

3D: Lost Time

Ginger was chewing her bottom lip to bruising while she waited, tense and watching. The director finished speaking to Pod 2 through the radio and hung up the receiver.

“They have a plan,” the director said, speaking to the whole control room though he was facing Ginger. All were quiet, listening intently. “They’re going to rush the portal when it begins expanding again, and backpedal their propulsion at the last couple seconds before contact. Ethan Howey is the operator of Pod 2, and he’s very skilled with the controls. He thinks he can pull off the maneuver so that their momentum will halt or nearly halt just as they enter the portal. If this affects their time jump, Pod 2 might reemerge with a couple extra seconds delay out through the next expanding wave. It’s possible. Jump times have varied by a fraction of a second in the past.”

The director took a deep breath and waved at the projection screens on the wall. “They’ll have to try, one way or the other. They’re running out of air, and we’re out of options.”

The control room rustled with fresh activity. Several scientists had retrieved reports and accounts of past clock delays, comparing circumstances and conditions to the current problem. Ginger rejoined Doctor Tom, wringing her hands with a stricken expression.

“I don’t know if this will work,” she told him.

“It might,” he replied, tone tensely calm. His eyes watched the fluctuating, colorless portal on the wall. “They have to try going through the portal one way or another, if they’re going to make it back at all. Now we can only wait, and see.”

Someone listened to Pod 2 through the radio and called out reports for the whole room to hear. As the next wave expanded sharply, Pod 2 rushed the portal. It made contact just before the sphere began to shrink again.

Seconds passed. Minutes passed. An hour. Two.

Nothing came through on Lemuria’s side of the portal.

Ginger returned to the great control room in the South Biome the next day puffy eyed, posture drooping. She was in her everyday clothes, having returned her white lab coat back to the

lab.

She'd found a couple cylinders accidentally left inside the coat's pocket. They were two of the algae samples Malachi had haphazardly stacked in her hands the morning before. She'd forgotten them in her pocket with her rush to join Malachi and Doctor Tom when the ex-Antioch professor had arrived to collect the students in time for the expedition. Ginger had returned the samples with the lab coat, and spent several minutes looking down at her small hands before moving on.

People in the control room told her that still nothing had come through the portal. It had re-stabilized roughly an hour after Pod 2 had gone missing. They'd been missing for over twelve hours now.

Doctor Tom stood from a chair and spotted Ginger. He waved her over, and she approached on sluggish feet. The doctor also looked tired, but he was hovering over a computer terminal with someone who seemed to be a data analyst. Displayed across dual computer screens was a colorful star map.

"We're still standing by," Doctor Tom said first to Ginger. He seemed to notice the puffy bags under her eyes and understand all too clearly. "Something still might come through. The director has ordered pod teams to wait near the portal in shifts, in case they come through and need assistance. Here, I wanted to show you this. I thought you should know that your hypothesis about the portal's backwards time travel was correct."

He urged Ginger to take a seat, and she did. She looked at the screens with blank eyes.

"This is a three-sixty star map taken from the surface on the other side of the portal yesterday from Pod 1. You're an astrology student," the doctor said. "What do you see?"

Ginger squinted at the screen. A furrow rose over her brows, and her frown began to deepen. A moment later her bloodshot eyes widened and she looked up at the doctor. It took her another minute to form the words.

"This wasn't taken from Earth."

An approving smile flickered across Doctor Tom's face as he nodded. "Correct. That sky doesn't belong to Earth, in either past or present. It belongs to an alien world."

A muffled sing-song ring emerged from Ginger's pocket. She rushed to mute her phone, but stopped when she saw the caller ID.

"I'm sorry," she stage whispered to the professor as she stood from her seat. "I have to take this."

She smothered the ringing cellphone under her arm as she hurried from room 126 in the McGregor building, shutting the door on her classmates' stares behind her.

"Hello?" she answered, and began to walk down the hall to speak somewhere that her voice wouldn't carry so loudly through the classroom doors.

"Hello, Ginger? Can you hear me?" The man's voice came through a layer of mild static.

"Yeah, I can hear you, Doctor Tom," she said. "Your voice is a little muffled, but your words are clear. What's up? I haven't heard from you in... months, I guess."

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" The doctor raised his voice as if to compensate for the poor quality of the call connection. "It's hard to maintain a signal from inside the twilight zone, so we should talk quickly before the call cuts out. There's someone here who wants to speak with you."

"Someone who wants to speak with me? Who is it?"

"Ah, it's a young man here. Someone you know."

Ginger's feet halted slowly as she listened to the static shifting of the receiver being passed around. The voice that came on the other line made her hands begin to shake.

"Hey, Ginger!" Malachi greeted jovially. "Long time, no see! Or, that's what I'm told anyway."

"Malachi?" Ginger's voice was weak as she clutched tightly to the phone against her ear. "Is that really you?"

"It's really me! I got back a couple days ago. I could swear that I just saw you the other day, but I guess for you it's been a lot longer for you. Are you back at Antioch?"

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