Rick had no idea where they were, or what lay ahead, but the weight of everything they had uncovered, everything they had fought for, seemed to hang in the air. The Broker was gone. The truth had been revealed. Earth's dark past was no longer hidden. But in its place—*what?*

“There's still so much we don't know,” Rick whispered to himself, his fingers brushing the cool glass of the window. The universe felt so vast, so filled with mysteries. “What if we never truly get to the bottom of it? What if there's more—so much more—that we're not meant to understand?”

Older Rick, who had been silently observing the view for some time, finally spoke. His voice was calm, but there was an undeniable edge of weariness in it, as though he'd lived through countless versions of this moment before. “That's the beauty of it, Rick. *We're not meant to understand everything.* That's the challenge—the question that keeps us moving forward, the reason we keep fighting. It's not about finding the answers, it's about the journey to discover them. The truth is, the universe is full of gaps, of unfinished stories, of things that can't be explained. But *we're* here. We're part of this story, and we get to write the next chapters.”

Rick nodded slowly, his mind whirring. He wanted to believe in the idea of an endless search, of eternal discovery. But somewhere, deep inside, a new question was forming. One that felt like it had been waiting for him all along.

“Do you think... there are more like us?” Rick asked, his voice barely a whisper. “People who know the truth? Who are fighting for it?”

Older Rick’s expression softened, and for the first time in what seemed like ages, there was a spark of something close to hope in his eyes. “Oh, kid, there are always others. There are always those who fight for the truth. Some fight with weapons, some with knowledge, some with just the courage to stand up and say no. But there’s always someone. And now, *you’re* one of them.”

Rick swallowed, the weight of his own words sinking in. He wasn’t just an observer of history anymore—he was a part of it. A part of something bigger, something far more complex than any machine he could ever build.

The machine came to a stop, and the hum of its engines died down completely. The door slid open with a soft hiss, revealing an unfamiliar landscape. Tall, jagged mountains stretched into the sky, their peaks shrouded in mist. The ground beneath them was cracked and barren in places, but signs of new growth dotted the horizon, like nature itself was beginning to reclaim what had once been lost.

“This is... this is it?” Rick asked, stepping out onto the strange land.

“It’s one of many places where the truth is waiting to be discovered,” Older Rick said, his tone filled with both reverence and excitement. “You asked earlier if there were more like us. Well, here’s the answer. This world, like so many others, holds its own mysteries. It’s up to us to uncover them.”

Rick turned back to the machine, the faint glimmer of excitement lighting his eyes. “So, this is where we continue? This is where we start *again*?”

Older Rick smiled, a knowing smile, the kind that came from years of experience. “Every journey has a beginning. Every discovery leads to another. The universe is vast, Rick, but you’re no longer just a spectator. You’re a part of it. And this? This is just the beginning. There’s always more.”

Rick stood there for a long moment, the wind tugging at his hair as the mist swirled around him. He wasn't sure if the road ahead would be filled with answers or more questions, but that was the thing. In the pursuit of truth, the lines between them often blurred.

He turned to Older Rick, a determined glint in his eye. "Then let's get to work."

And with that, they stepped forward together, leaving the time machine behind. The world stretched out before them, full of promises and hidden dangers, waiting to be uncovered. As they walked into the unknown, Rick couldn't help but feel that he was finally where he was meant to be.

For the first time in his life, he wasn't just a curious observer. He was the one shaping the future. The memory of what had been was still fresh in his mind—the fight for the truth, the loss, the revelations. But Rick knew now that there was no turning back.

The universe had endless secrets to offer. And Rick was going to find every single one of them.

As they walked into the mist, a faint sound echoed in the distance—a whisper, a voice, or perhaps the wind itself. Rick could almost hear it calling to him. **A new truth, waiting to be discovered.**

And he was ready.

The journey had only just begun.

THE END... for now.

EPILOGUE

The stars above were different now. Or perhaps it was Rick who had changed. As he stood at the edge of the new world, the morning sun rising slowly in the distance, he felt the weight of everything he had uncovered. The path had not been easy, and it had not been predictable. But it had been worth every moment.

The time machine, now silent and dormant, stood behind him like a relic of a past he had once thought was all there was. The journey through time had revealed the deepest secrets of Earth—its shadowed history, the truth about its fall, and the dangers it had hidden for centuries. But it also brought with it a greater understanding: that the story was far from over.

Rick glanced over at Older Rick, whose face had softened with the wisdom of years. Though the older version of himself had been through endless struggles, had seen timelines crash and rebuild themselves, he still had the same fire in his eyes that Rick himself now felt stirring. The fire that made them both keep going, keep searching.

"We're not alone in this, you know," Rick said softly, his gaze still fixed on the horizon. "There are others out there—others who know the truth, who are still out there searching. Maybe they'll come for us one day."

Older Rick nodded. "They will. And we will find them. But we can't wait for them to find us. We have our own journey now."

Rick turned back to the landscape, his mind racing. The journey ahead was uncertain, and it could lead anywhere. They had barely scratched the surface of the vast, interconnected web of secrets across time and space. But for the first time, Rick felt ready to face it. He wasn't just an inventor or a curious teenager anymore. He was part of something much bigger. A chain of discovery that would never stop. And it was a chain he now had the power to influence.

The universe was full of riddles, mysteries, and dangers waiting to be uncovered. But Rick was no longer afraid. The same curiosity that had driven him to question everything about the past now fueled his need to see the future unfold. It was time to write a new chapter for humanity—a chapter that no one had predicted.

“We’ve learned a lot, Rick,” Older Rick said, breaking his reverie. “But the most important thing we’ve learned is that no matter how much we uncover, we’ll always be chasing something. There’s always something more out there waiting.”

Rick smiled, looking up at the stars, and felt a sense of peace he hadn’t felt before. “I know. And I’m okay with that. Because with every mystery, there’s a chance to make things better. We’re not just solving problems anymore. We’re shaping the future. Our future.”

Together, they walked into the rising light, knowing that the road ahead was filled with unknowns. But Rick wasn’t afraid. He had already unlocked the greatest mystery of all: his own potential.

The universe would continue to evolve, to change, and to surprise them. And for the first time, Rick knew he would be there for all of it.

The journey didn’t end—it had only just begun.

And somewhere, in the endless expanse of the universe, the echoes of time and the secrets of the past were waiting for them to discover. Together.

The End.

POSTSCRIPT

Since 2014, I have implemented a hands-on research project aimed at engaging schoolchildren in book writing. This initiative was driven by my vision to enhance literary creativity, promote literary enlightenment, and improve the quality of education, all of which contribute to the country's future development. As a result of this project, over sixty thousand budding writers have been introduced to the field of local literature—a significant achievement. However, ensuring a supportive environment for these seeds to grow into strong literary figures is a social responsibility.

This project is the only one in recent history that has been continuously implemented at school, regional, national, and even international levels to enhance the effectiveness of education. This year, a notable addition has been the involvement of **Pirivena** student monks in the initiative. In this endeavor, the dedication and commitment of the **Principal of Mahamaya Girls' College**, along with the students, teachers, parents, and alumni, deserve national recognition and appreciation.

Printed books remain the primary tool of education. The joy and intellectual stimulation that a child gains from a book cannot be replaced by any other medium. However, as children increasingly turn to various digital devices for storing knowledge, they are drifting away from books—an alarming trend that negatively affects education and contributes to various societal issues, as confirmed by research.

To address this challenge, this project has been actively promoting printed book writing for years while also integrating **modern digital technology**. For the past two years, **Mahamaya Girls' College has been leading the way in digital book creation**, enabling school students across the country to publish their work and share it with international readers through digital platforms.

To all the young writers embarking on their literary journey, I extend my heartfelt best wishes for a successful and fulfilling writing career.

Senewiratne secretary

Project Creator & Coordinator



In the year 2049, humanity has surpassed the impossible.

With the ability to travel between Earth and Mars in the blink of an eye, humans have unlocked the secrets of the universe. But some secrets are better left buried.

Rick is a brilliant yet troubled teenager living in New York, Earth. With an inventor's mind and a curiosity that knows no bounds, he has always been fascinated by the mysteries of the world around him. But when he stumbles upon a forbidden question in his history class, *Why does humanity know so little about Earth's past?* he can't let it go.

Driven by a burning desire to uncover the truth, Rick's quest takes him far beyond the walls of his school and into a hidden, dangerous world of time travel, forgotten history, and dark secrets. Along the way, he discovers that the universe is far more complicated, and far more dangerous, than he ever imagined.

As Rick delves deeper into the fabric of time, he will have to decide: Will he use his newfound knowledge to change the future, or will he become part of a much larger, far-reaching conspiracy? And what happens when the very forces that shape time and space are the ones that want to keep the past hidden forever?

In a universe full of unknowns, Rick is about to discover his true role in the most daring adventure humankind has ever known.

The journey through time has only just begun.