

FROM FUTURE DAYS

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"This can't be happening."

Isak Mehari glanced at the date printed on the newspaper tucked inside a coin-operated vendor. He had never seen a newspaper before--in fact, he had never seen paper except in the books protected behind tempered glass in the museums back home. He ran a tattooed hand across the window encasing the display paper, longing to touch it, to experience the texture of it between his fingers. The sensation didn't last long. Like a wave of heavy muck, the bleakness of his situation came crashing back on him.

Switching his focus between the newspaper and the digital display implanted in the soft flesh of his wrist, it became apparent that there was no mistake. The date was March 16, 2017 and he had traveled nine hundred fifty-three years into the past. It wasn't the fact that he journeyed to an earlier time that concerned him, although it was the first time he had done so. In the year 2970, time-travel was a common occurrence for anyone who could afford the expense. Many people would travel to the past during their vacation time, since there was no place left on Earth they could go to that would give them any sense of "getting away from it all". The planet's population reached stifling numbers. Cities merged into each other until the entire surface of the world was one massive metropolis. Forests were relocated to the roofs of the cityscape in an effort to provide as much natural fresh air as possible. If one looked down from

space, the Earth would look like it was covered in nothing but lush greenery. It was a stunning site for the wealthy, who lived in their luxury pods high above the Earth's atmosphere. What was hidden below the elevated canopy, however, was far from beautiful.

There were limits to time-travel, and the most important rule was that you couldn't travel more than three hundred years into the past. Isak overshot that by over six hundred years. He rubbed the stubble of his shaved head and looked around. The people were strange. They seemed to come in a variety of different skin tones. He captured the gaze of a woman with blue eyes and he stumbled backward in awe. In Isak's time, everyone's eyes were dark, like his. Everyone's skin was approximately the same tanned hue. Even the hair--blond or red wasn't possible--only shades of brown or black. Centuries of mixed-race breeding eventually created a singular master race of people and with it, racism died out. Their biggest battles now lay in which grade of society you belonged to.

The buildings surrounding Isak were tall. However, they were insignificant in comparison to his own imposing structures built high above the waterline which covered most of the land after the melting of the polar ice caps. He followed a line of windows all the way to the top of a nearby tower and beyond. For the first time in all his thirty-two years, Isak saw the sky. As a schoolboy, he was taught that if you could climb to the top of

the highest trees above the world, you would be able to look out into a never-ending gray sky that had a tint of green--a reflection of the forest. What he saw now was gloriously blue with billowing white puffs...clouds, he knew, though he'd never seen them before.

As he stepped back distractedly, someone passed by him close enough to bump his arm and shake him out of his reverie.

"Watch it!" the man hissed at him. "You on drugs or something?"

"On what?" Isak replied. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to..." he gave up trying to explain himself. The man wasn't listening.

"You're not from around here, are you?" a feminine, but demanding voice spoke behind him. When Isak turned, he found himself staring down a young woman with auburn hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Deep green eyes captured the friendly smirk on her lips. "Are you lost? You kinda look lost."

"I...uh...yes. Yes, I can honestly say that I'm lost," he replied, returning a pathetic lopsided smile.

She stuck her right hand out and Isak looked at it questioningly. With reluctance, he lifted his own hand and gave her a curious glance. "I'm Charlotte. Friends call me Charlie," she offered as she gripped his hand in her own. "And you are...?"

"Isak. Just...Isak," he looked down at her hand in his. It was cool, dainty, soft.

"Cool tat." Charlie was appreciating the colourful art on the back of Isak's hand. It was an octopus, with four tentacles crawling along his fingers and four more creeping down his arm. Isak wasn't familiar with the term tat, but he knew that she was referring to his designation. He proudly displayed it, but it wasn't meant to be decorative--all his colleagues bore the same mark. "So where are you from, Isak?" she asked.

"Earth," he cast a dubious look at her. In his time, there were no city names, since Earth was a city in its entirety. You either lived on Earth or you lived in one of the space pods. Somehow, he realized that she expected a more specific answer. All he could offer her was the section he lived in. "G4Alpha9".

Charlie blinked at him absently. "Wow, you really are lost," she teased. "Hey, how about we sit down and have a coffee. I'll help you figure things out, okay?"

Not willing to admit that he didn't know what coffee was, and feeling overwhelmed at the task of trying to explain to someone that you come from the future, Isak tried to shrug her off. It was useless; Charlie wouldn't bend. She found Isak intriguing. He was extremely good-looking in an exotic way, with a chiseled jaw and straight nose. His shoulders were wide and his chest muscular, but all that was secondary. There was something about him that she simply couldn't walk away from. She wanted to know more. "C'mon--it's my treat."

Linking her arm in his, Charlie led Isak to her regular

coffee shop and slid into a booth. He sat himself down across from her and she held out two fingers to a passing waitress. It appeared to Isak to be some sort of code and he made a mental note to remember it. Moments later, the waitress placed two mugs with a heady dark liquid in front of them. Charlie grabbed the sugar and measured out two teaspoons into her cup then poured some cream in and stirred. Isak mimicked the actions, despite being oblivious to what he was putting in his coffee. When she blew on the hot steam, he did also. She sipped, he sipped. He wouldn't have been able to describe the taste if he tried. All he understood at that moment was that the hot beverage gave him a sense of comfort. By the time he was finished drinking it, he felt positively animated, like he could run the circumference of the planet. His mind was racing as he attempted to take in all his surroundings.

"So, where are you supposed to be right now?" Charlie's elbow rested on the table as she propped her chin up with a loose fist. The fingernails of her other hand gently tapped a rhythm on her coffee cup. Isak studied her face, wondering how much he would be able to tell her. Would she trust him? If they exchanged places, he doubted that he would be able to believe it. The fact remained that he was stranded here without a friend in the world and he really needed someone to lean on.

"Okay, I'm going to tell you, but please don't think I'm insane, because what I'm saying is the truth," Isak's forehead

creased and his eyes held a silent plea. Charlie straightened and fixed him with serious regard. She urged him to continue. "I'm actually from the future. The year 2970, to be exact," he assessed her expression, but whatever she was thinking, she clearly kept it behind the wall of her mind. "Look, let me show you."

Isak placed his left arm on the table, palm up. With a quick double tap to his wrist, a display began to glow on his arm. Charlie's brow furrowed and she leaned closer to see. There was nothing there before--just flesh. He had nothing on his arm that could create the illusion of a digital screen. The display showed two dates. One was the current day in 2017, and the other was the same day in 2970. With a series of taps similar to Morse Code, the display changed and a silent video began to play. With two fingers, Isak stretched the display wider to create a larger screen surface. Charlie watched as the video trailed along between closely-packed buildings with people shoving their way through tight crowds. Every so often, you could catch a glimpse of the sidewalk underneath the hordes. It was dark blue and appeared to be made from a textured plastic. There was no street...no cars. There were no trees or plants. The street was dim like night was falling, but a small box in the upper right corner of the display identified the time of the video at 2:00PM. It also stated the area G6Alpha14. Panning up, the video now showed the incredible height of the buildings--it felt like

you were in a crevice of the Grand Canyon. There were rails several feet above the people's heads, and along these rails slid train cars shaped like bullets. There was no sky. It looked like darkness over the city. When the video zoomed in, it became more clear that there were trees blocking out any possible sunlight. Isak tapped the video off and waited.

Charlie let out a quick breath. "Okay, so what are you--a film student? This is a gimmick, right?" She leaned closer and whispered, "Am I on camera?"

"Charlie, I wish this was a joke, but I'm dead serious, and I'm in a lot of trouble," he replied. "I could really use your help. Please."

She shook her head slowly, eyes wide with wonder. "Who are you?"

"I'm willing to explain, if you'll let me," he answered. With a terse nod from Charlie, Isak began his story. It all started with the tattoo on his hand. "Everyone has a tattoo. It's your designation...your job, I guess you would call it. If you are in the field of law, your tattoo is an owl. Those who work in sanitation have a tattoo of a rat. The sciences have the octopus," he flashed the tattoo at Charlie briefly. "Mine is an orange octopus because I'm a theoretical physicist. A medical doctor would have a red octopus, and a chemist would have one that's blue. The point of the tattoos was lost ages ago, but now they just serve as a means to keep people grouped in their

fields. It's unheard of for a doctor to befriend a builder."

Isak paused as he considered the reaction of the woman in front of him.

"You're a theoretical physicist? Are you shitting me?" she gaped.

"That's revolting." Isak's lip curled with disgust.

"It's...it's an expression," she sighed. "Never mind. The point is, you're, like, really smart then."

"My intelligence is average. Actually, the whole subject of IQ is the reason I'm in this mess in the first place."

"Oh? How so?"

Isak licked his lips and breathed heavily. "As you saw from the video, we're vastly overpopulated in the future. It's a real problem because Earth can no longer sustain us naturally--we've had to create our own resources. Well, I happened to overhear something that some of the senior medical research officers were discussing with the president. It's a plan to control the population. It's a horrible plan. There are two steps to it," he held up a finger. "First, everyone takes an IQ test as soon as they turn eighteen. Anyone with an IQ lower than one twenty is marked." Isak held up a second finger. "Next come the vaccinations. It's always been mandatory to get them when you're twenty-one, so nobody is going to think twice about it. The problem is that those who are marked get a special vaccine. It's designed to kill them within a year."

Charlie sucked in a quick breath. "Oh my God! How can they do that?"

A car horn blared on the street outside the coffee shop and startled Isak, stealing his attention for a few seconds. Charlie noticed that his eyes were constantly darting around, like he was looking for something specific, not just taking in the scenery of an unfamiliar place. He ignored her last question.

"My mistake was going to my own superior with what I heard. He went straight to the president about it. Naturally, I became Earth's most wanted at that point, so I ran. I knew that I couldn't go anywhere on Earth that they couldn't find me. The chips we're given when we're born make us pretty easy to track." Isak gestured toward his arm where the video display was. "So, I leapt into a time slip. With the constabulary hot on my trail, I didn't have time to enter in a proper date--I just mashed the buttons to get a random year and hit the slip. Now, here I am. I can't stay and I don't want to go back," he dropped his head into his hands. "What a disaster."

Staring into her coffee, Charlie thought hard about the situation. She could understand why he couldn't go back--they would easily find him. But, why couldn't he stay? She could help him if he did, and she told him so.

"It's not that easy," he admitted. "The time slip is a fragile thing. See, nobody was ever meant to come this far back into the past. We can travel three hundred years, but any more

than that and we risk not being able to lock back on to the time slip to return home."

"Why is that a bad thing? It seems like it would solve your problem," her eyebrows drew together, confused by his lack of understanding.

"Essentially, it would," Isak gazed at her, patiently. "The problem is that the farther back we go and the longer we stay there, the more we are exposed to the slip's instability. Basically, the future is trying to pull me back in, knowing I don't belong here. When it catches up, it will literally tear me to pieces. Charlie," he reached across the table and held her hand, "I have to go back. There is nothing they can do to me there that would be a worse fate."

Charlie rapped three times with her knuckles on a heavy wooden door and stood silently. It was a primitive method of making your presence known. In Isak's time, there simply was no such thing as waiting for a door to open. An automated system scanned your chip as you passed by and, if the homeowner was available to take visitors, they would just tap the notification on their arm display and the door would open on its own. As they waited for a response, he explained this to Charlie, who listened intently. A wooden door was a bit of a novelty to him, as well. He ran his hand along the surface, feeling the texture of stained wood and the gentle prick of a few splinters. When the door swung open suddenly, he jumped back a few paces.

"Hey dweeb," Charlie grinned. The man on the other side of the door was shorter than her by at least a few inches. He wore glasses, which people only did in the future for fashionable purposes, but what really caught Isak's attention was the shaggy hair and thick stubble coating his chin. Isak had doubts that this shamble of a human being could possibly help him. Charlie gestured toward him and introduced Isak to Stefan.

"Hi...dweeb." Isak imitated Charlie's greeting.

"Yeah...um....Stefan will do." Stefan fixed Isak with a dubious expression and opened the door wider, allowing them both to enter the apartment. "So, this is the Terminator, huh? Doesn't look too threatening."

"I'm not a terminator--I'm a physicist," Isak countered. He

turned to Charlie, "Didn't you tell him on your cell-o-phone?"

"Yeah...no, that's not what he meant. It's just..." Charlie sighed deeply and shook her head, "Never mind. Look, if you need help getting back to the future, then Stefan's the smartest guy I know. Just...show him what you're working with. Trust me."

Stefan pulled a kitchen chair out for Isak and gathered the pile of papers that were occupying the seat. They both sat-- Charlie opted to perch on the window sill and watch the traffic go by from the fourth-story apartment. Before long, Isak was deep into his explanation of how they managed to make time travel possible in the future. Even though all the instructions and key theories were in place, there was no danger of anyone in 2017 being able to develop time travel--some of the most important elements involved wouldn't be discovered for another five hundred years. As Isak spoke, Stefan jotted down notes and sketched diagrams to the best of his comprehension. When Isak finally finished speaking, a haphazard stack of seventy-six pages lay on the table before them.

"All this is just sitting there in your noggin?" Stefan's eyes widened. When Isak cast him a puzzled look, he waved a hand dismissively. As impatience for Isak's lack of understanding basic communication surfaced, he forced himself to get it under control, realizing that he would likely be in the same boat meeting someone from a thousand years in the past. Dialect seemed to be one thing that evolved at an expeditious rate. "All

right, just let me mull this stuff over for a bit and I'll see what I can come up with," he stood and escorted his visitors to the door. "I'll give you a ring when I got something, Charlie."

Shortly after, Isak and Charlie found themselves back on the busy sidewalk, but they each had widely varying views on how crowded it actually was. While Isak felt a degree of freedom being able to walk several steps without having to dodge bodies or swerve between groups, Charlie inwardly seethed at the slow-paced teenage girls in front of her, their eyes glued to their phone screens and oblivious to the lines of people surging behind them. At her breaking point, Charlie grabbed Isak's arm and pulled him into a small corner restaurant, admitting her eagerness to escape the crowd. It was four in the afternoon and the sidewalks would be swarming for at least another hour and a half.

"I'm just running to the little girl's room," Charlie said, pointing to an empty booth by the window. "Just sit there and wait for me."

He followed her with his eyes as she ducked into the women's bathroom and nodded in understanding. It would take him ages to figure out all the intricacies of language in twenty-first century. To start, though, he would order them both coffee. He glanced about the dining room, looking for someone who appeared to work there. There didn't seem to be any identifying uniforms, but ladies in aprons flitted about, jotting orders

down in notebooks or attending to tables, arms heavily laden with plates. An older woman of generous proportions walked by and Isak held up two fingers, like he remembered Charlie doing earlier that morning.

"Be right with you, honey," she replied before disappearing behind a swinging door. Only moments later, she came back out carrying two plates in her hands. After gently setting them in front of a couple nearby, she approached Isak with a hand on her hip. "So what can I get ya?"

"Um..." he held up two fingers once again. Why wasn't this working?

"Two what, sugar? You want coffee?"

"Yes. Please. Two of coffee," Isak threw her his most charming smile.

"Not from around here, are ya, honey?" The waitress winked at him and promised to be right back with his beverages.

Turning his focus to the street outside, he barely registered Charlie sliding into the seat across from him. He wasn't used to the noise of the cars and grew increasingly anxious with every blaring horn, wailing siren, and backfiring exhaust. As he watched the action, he remained alert, looking for any odd fluctuations in the atmosphere. The time vacuum would catch up to him eventually--his only hope was seeing it happen before he became trapped in it. If he noticed the ripple soon enough, he could try and escape it.

The smell of hot coffee reached his nostrils and he looked back just in time to see the waitress smile and walk away.

Immediately, he reached for the glass shaker on the table, but before he could pour it into his cup, Charlie grabbed his arm.

"That's salt," she grimaced, handing him the sugar shaker instead. "You don't want to put that in your coffee."

"What is 'salt'?" he asked. "In fact, what is this?" he wiggled the sugar in front of her.

"Are you frigging kidding me? You don't have condiments in the future?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Our food items already have all the necessary flavours when served. It seems more ludicrous that you people need to assemble your food and beverages before consuming them."

Charlie sat back, defeated. She actually couldn't come up with an argument for that. It would seem that, in the future, everyone had the same tastes--or they were brainwashed into thinking they did. The more she thought about it, the more she felt fortunate for being born in her own time. While the possibilities the future provided were fascinating, she rather enjoyed the freedom of deciding whether or not to dip her fries in ketchup. Her phone rang then, and she swiped a thumb across to answer. It was Stefan with news that he believed he found a solution for Isak's problem. She fished a pen out of her pocket and jotted down some information on a paper napkin, then ended

the call.

"Alright, Stefan gave me a list of things we need to find. Before we go hunting, though, I'm starved. Want a burger?"

"What's a...?" Isak started to ask, before being cut off by Charlie, waving her hands in front of her.

"Forget I asked. You're getting a burger. And--yes--you need to assemble it," she laughed.

The eight-foot wire fence caging in the forgotten remnants of people's lives was no challenge for Isak. His above average height and well-muscled arms and legs allowed him to scale it and jump down the other side with ease. When Charlie made her way over the top, however, he reached up and placed two firm hands around her waist to guide her down. While his hands felt warm and comforting on her body, it was the thrill of chivalry that took her breath away. For a moment she was lost in the idea of developing something more intimate with him, then the cruel blow of reality set in and she remembered that he would be gone soon. Just my luck, she thought. Finally, Charlie met a man who she could really connect with and she couldn't have him. What she didn't know was that at that same moment, Isak was feeling a little cheated, himself. Charlie was a marvel to him. So full of spunk mixed with benevolence--traits that simply didn't exist in the women of his day. He wanted nothing more than to remain in 2017, but he wasn't too keen on dying for the effort.

"So, it should be pretty easy to find a satellite dish somewhere in this junkyard," Charlie observed, "just look for something that looks like a shallow bowl...about this big," she held her arms out indicating an approximate size. The night's darkness, broken only by the dim light of the streetlights behind them, forced her to squint as she searched. Isak's vision was far superior and he scanned the piles of debris with the acuity of a cat.

"Is that it?" he pointed to an area Charlie could barely make out. When she moved in closer, she could see that it was, indeed, what they were looking for.

"Perfect. That means we only need a few more things..." she pulled the napkin out of her pocket and held it close to her face to read it. Taking a few steps ahead, she didn't notice the abandoned bicycle lying across her path. The toe of her shoe caught it and she plunged forward, only to be caught mid-fall by Isak. There she hung, wide eyes staring at the broken and jagged frame that rose up to meet her square in the face. He literally just saved her life. If she wasn't already falling helplessly in love with him, this would have been the incident that put her over the edge. He propped her up firmly on her feet. Without a thought, she spun about and wrapped her arms around his neck, locking him in a passionate kiss. He didn't pull away. Her heart fluttered.

After what felt like an eternity, the moment ended and they released their hold on each other. With heavy breaths, they stared at each other. In Charlie's eyes, Isak could see hope and yearning. In Isak's eyes, Charlie saw sadness.

"Charlie..." Isak dropped his gaze.

"No, please. Don't say anything," she gently pressed her fingers to his lips. "I know...God knows, I know. I just...I want to have this for what little time I can."

Isak swallowed hard and responded with a curt nod. He

couldn't bear to look at her just yet. "Let's just find the rest of the items for Stefan."

With a heavy backpack tossed over one shoulder and a satellite dish cradled in his arm, Isak followed Charlie back to Stefan's place. He wouldn't bend on allowing her to carry anything. They stuck mainly to quiet streets and alleys, determined not to attract too much attention. Despite their caution, someone did notice them--or he was waiting there for them all along. Charlie disappeared around a corner and Isak trailed closely behind, nearly walking right into her rooted form. Before her stood a well-dressed man with a stern expression. A device in his hand began to alarm the moment Isak came around the corner.

"You have some explaining to do, boy," the man spoke. "Why don't you just come along with me, nice and easy."

"Who the hell are you?" Charlie's voice was strong...authoritative. A side to her Isak hadn't seen until now. Fleeting thoughts of wanting desperately to learn more about her were suppressed by his growing alarm.

The man reached into his coat and pulled out a badge. "FBI," he answered patiently. "We've been tracing your friend here all day. The department of defense picked up a strange signal that they asked us to investigate. Managed to track it down to you, sir. If you don't mind, I really think it's in your

best interest to come with me. Don't make me use force."

Isak took a few hesitant steps back. He didn't know what FBI was, but he recognized the man represented the law. One of the first things they learn before traveling through time was to never allow yourself to be discovered by any governing entity-- the results of it could be catastrophic.

Noticing Isak's intent to flee, the man shoved Charlie hard into a nearby brick wall and made a grab for him. Seeing Charlie's face contorted in pain as she hit formed a sudden protective and unfamiliar reaction in Isak. He dropped the satellite dish and his backpack, stepping towards the man with as much threat in his eyes as he could forge. He felt the agent's forceful grip on his left arm and swung fast with his right. The man's head jerked back when Isak's fist connected with his jaw. A strange pulling force abruptly formed behind Isak and in the moment it took for the FBI agent to shake off the assault, Isak spun around quickly, pulling the agent with him. It took no more than a gentle push from Isak and the man went hurdling into the barely noticeable wave in the vacant air. His mouth twisted into a painful scream, but no sound came out. With stunning ferocity, the man's body began to tear apart until there was nothing left. The ripple snapped shut. It had claimed a life, but it was not the right one. Isak knew the time vacuum would be back for him. He needed to return to his time quickly.

Charlie sat with her feet up on Stefan's couch. A notebook was propped up on her knees, her pencil eagerly scribbling whatever ideas were in her head. As she wrote, she nibbled on her bottom lip, which made Isak's heart do flip-flops in his chest. Stefan was skillfully explaining how to use the items they retrieved for him, but Isak could hardly concentrate on his instructions. All he wanted was to hold Charlie again. Almost as though she heard his thoughts, she looked up at him and the corners of her mouth turned up in a soft smile that didn't reach her eyes. Her heart was breaking, too. With a heavy breath, Isak's focus turned back to Stefan. From what he was able to decipher, Stefan was creating a device that locks onto the chip in his arm. In turn, it would allow the chip to modify the signal from the satellite dish to match the signal used for time travel. The satellite then boosts the signal, and Isak returns home. It was all very simple in theory, but Stefan would have to build the device, himself. Isak left him to his work and joined Charlie on the couch.

"What are you working on?" he asked her.

"Your future. Uh...well...your present, I guess I should say." If Isak felt baffled by her response, he wasn't alone, Charlie wasn't sure she understood it, herself. "It's a prophecy," she explained. "I'm going to make it go viral and, hopefully, by the time you get home, your people will believe it enough to avoid introducing that vaccine. Then, none of this

will have to happen." Charlie's chin dropped. Isak tenderly lifted it back up to hold her gaze.

"Is this really so bad? After all, I got meet you. Maybe it was only for a short time, but I'll never forget you, Charlie. Someone like you only comes along once in a lifetime."

"But not necessarily the right lifetime, it seems," tears threatened to fall and she could barely get the words out. Isak gently pushed her legs out the way so he could shift a little closer to her. When he wrapped his arms around her in a warm hug, he felt her shoulders shaking as she sobbed quietly. After some time, her tears finally spent, She showed Isak the prophecy she was working on. He read it to himself.

Thirty years to the end of the thirtieth century, the people will die.

To control the population, the solution will turn angry.

A virus mutates.

Death, agony, children on the streets drowning in their own blood.

No person survives.

"This is seriously dark, Charlie," Isak re-read it a few times. "But I think it will get the point across. I don't know how you're planning to make this change my fate, but I have complete faith that you'll manage."

He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. They lay together on the couch, feeling

secure in each other's arms until sleep overtook them.

When the morning sun shone in through Stefan's dusty window and woke her, it took Charlie a second or two to remember where she was. Isak breathed steadily beside her. She raised her head and saw him watching her. His eyes seemed lost in a thought very far away.

"If you two lovebirds are up, the device is ready," Stefan broke in on their moment. Charlie and Isak exchanged a pained look. Without a word, they rolled off the couch and went to the table where Stefan was tackling a few final adjustments. He had been tenaciously working on it all night. "All right, Isak, give me your arm."

As he held out his arm, Charlie could swear his hand was shaking. He was fearless, so she knew he wasn't scared. No-- Isak's heart was grieving, just like hers. They both watched as Stefan attached the device to Isak's arm and turned it on. The chip in Isak's arm opened the digital display and showed a spinning circle.

"What the hell, Stefan, is this thing buffering?" Charlie questioned.

"Totally 'ha-ha', Charlie," Stefan rolled his eyes. "It's searching for the signal. Once it turns from blue to red...ah...there! Now it's locked on. All you gotta do is tap it and go home." Stefan grinned proudly as he glanced from Isak to

Charlie. They ignored him. He quickly got the hint. "I'll just, uh, go away and let you two say goodbye. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Isak," Stefan bumped him on the shoulder lightly with a fist and left the room.

"So, that's it, then," Charlie's voice wavered. "Time to go."

Isak frowned and nodded slowly. "So, I guess...goodbye?" he said.

A sob escaped Charlie's throat and she embraced him tightly, pressing her lips against his in a final, agonizing kiss. When they finally broke off, he leaned his head against hers and whispered.

"No matter where I go, always remember that I fell in love with you."

Charlie's head bobbed emphatically. "And I'm going to save you, Isak. I'm going to change your world."

"My precious Charlie...you already did."

He let her go and tapped his display. Then he was gone.

Charlie sat on the couch, reliving the last moments she spent with Isak. She cried for at least an hour after he left, but her eyes were finally dry. She felt numb on the outside, while everything inside her seemed to ache. She didn't feel empty, as many people claim to be after losing someone--she felt broken.

As geeky and inattentive as Stefan could often be, he did his best to console her, but he was a poor substitute for the alluring and wistful Isak. She appreciated his company, though. She didn't feel like being alone just yet. Not forgetting her vow to Isak, she handed her false prophecy to Stefan. "We need to make this go viral. It has to become as important as the bible by 2970."

"No problem--I know just what to do with it," Stefan assured her. She trusted that he did. He sat at his computer and got to work while Charlie, exhausted in her despair, fell asleep in the same spot where Isak held her not long before.

"Charlie!" Stefan's alarmed voice jostled her awake a few hours later. "Charlie, wake up!"

She jumped from the couch, her head spinning and heart thumping, trying to reacquaint herself with being vertical. "What? What's happening?" she yelped. Then she saw it. A ripple in the air. It wasn't very distinct, but Charlie recognized it from the demise of the FBI agent who got sucked through the day prior. "Stay away from that, Stefan!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, the ripple began to spin like a vortex. It didn't do that before. She reached out to grab Stefan's sleeve and slowly pulled him back as she retreated. Not knowing what to expect, she planned to get as far away from the thing as possible. Then, something happened that stopped her in her tracks. It began to glow. There was a light on the other side that grew increasingly bright, causing them both to look away. From behind closed eyelids, the blaze started to soften. She looked again at the light and standing before it was a silhouette of a man. Her heart lurched. Maybe she was being hopeful, but she felt sure that she recognized him. The light faded, the ripple closed, and her eyes adjusted to the dimness in the room. Isak stood in front of her. Frozen in place, she didn't know if she should run to him or wait for him to come to her. A firm shove on her back made the decision easier.

"Geez, Charlie, go to him already!" Stefan urged.

Suddenly she was in his arms again and he was holding her like he had been gone for ages. Which, she realized in an oddly technical way, he had been.

"How are you back?" She cried. So many questions danced around in her head.

"It took two years," he beamed, "but I used Stefan's device to make modifications to the time slip. I can stay now, Charlie. The time vacuum has been solved, and I can stay." He wiped away

Charlie's happy tears. "And you did it. Your prophecy saved my people. You're my legend."