Lee Bacon

AREA 52

The Time Twister

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons or monsters is entirely coincidental.

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The Day The World Blew Up

"Who wants pancakes!"

Dad stomps out of the kitchen, carrying a giant wooden platter, piled with a few hundred chocolate chip pancakes. He looks sort of like me, but with more belly and less hair.

Mom follows him into the dining room. Her blond fur glows golden in the morning light. Her green eyes shine brightly as she smiles.

The rest of us are gathered around the oak-slab dining table. To most observers, we'd probably make a strange sight. Bigfoot sharing a table with the Abominable Snowgirl. An alien sipping milk from a wooden mug. The Jersey Devil sharing an inside joke with a tiny T-Rex. But for us, this is just a typical morning in the cave.

Dad clomps down the platter of pancakes and we all dig in.

Tiny savagely rips into his breakfast like it's his prehistoric prey.

Fermi, on the other hand, inspects her breakfast as if it's a math equation. "Fascinating," she says. "The chocolate chip distribution reminds me of a nebula within an interstellar—"

"Hey, geek," Bruce interrupts. "Yer s'pposed to *eat* da food, not study it!"

He demonstrates by taking a huge bite of his pancake. As he chews, his leathery wings flutter with appreciation.

"Now dat's good stuff!"

Abby is squeezed onto the bench beside me. I feel her snowy-white fur fluttering against my elbow. She shoves a dozen pancakes into her mouth, all at once.

"Mmmm!" she growls happily.

"Glad you like it!" Dad says, taking a seat on the other side of the table. His tower of pancakes wobbles on its plate as Mom drops down beside him.

"Quick announcement," Mom says. "There's been a human sighting in another section of the forest."

At this news, everyone tenses up.

No matter how hard we try to hide from humans, there's always the threat of them discovering us. Which would be bad news. Pitchforks, torches. That kind of thing.

And it's not just the angry mobs. We also have to worry about Area 52 agents. Ever since we escaped, they've been looking for us. The monsters who got away.

Which is why we've had to step up our security.

Mom explains: "I've extended our network of HDD's. Otherwise known as Human-Detection Devices."

Mom's always coming up with amazing inventions to keep us safe from humans. The forest is filled with her HDD's, cleverly camouflaged to blend into the surroundings. And ever since my friends arrived at the cave, she has a helper.

"Our HDD's are more sophisticated than ever—thanks to Fermi!" Mom nods to the blue-haired alien at the end of the table. "And she's also installed some traps around the perimeter of the cave that'll snag any human who gets too close."

Fermi's not the only one who's been helping out around the cave.

Tiny's been joining my dad on his hunting expeditions. Bruce is great in the kitchen. And Abby comes with me to gather supplies.

I love these mornings. All of us sharing food at the table. Me, my family, my friends. I wish we could stay like this longer, but there's work to do.

My parents are the first to leave. Dad heads off to hunt for dinner. Mom makes her way up the mountain to grab some stuff for her workshop.

The rest of us sit down for our lessons.

This is a new part of my routine. I spend an hour every day learning to speak Person. Growing up in the cave, my parents taught me how to read and understand human language. But I never figured out how to *speak* it. Whenever I tried, the words came out sounding like a whole lot of grunts and growls. It's the same for my friends. Bruce, Tiny, Abby.

But not Fermi.

The alien is fluent in 527 languages from around the universe. Including English. And so each day before we begin our jobs, she teaches us how to talk to people. That way, if we ever have to save humanity (again), we'll have an easier time explaining ourselves.

To begin our lesson, Fermi instructs us in some of the most important things we might need to say when meeting a person for the first time.

"*Hello.*"

"*How are you?*"

"*Don't worry. I'm not going to eat you*."

We've gotten a lot better at speaking Person. All thanks to Fermi!

Around the time that we're finishing up, a sound erupts through the cave. The loud jangling of glass jars.

"That's the alarm!" Fermi says. "Someone just triggered one of the traps."

To me, it just sounds like a bunch of clanking glass. But Fermi has extraterrestrial ears. She hears things that others don't. She designed the alarm so it'd trigger dozens of unique melodies—each one with a different meaning that only she can interpret.

Fermi listens for a second. "We have an interloper in Sub-Quadrant B-3."

"Could someone translate dat fer me?" Bruce says. "I don't speak Nerd."

"A human," I say. "Less than fifty meters from the cave."

Fear tingles through my fur. If there's one human, there could be others. What if they followed our tracks to the cave? What if they've come to take us back to Area 52?

I leap up from the table.

"Let's go!" I say. "There might not be much time."

Finding My Inner Monster

We rush out of the cave.

Charging through the woods, fear floods my brain. I imagine people. Lots of people. All armed with tranquilizer guns. My imagination skips, and suddenly we're all back in Area 52, with shock collars around our necks, wearing matching orange jumpsuits marked with the words:

Is that what's waiting for us?

At moments like this, it's helpful to remind myself that I'm nine feet tall, with sharp teeth and claws. I weigh over a thousand pounds.

I might *feel* like a terrified kid, but to the rest of the world, *I'm* the scary one.

I can use that to my advantage. Tap into my inner monster. Without slowing down, I raise my hands, showing off my claws and let out my fiercest "RooooAR!"

And it seems to work. I don't feel quite as afraid anymore. Especially when I take a quick glance at the others around me.

A Jersey Devil.

An alien.

A T-Rex.

And an Abominable Snowgirl.

If you saw the five of us charging in your direction, you'd probably pee your pants. At least—that's the vibe we're *going for*. A collection of terrifying monsters, rampaging through the dark forest like something out of a nightmare.

Soon enough, we burst through a curtain of branches.

And that's when we gain our first glimpse of the intruder.

As soon as I see him, I let out a breath of relief. We can drop the scary monster act.

The intruder isn't an Area 52 agent.

He's our friend Stanley.

And right now, he's dangling upside-down from a tree.

A rope vine is wrapped tightly around Stanley's ankles. His glasses are lying on the ground below.

"Would someone mind cutting me down?" Stanley asks politely.

"No problem!" I step forward and raise one hand. With a single swipe of my claw, the rope splits apart.

"WAAAAH!" Stanley drops like a stone.

And clomps onto the ground.

"Sorry about that!" I say. My lessons with Fermi have paid off. The words come out crisp and clear, with just a faint growliness. I basically sound like a polite grizzly bear. "Here. Let me help you up."

My friends and I met Stanley the day after we escaped from Area 52. Well, maybe "*met*" is the wrong word. First, we followed the guy home. Then we broke into his house and tried to steal his vintage Nintendo Game Boy.

Which—I know—sounds bad.

But we didn't have a choice!

A horde of vicious aliens was about to invade our planet. And believe it or not, Stanley's Game Boy was the key to stopping them. Once we explained all this, he forgave us for breaking into his house. And he even helped us defeat the evil aliens.

We've been friends ever since!

"Sorry to barge in on you like this!" he says. "There's something important I need to tell you."

"What's going on?" Abby asks.

Stanley plucks his glasses off the ground and places them crookedly on his nose. “I think I’m being followed.”

“Followed?” Confusion clings to Tiny’s voice. “By who?”

“I don’t know. But I keep seeing the same woman, everywhere I go. At the grocery store. On the street. When I’m driving around town. I’ll look over my shoulder and—suddenly—there she is.”

Stanley tries to adjust his glasses, but only ends up tilting them in a different angle.

“I’m starting to think maybe she works for Area 52,” he says. “They could’ve sent her to track me down.”

“Dis woman,” Bruce begins. “Is she ‘bout five-five with short black hair?”

“Actually, yeah.” Stanley stares at Bruce, wide-eyed. “How could you possibly *know* that?”

“Because...” Bruce points. “She’s standin’ right behind ya.”

The rest of us spin around.

And that’s when we see her. A woman, cloaked in shadows, standing at the edge of the woods.

Eating Pancakes With A Secret Government Agent

The woman steps out of the shadows. She's wearing a black pantsuit and black shoes. A black handbag is slung over her shoulder. Her eyes slowly scan our group.

"After all this time," she says. "It's nice to see you again."

Again. That one word rings in my head like a bell. My memory flashes back to Area 52. A too-bright examination room. A group of scientists in black lab coats crowding around me. Poking me with needles, plugging electrodes to my head, shining lights into my eyes.

She was one of the scientists.

"My name is Agent Archer," she goes on. "You may remember me from Area 52."

My worried glance darts into the woods behind her, searching for any sign of other Area 52 agents.

And I'm not the only one. Our entire group bristles with nervous energy, preparing for whatever comes next. Is this it? Our one-way ticket back to Area 52?

Agent Archer obviously notices. "Don't worry," she says. "I'm alone."

"What're you doing here?" Abby asks.

"You can *talk*!" The agent's tone is thick with wonder. "All the years I spent studying you, I had no idea you were capable of speech."

"Yeah, we've been doing our homework." Tiny steps forward, showing off his sharp teeth. "And *you* still haven't answered Abby's question."

Agent Archer takes a step away from the little T-Rex. "Don't worry. I came here on my own. Nobody from Area 52 knows I'm here."

"Why have you been following me?" Stanley asks.

"I'm happy to tell you everything. But first..." The agent tilts her head, sniffing. "Do I smell *pancakes*?"

Which is how we end up inviting a secret government agent over to our cave for breakfast.

"Mmm!" Agent Archer says. "These pancakes are *delicious!*"

We're all gathered around the table. Everyone except my parents. They're still off, in other parts of the woods, busy with their work. Agent Archer pops another piece of pancake into her mouth and closes her eyes with appreciation.

"So fluffy and sweet!" she says. "Where do you even *get* chocolate chips way out here in the middle of the woods?"

"Stanley brought them for us," I answer. "Now will you *please* tell us what's going on?"

The agent nods. Setting down her wooden fork and knife, she explains. "Nearly eighty years ago, an extraterrestrial spacecraft crash-landed in western Iowa. Our government retrieved the craft and took it to the place where they keep *all* their secret stuff."

I lean forward. "You mean Area 52?"

Agent Archer shakes her head. "This was *long* before Area 52 existed. They took it to Area *51*."

She goes on to explain how all those old-timey secret agents dismantled the UFO. And inside, they found three very freaked-out extraterrestrials.

"Funny coincidence." Agent Archer's eyes land on Fermi. "They came from your neck of the universe."

Fermi raises her eyebrows. "You mean...?"

"They were from your planet."

The alien bolts up from the bench. “Others from my planet? Here on Earth?”

The agent nods. “Although by the time you arrived at Area 52, they had passed away.”

Fermi’s antennae droop. She sinks slowly back onto the bench. For a single moment, she’d allowed herself to believe in the possibility that she *wasn’t* the only one. That there were *others*, survivors from their annihilated planet, here on Earth.

But no.

The others were long gone. Fermi would never have a chance to meet them. Or anyone else from her planet.

I can relate. Once upon a time, this forest was *full* of Sasquatches like me. Sometimes I’ll imagine what it must’ve been like. To walk through the woods and see so many familiar faces. Faces like my own. A bustling civilization of Sasquatches, right here in these trees.

I let this fantasy run through my head, even though I know it’s impossible. Just like Fermi, my species is nearly extinct. But at least I have my parents. Fermi doesn’t even have *that*.

She’s the last of her kind.

She looks up at Agent Archer with fresh pain in her eyes. “Why are you telling us this?”

The agent pushes away her plate of pancakes. “Because I need your help. I know what you did back at Area 52. Closing the portal. Stopping the Krellian invasion. My fellow agents might not give you credit, but *I* do. You saved the world once already. I came here to ask if you wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

The Time Twister And Sunbeam

A tense silence hangs over the cave. Agent Archer stares back at us, waiting for a response.

"I'm sorry," I say, smiling sheepishly. "I don't speak perfect Person. I must've misunderstood. Because it sorta sounded like you said—"

"I need you to save the world," Agent Archer interrupts. "Again."

Okay, so it *wasn't* a misunderstanding.

The agent explains. "The space craft I mentioned. The one that was taken to Area 51. It didn't just contain three extraterrestrials. It was also carrying some seriously advanced technology. The kind of stuff our greatest engineers and scientists could only *dream* of inventing."

"What kinda technology we talkin' 'bout here?" Bruce asks.

"Two devices were extracted from the craft. The first was a mysterious little gadget. Small enough to fit in your hands. Well, maybe not *everyone's* hands..."

Her eyes land on Tiny.

“Oh, ha ha.” The mini-dinosaur says without laughing. He waves his short, stumpy arms around. “Let’s all laugh at the T-Rex with his itsy-bitsy hands. *Real* funny.”

“Sorry,” the agent replies. “I was just trying to be accurate.”

Abby leans forward. “This device...? What does it do?”

“It’s a time machine,” Agent Archer says.

For the second time, I’m sure I must’ve misunderstood.

I gaze at the agent, baffled. “A time machine?”

“The researchers at Area 51 nicknamed it the Time Twister. A device that transports users into the past, or the future.”

An *actual* time machine. I didn’t think that was possible. But then again—most people don’t think *I’m* possible. So I guess I have something in common with this Time Twister thingy.

We’re both not supposed to exist.

Same goes for most of the others at this table. My fellow Area 52 crew. Even Agent Archer. We’re all highly classified.

Everyone except Stanley.

He’s the only one in this cave who doesn’t count as “Top Secret.”

He casts a glance at Agent Archer. “You said there were *two* devices...?”

She nods. “The other device contained a source of energy unlike anything that exists on Earth. If properly harnessed, it could power

every home, every business, every car, every factory, every *thing* in the world with clean, green energy. They called it Sunbeam."

"Sounds like the kinda thing people could use," Bruce says. "No more pollution. No more drilling. No more wreckin' our planet, just so humans can crank up the AC and watch their TVs."

Abby nods in agreement. "This thing could put a stop to climate change!"

"Yes," replies Agent Archer. "Except Sunbeam is extremely volatile. If *one thing* goes wrong, it could unleash an explosion more powerful than anything the world's ever seen."

"*How* powerful?" Tiny asks.

"Extinction level." The agent's expression darkens. "The end of all life on Earth. Within minutes, the entire world would be swallowed by a flaming cloud of radioactive—"

"Okay, we get it!" Tiny interrupts. "This Sunbeam thing's all kinds of scary. Why're you telling us this?"

"As you know, everything inside Area 51 was eventually relocated to Area 52. Including the Time Twister and Sunbeam. Recently, my colleagues have begun tinkering with Sunbeam. Trying to tap into its power. And I worry that—it's just a matter of time till..."

Her voice cracks. As a heavy silence settles over the table, my brain fills in the rest of what she'd been about to say.

It's just a matter of time till they trigger the end of the world.

After a moment, Agent Archer clears her throat and goes on. "I couldn't accept what they were doing. It was simply too dangerous. So I left Area 52, without telling anyone, and I started looking for you."

Her eyes roam the table. Her face is a mixture of hope and fear.

"Look, lady, we're flattered thatcha came to us," Bruce says. "But...um...*why?*"

"Lots of reasons." Agent Archer holds up a finger. "First of all, you know your way around Area 52. You can navigate the facility better than almost anybody."

She raises a second finger.

"Also, Fermi belongs to the species that invented Sunbeam." She looks at the alien. "You could have unique insight into how the technology works."

A third finger goes up.

"But most of all, you've done this before. If anyone can be trusted to save the world, it's *you*."

Stanley leans forward. "How did you track me down?"

"I accessed the security footage from the night you all broke into Area 52. And used facial recognition software, to identify you."

Stanley crosses his arms tightly. "Then you started stalking me?"

The agent shrugs. “I would’ve emailed, but you seemed...well...a little grumpy.”

She has a point. Stanley isn’t exactly a people person. When he was younger, kids used to tease and taunt him. So he vanished into his own little world. A world where *he* made the rules. A world of video games.

Now that he’s an adult, he lives by himself, surrounded by pixels and programming. Whenever he *does* go out into the real world, he slouches past other people without making eye contact.

Agent Archer continues. “But I didn’t show up empty-handed. I also brought *this*.”

She reaches into her black handbag and pulls something out. A silvery gadget with smooth, rounded edges. The thing sort of looks like a shiny silver hourglass. It’s maybe six inches tall. *Small enough to fit in your hands.*

“Hold on.” I take a closer look. “Is that...?”

“The Time Twister.” Agent Archer sets the alien gadget down on the table in front of us. “Before I left Area 52, I sorta...borrowed it.”

Fermi narrows her eyes. “You mean, *stole* it?”

“I had no choice! Sunbeam could lead to the end of *everything*. So, yes. I took the Time Twister. I thought—maybe—we could use it to go back. To a time *before* anyone began experimenting with Sunbeam.”

Abby points to the silver hourglass on the table. “Do you know how it works?”

The agent shakes her head. “I’ve never seen it in operation. I was hoping *you* could offer some insight.”

Her eyes are on Fermi now.

“Your species invented it,” she says. “They brought it here. Maybe you have some idea how it works.”

Fermi picks up the Time Twister, slowly turning it over in her hands. “Even if I *can* operate this device, what you are proposing is extremely dangerous. By altering the past, you also alter the present. You could return to your time and discover a world you don’t recognize.”

“As long as it’s a world without Sunbeam, I’m willing to take that risk.”

“So what’s your plan exactly?” Abby asks. “Go back in time and steal Sunbeam from Area 51?”

Archer nods. “I know the exact date and location when Sunbeam and the Time Twister were discovered. And I know who was in charge back then.”

Archer reaches into her jacket and removes a phone. After a few taps, she turns the screen for us to see. On the phone, there’s a black-and-white photo of a thin man in a black suit. He has slick black hair and dark eyes. A jagged scar slices across his right cheek.

“This is Commander Peter Yates,” Archer says. “He was running Area 51 back when they found Sunbeam. If I can track him down, I’ll be able to locate Sunbeam. And *destroy* it.”

Her eyes move across the table, locking into each of us, one at a time. Her face is tight with urgency.

“But in order to do that, I’ll need *your help*,” she says.

She’s waiting for an answer. But before any of us can respond, our conversation is interrupted by a sound outside.

An epic world-shattering explosion.

A Killer View

BA-BOOOOOM!

The sound echoes against the stone walls and thrums in our ears.

I glance around at the others. “What *was* that?”

Nobody responds. But the look of pure dread on Agent Archer’s face is all the answer I need. She came here because she was afraid of Sunbeam. Of what could happen if the alien technology was triggered.

The end of everything.

What if the scientists inside Area 52 accidentally detonated the device? What if the sound was caused by Sunbeam? What if...?

Agent Archer leaps to her feet and races across the cave.

An instant later, the rest of us are up too, scrambling for the door. On my way, I notice the Time Twister on the table. Without slowing, I grab the silver device.

When I get to the cave opening, I stagger to a halt. The view fills me with horror. The sky is the color of ash. Dark and gray and ominous. Above the horizon, a crimson cloud churns like flames in a fireplace. As I watch, a terrible realization dawns on me.

The blood-red cloud is headed our way.

With every moment that passes, the flaming cloud grows bigger. Closer. Swallowing up more and more of the landscape as it rumbles toward us, destroying everything in its path.

I want to scream, but my throat feels like it's been sealed closed.

I want to run, but the fiery cloud is moving far too quickly.

I want to hide, but that wouldn't do any good. There's no getting away from what's coming.

The end of all life on Earth. Those were Archer's words. And now her worst fears are turning into a reality.

Sunbeam is coming for all of us.

The flames surge forward at nerve-rattling speed. This terrible sight is joined by a terrible sound. A deep roar, growing louder and louder with each second, like thunder that never ends.

My friends are beside me. But my parents *aren't*. Dad's out hunting. Mom's up on the mountain.

An awful thought stabs at my brain.

I'll never see them again. Or have the chance to tell them I love them. Or say goodbye.

I wish I could find them, give them one last hug before the world ends, but there's no time for that. There's no time for *anything*. The flames are coming too quickly.

Over the roar, I hear Agent Archer's voice.

"If only we'd had more time."

More time.

Her words cut through the chaos. I glance down at the object I grabbed on my way to the door. With everything else going on, I'd kinda forgotten I was even *holding* it.

The Time Twister.

The apocalypse is reflected in its silvery surface. Red flames dancing across its smooth edges.

More time.

I could use the Time Twister to go back. Back to before the explosion. Before Area 52 scientists began tinkering with Sunbeam. We could get more time.

But there's one slight problem: I have no idea how this thing works.

Agent Archer said she didn't know how to operate the Time Twister. Maybe Fermi has a clue. But it's too late to ask. The blast has nearly reached us.

I have to do something! Now!

I give the Time Twister a closer look. The surface is totally smooth. There's no button, no switch, no markings of any kind.

Ugh! Couldn't these aliens have added some instructions!

But maybe there's a clue in the name. Time Twister.

Only one way to find out.

I grip the device on both ends. And then—

I give it a *twist*.

I turn the top one way and the bottom the other, rotating each end until they won't go any further. From somewhere deep inside the device, I feel something click into place. But after that—

Nothing happens.

We're still stuck in the present. The doomsday view is worse than ever. Fire towers above. Destruction roars in my ears. The scalding heat is overwhelming.

All my emotions are swirling like the fiery storm around me. Fear, anger, desperation. It's not fair! Finally, I make a few friends and then *this* has to happen? The world blows up!

This is all humans' fault! They didn't understand Sunbeam, but they tinkered with it anyway! Typical! They're always sticking their noses where they don't belong. Like with this forest. Sasquatches had been

living here for thousands of years. A happy civilization. Then people came along and messed it all up!

As these thoughts are thrumming through my head, I notice something on the Time Twister.

All across its silver surface, strange symbols have begun to glow.

Symbols I've seen once before. On Fermi's escape pod. An alien alphabet from her distant planet.

But what do they mean? And why did they suddenly start glowing? I'm pondering these questions as the flames reach the cave. A chaotic swirl of fire and fury.

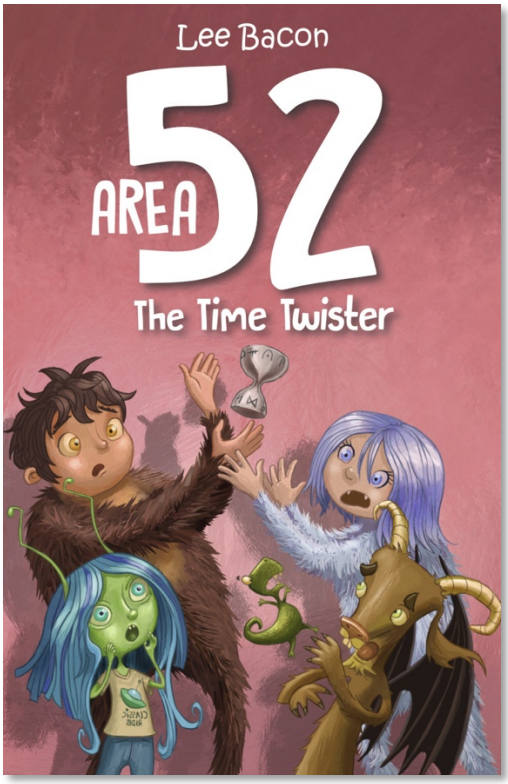
And then—

FWOOOM!

Everything goes black.

Want to find out what happens next?

order the book now!



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