

Object Lesson

As they stepped onto the train, she fought every urge to jump on after them. They were just going on ahead and she would join them in a few days. She smiled, briefly considered pulling her scarf from around her neck and waving it, then settled for waving her hand as the train left the station.

Professor Girlande glanced over the faces of the candidates, seated in sloping tiers at precise intervals in the observation section of the Zeit Laboratory. They had made it through the morning's rigorous academic and physical testing. He noted their dress, identical light blue single piece garments with garish red cuffs and a red stripe down the left arm, standard haircuts, and statistically distributed variation of eye and skin color. Each person marked over the left breast with a name in capital letters on a brass plate. Absolutely as expected. No deviation. "The afternoon session will be the psychological and psychiatric exams." He surveyed them with his best senior professor smile – warm and friendly enough to ease their anxiety but not enough to make them relax. "Before that process begins, I will show you a reason for them." He walked to the side of the lecture platform and flipped some switches on the control panel. "Pay close attention to what you see. This observation portal links to a Zeitreisender on a mission." The overhead lights dimmed, and the large screen that was the Zeit portal hummed to life.

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As they stepped onto the train, she fought every urge to jump on after them. They were just going on ahead and she would join them in a few days. She smiled and blew kisses at the train as it left the station.

As they stepped onto the train, she fought every urge to jump on after them. They were just going on ahead and she would join them in a few days. She sighed, turned, and left the station, not looking back as the train pulled away.

Sandra Dickerson

The portal faded and the room lights brightened. Girlande turned to the candidates. "Why did I show you this?" He studied the faces and then barked, "Spielrein, analysis!"

Candidate Spielrein stood. "The time traveler is in a time loop, and seeking to discover the action that will break it."

Girlande nodded. "And if I told you that the Zeitreisender has been in the loop for local time of fifteen years?"

"The Zeitreisender has not been successful."

Girlande caught sounds of suppressed laughter and glared. In the ensuing silence, he studied the candidates, seeking the culprit. That goal disappeared when his gaze lingered on a somehow familiar face. "Raman, expound."

Candidate Raman stood. "The Zeitreisender has a phobia involving trains. There is no specific name for this condition which is classed as an anxiety disorder. It usually involves fear of traveling by train and is often referred to as Siderodromophobia." Raman paused to breathe deeply then continued in a rush. "By watching the iterations of the time loop, it becomes clear that the Zeitreisender must board the train to break the cycle. However, she is unable to recognize the solution and board the train due to her phobia."

"Sit," said Girlande. He paced the platform, angry to have his lecture preempted, but now certain that he knew the birth name of Candidate Raman. "That is correct, Candidates. An unrecognized phobia has caused Zeitreisender Nambu to not complete her mission." He looked up and down the tiers spending a few milliseconds on each face. "Now we will go and find if you have such a flaw."

Candidate Raman, dressed all in black, studied the open area near the bunker door to the Zeit Laboratory. Motionless he listened for any additions to the night sounds. Raman moved from shadow to shadow to a small side door, expertly disabled the lock, and slipped inside the building. He made his way to the observation section. Raman climbed from the front tier up onto the lecture platform. He flipped the switches on the control panel. While the machinery hummed to life, he pulled a folded paper from his sleeve and studied it. Raman began adjusting dials and entering commands into the computer.

The overhead lights crackled to life. Raman blinked in the brightness.

"What are you doing Candidate?" Professor Girlande demanded.

Raman started but didn't turn from the control panel. "Setting the transition coordinates and initiating the auto-connection to deliver me to the correct time space position."

"Cease at once. This is unauthorized. I've already notified security. They are on their way."

Raman laughed, finished the entry on the control panel, and turned. "Was it authorized to leave my mother trapped in the past?" He took a step toward Professor Girlande who reflexively stepped back. "Was it authorized to keep her imprisoned as an object lesson for the candidates?" He stepped closer to Girlande. "Did you authorize it?"

Girlande retreated another step. "The Council decided that the risk of sending another Zeitreisender was too high. I convinced them not to sever the connection to her." Girlande tilted his head to study the tall young man. "You're Theo Nambu. Laura's boy."

"Yes," said Theo. "I've spent the last fifteen years planning for this day. I'm going to save my mother."

"I've been trying for the past fifteen years to determine how to rescue her within parameters acceptable to the Council." Girlande shook his head and dropped his eyes. "Obviously without success."

"She will listen to me and board the train." Theo went back to the control panel and flipped a final switch. "And I'm just an expendable candidate."

"Wait!" cried Girlande.

Theo stepped through the portal.

As they stepped onto the train, Laura fought every urge to jump on after them. They were just going on ahead and she would join them in a few days. Laura sighed and turned away. She nearly ran into the tall man who was suddenly behind her. "Excuse me!"

"Hello," he said. "I'm here to help."

Laura looked up; her brows drew together. "Do I know you?"

"The last time you saw me I was trying to crawl onto your lap with my stuffed tiger."

Laura stepped away, frowning.

"Mom, you've been stuck in a time loop for fifteen years," Theo said. "I've figured out what you need to do ..."

The train left the station.

Girlande watched Laura and Theo through the portal. Theo stopped her and spoke. Smiles grew on their faces. Girlande saw the scene reset. "Damn!"

"She will listen to me and board the train." Theo turned to the control panel and flipped a final switch. "And I'm just an expendable candidate."

“Wait!” cried Girlande, reaching to stop Theo.

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“Wait!” cried Girlande. “Stop!” He flung himself at Theo.

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