

Time Travel Is Only for the Poor

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Orson knew never to have money in his pocket. If he didn't have any money, they couldn't force him to invest. Sometimes they made people work—or, “offered a productive path toward a meaningful future”—and as soon as the sorry folk had made a dime, the courts snatched it and iced 'em.

Orson knew the way out was to refuse to work. If you didn't work, they couldn't pay you. That was capitalism.

So Orson was very careful never to have money. But then one day he got picked up between panhandling a few nickels and going to buy a Ho-Ho with them. He loved Ho-Hos. They never had them at the soup kitchen, even stale ones, and sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

The courtroom was as shiny and imposing as his nightmares had imagined. The judge leaned down and smiled at him winningly. Woman could've won a beauty pageant with that smile, Orson thought.

“Have you heard of the option of cryonics?” she asked, with the kindness of the devil.

Of course he had. Everyone had. The whispers had filtered down through the ranks of the street folk, at first the perverse rainbow of a better life—get your hands on a dollar, then apply for a far-flung chance at being a millionaire, if you dared. Some people Orson knew had gone for it, tempted by that golden ticket to step through a portal into the future.

But then the whispers changed. The Haves had looked at the Have-Nots and declared it their solemn duty to make them Haves, too. Or so they said. To Orson it looked an awful lot like sweeping the riff-raff off the street where they wouldn't have to look at 'em.

“The government has a partnership with a company called Revesta,” the judge was nice enough to explain. “Do you know about Revesta?”

If she thought he didn't know about Revesta, he could probably plead a mental status exception. What, did she think street folk didn't ever overlap with her world? That her realm of sleek and chrome wasn't the same reality he lived in?

He wondered if he'd ever seen the judge before. If she'd walked by him, averting her eyes as if his kind were invisible. If she'd hoped to get him in front of her bench one day. Would she

have wanted such a thing in order to save him or condemn him?

“Revesta has a novel program for the indigent population,” the judge continued.

Yeah, he knew all about it. “A dollar buys you a lottery ticket where everyone’s a winner,” sang perky girls in the Revesta ads. “Come apply today!” In the ads they didn’t tell you Revesta siphoned half the profit every year. Most people who went in for that lottery ticket didn’t care anyway, though—after all, what was the difference between waking up in five hundred years or a thousand?

“It’s the notion of something called compound interest,” the judge said now. She put a hand a few centimeters above her bench, next to where her gavel rested. “You put in any small amount of money. Really, it can be pennies! And then you enter a cryogenic deep freeze. You tell them what level you want to wake at—you can choose a median living wage—” her hand lifted, measuring the imaginary wealth “—or anything higher, if you’d like to wake in the lap of luxury. Presto, you can instantly be a billionaire!” Her hand shot up high above her head, and her smile shone as if she were sharing a joke.

Why aren’t you doing it, then? Orson thought but didn’t say. He knew the consequences of mouthing off to authority. He also knew the answer, so what would be the point in asking the question?

“I don’t think that’s for me, ma’am,” he said instead, when the judge had paused for long enough that a response felt expected.

Her smile stayed grafted onto her face. “Oh, the Court understands there are genuine humanitarian reasons people have for not Investing. If you have extended family ties or other proof of community relationships—for instance, if you are a caregiver for someone . . .” She trailed off. Her eyes roamed up and down Orson’s frayed army coat, his unkempt beard, the black grime in his fingernails. “You’ll be provided with a list of valid documentation, if you would like to appeal.”

And if I just say no? Orson thought, but again did not say.

He knew what happened if you said no without documentation of a reason deemed valid by a smiling judge. The courts said you weren’t acting in your own best interests and took away your right to do so.

Then they froze you anyway.

* * *

“Excuse me—sir?”

Orson didn’t turn at first. Nobody called him sir. He continued down the courthouse steps, fingers crushing the legal papers they’d given him. He’d bin them as soon as he was out of sight.

“Sir?”

That time the voice was right behind him, and he looked over his shoulder just to see.

The person he ended up making eye contact with was definitely one of the Haves. Smartly dressed, with a shiny gray suit and shiny brown hair she had pulled back in a way that meant business. Probably business with a lot of zeros at the end of the bill. Young, for someone working in the courts, and white—or maybe mixed with Hispanic or Indian or something, he couldn’t quite tell.

“You talking to me?” Orson said.

“I am.” She stuck out a hand. “I’m Abby Wainwright. I was watching the hearing.”

Orson slowly unstuck his right hand from the court papers and reached out to grip hers. People didn’t shake his hand.

“Are you planning to appeal being asked to Invest?” Wainwright asked.

“You a reporter?” Orson said. It was the only thing that felt like it might make sense.

“No. I’m a lawyer. I work for an organization called Future Choice. Are you able to gather the necessary documentation?”

“I thought I might just skip out, you know,” Orson said. “They want me so bad, they can come get me.”

“They will,” Wainwright said. “The indigent population is shrinking fast, and law enforcement is enthusiastic about sweeps now that there’s a ‘solution.’ They’ll find you and charge you, and

that time they can legally refuse your right to appeal.”

“Oh. Well. I guess that’s that, then.” Orson still wasn’t sure why she was talking to him.

“Mr. Jefferson, the organization I work for—people like you are our mission. If you’d like to appeal this, we’ll take your case. Pro bono.”

“What’s that?”

“It means free of charge.”

“I know what it means.” He hadn’t thought he’d heard rightly, was all. “Why would ya’ll do a thing like that for an old bum like me?”

She smiled then. It wasn’t like the judge’s smile. Wainwright’s was too toothy, like she didn’t have much practice, and had only been told a smile was about peeling your lips back. “We think this solution of theirs is too neat and pretty,” she said. “Human life and choice shouldn’t be linked to a dollar sign. Are you in?”

“All right,” Orson said, because what else could he say?

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Orson arrived at the court early the day of his appeal, as his new lawyer had instructed. He’d tried to make himself look neater, scrubbed at his hands and face in the courthouse bathroom, but there was only so much one could do. He also had to carry his backpack with him, as he always did, everything he owned in the world.

Wainwright swept up the steps and found him lurking outside. He had felt too out of place in the lobby, the security guards making slitted glances in his direction.

“Good, you’re here.” She strode right by him and into the building, her heels clicking like exclamation points.

“I look okay?” Orson asked, lumbering to catch up.

“Fine.” Her gaze was buried in an open folder in her hand, reading as she headed for the security lines. “We’re going to lose today. Be prepared. This court can only apply the law, and the letter of the law is clear. But we have to lose here to appeal to a higher court. My assistant is on standby to file as soon as we walk out.”

“Oh,” Orson said.

“We have to go over what you’re going to say. I’ll do most of the talking, but they’re going to ask you your reason for refusing so they can enter it into the record. It has to sound honest, not too rehearsed, and it can’t touch on any area where the law gives leeway. We’ll go over it until you have it down.”

“This time’s my home, is all,” Orson said. “Don’t know how to live in any other.”

Wainwright looked up. “Perfect.”

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The hearing went as Wainwright had predicted. She did most of the talking, Orson said his one line, and the same smiling judge said regardless of personal sympathy the law was definitive. Orson was given a place and time to report at a Revesta facility and told if he failed to appear a bench warrant would be issued.

He and Wainwright left the courthouse together. She flung words at her assistant through her earpiece the whole way out, confirming the appeal had been filed and giving further instructions.

When three people with notepads and voice recorders popped up right in their path, Orson stumbled back and nearly went ass over teakettle.

“What do you think your chances are?” the reporters demanded, their faces like hungry scavengers. “What would you say to those who would accuse you of bringing civilization a step backward? Mr. Jefferson, why would you rather stay a penniless burden on society than have limitless wealth in the future?”

“Mr. Jefferson is exercising the freedom of existence that should belong to every human being,” Wainwright declared smoothly. “The future is not a certainty we can offer. Look how drastically our society has changed in only the past few decades. If Mr. Jefferson Invested, it might take hundreds or even thousands of years for his capital to compound sufficiently, during which time any number of disasters could occur. Even in the best case, imagine waking in a world alien

in its technology, its language, its social mores. No amount of wealth would be a comfort."

She made it sound so grand.

The reporters clamored after her, pressing with the same questions in different words, and Wainwright gave them as many eloquent sound bites as they wanted. Orson never said a word.

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"I saw your lawyer on the television," Frank said, while serving Orson some noodles and hard doughnuts at the soup kitchen. "Aggressive sort of gal, right?"

Orson was bone-sure Wainwright would dismember anyone she heard call her gal. Or sue them.

"You win this, a lot of folks here would be grateful," Frank continued. "It's scary right now, man. I see it. People feeling like any second the government can swoop down and scoop 'em off to the future. It ain't right."

"Suppose not," Orson agreed, picking up his tray.

"It's a fine thing you're doing. Damn fine thing," Frank called after him.

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Orson supposed he shouldn't have been surprised when Wainwright appeared at his corner with a cell phone for him and the invitation for a TV interview.

Or at least, she said it was an invitation. It sounded like a command, do or die, do not pass go.

"I got nothing to wear," Orson said.

"Don't worry about it." Wainwright was tapping text messages into her own phone. "Be at the studio at eleven A.M.—it's only a few blocks from here. The cell phone's got a clock. The battery will last for a week; if you can't find somewhere to charge it, tell me so and I'll have someone come swap it out."

It was like she thought he'd never seen a cell phone before. This one was an old-style flip phone. Orson remembered a friend of his, Karina, showing off a new flip phone years ago when they were all the rage.

"I'm telling you, all you need is a phone. You get yourself a real-life phone number, you can get yourself a job," she'd preached at everyone, before leaving for her new job and never coming back. He wondered what had happened to her. He hoped she was well.

Now the whole population had smartphones and earpieces, walking around with the whole world in their eyeballs and voices in their heads. Orson was already too old for this century, let alone any other.

He got to the studio at 10:40 according to the phone. A security guard tried to tell him to "move along" before a skinny assistant wearing a headset and red plastic-framed eyeglasses descended and commandeered him. The assistant brought him into a long warehouse room, saying words like "Roger" and "Go to two" into the headset the whole time. He left Orson with a plump, frizzy-haired wardrobe lady and a young woman with kind eyes and skin like brown silk.

The wardrobe lady took a look at him and then started digging through racks of clothing, rambling to herself about lighting and what the host was wearing. The kind-eyed woman smiled. "I'm Jasmine," she said. "I'll be doing your makeup for the show."

They stood in that awkward way two people can inhabit the same space and waited for the wardrobe woman.

"I read the bio on you they have tacked up," Jasmine blurted. "Thank you for your service."

Orson nodded. She wasn't the first who had said that to him, but she was the first in a long time.

"My sister's a marine," Jasmine went on. "She's overseas right now. I pray for her to come home safe, but she's so proud, you know?"

"Jarhead, huh?" Orson felt himself starting to smile. "Couple of jarheads saved my life once. That was a story."

Jasmine smiled back, half her mouth curving up as if it was too shy to bloom all the way. "You know, I'll be wrapped after your interview. Would you maybe like to get some coffee?"

"I don't got any money," Orson said. "You mighta heard." He said it like it was a joke. Regret was for young men. He was too old for her anyway.

"I'm buying." She was still smiling. She smelled faintly of jasmine, like her name.

Wainwright stalked in. "What's going on here? No, no, no. No wardrobe, no makeup. Are you people dim? This has to look authentic. Mr. Jefferson, come on to the green room."

"Oh—I can at least do a little powder, or—" Jasmine tried to offer.

"I said no; are you hard of hearing?" Wainwright grabbed Orson's upper arm and hustled him along with her. "Now, I've got some talking points to go over with you. We want you to come off simple but not mentally deficient, intelligent but not educated, sincere but not noticeably well-spoken. We'll emphasize that you grew up in this city. And we'll stress your military service. People like to get angry about seeing vets on the streets."

Orson looked back at Jasmine as he was whisked away. She gave him a little wave.

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The interview turned out to be easy. Wainwright was on with him, and she did most of the talking, again. They sat together with the meticulously groomed host in an island surrounded by bright lights, and Orson only had to contribute a sentence here or there, when the host turned to him with the same panting look as the reporters on the courthouse steps. Orson said things like "Yes" and "That's right" and "I'm just old, you know?" and the host and Wainwright nodded and elocuted off his statements with shining eyes, as if he'd contributed wise gems of conversation.

"This city, in this time, is Mr. Jefferson's home," Wainwright declared. "His life may not be one you or I or even he might choose, but it's familiar to him, and it has human value. But he makes us uncomfortable, so we want to disappear him to a time when he will cease to offend our delicate sensibilities. It's despicable."

"But you can't deny homelessness is a huge problem in this country," said the host. "Cryonics appeals to so many because it feels like a win-win compromise. How else would you begin to address the issue?"

Orson noticed the question was directed at Wainwright. He was not expected to have solutions.

"I don't think there is an easy answer, Harold," Wainwright replied gravely. "But that doesn't make it different from many other social problems that we freely acknowledge are multilayered and complex. After all, one could hypothetically think of plenty of ways to wipe out the homeless population that we would consider unthinkable from a humanitarian perspective. I'm merely arguing cryonics is one of these."

The host nodded and nodded as she talked. Funny, how rich folks could make *not* having solutions sound smart and complicated. When Orson said he didn't know, people just thought he was ignorant.

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When they'd finished, Wainwright screamed away in her fancy silver car and left Orson to make his own way back to his corner. Evening was purpling the sky between the buildings overhead. He'd been at the studio a long time.

They'd had good food, though. A whole table of fruit and cakes and chips and snack bars out all day, and a lunch with shrimp and creamy spinach and beef so tender it fell apart on his fork. He'd stuffed a bunch of the snack bars in his bag for later.

"Hey," said a voice. Orson turned to see Jasmine waiting by the door, her bag slung over one shoulder. She gave him the same little nervous half-wave as before. "Still want to get that coffee?"

Orson thought for longer than was polite. He figured he had three options. He could say yes, he could say no, or he could ask her why.

"Sure," he said.

They walked to a chic little shop nearby that Jasmine knew. They didn't talk on the way.

Jasmine told him to order anything, so he got a coffee and a piece of pie. Her coffee order was so long Orson missed half the words.

They sat by the window. The chairs were squishy lounge ones, and classical background music tinkled from unseen speakers. Orson pushed his bag under the table, where he could feel it

touching his leg.

"Thanks for the pie," he said, taking a bite.

Jasmine waved it off self-consciously. "Will you tell me the story you mentioned?" she asked, wrapping long fingers around her cup. "About the marines? The ones who saved your life."

Orson let the apple and sugar and cinnamon settle on his tongue. It was a good story. He'd tell her.

What happened after had been a less good story. One of the guys had caught a mortar round in combat his next tour. The other had made it back but swallowed his own gun four years later.

He'd leave that part out.

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Wainwright started calling Orson for more interviews. Ones that were farther away. The studios sent car services for him, and twice put him up in fancy hotels where he lay on top of the blankets unable to sleep and kept a hand on his backpack. Orson wasn't sure when and where the things all aired, but every so often now, someone passing his corner pointed or had their eyes widen in recognition before whispering to a friend. They didn't seem to realize he could see them.

It was still a jarring change. He was used to most people pretending they didn't see him at all.

Other street folk started coming up to him, their eyes full of an odd kind of hope. Asking about his lawyer lady, awed that he'd been *on television*.

Orson answered them as well as he could. It had been a long time since he'd sought out friendship, but he still knew most of the street folk in his neighborhood. Good folk, most of them.

For the first time, he noticed some old faces had disappeared. Had they Invested? Of their own will, or because they'd been told they had to?

Jasmine had started coming around on the regular, too, to buy him coffee and talk. He felt a little strange about it, but . . . the girl seemed so lonely. She didn't have many friends either.

They definitely weren't dates. She rambled to him unhappily about her dating life, going out with both boys and girls she met through those phone apps in the way modern kids did, how much trouble she had finding someone who wasn't a flake or selfish or cruel. "I want someone to curl up by the fireplace with who isn't my cat, you know?" she said. "Not that I have a fireplace. Or a cat. But that's the idea."

He'd started to feel protective of her, the way he might have toward his children, if he'd had children.

That made him think of Therese. He hadn't thought of her in a long time.

The last thing she'd ever said to him was "I'm sorry." The second to last thing she'd said to him was, "I know it's not your fault, but I just can't deal with all your bullshit anymore."

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His next court date rolled around—the court of appeals, the first one that could change the law. This time Future Choice sent a car service that took him to a different courthouse, but the routine was the same: he arrived early, and Wainwright swept him in and told him what to say.

"We might win this one, we might lose," she said. "If we lose, we'll appeal again immediately. We will take this all the way to the Supreme Court. I dare say the State feels the same, so this won't end today. But if we win we'll strike a major blow in public and policy opinion against forced Investing."

This time there were three judges, all older and with stern faces. They listened to the arguments, asked questions, and then said they would consider and render their decision shortly.

This time the crowd of reporters on the courthouse steps was much larger. Wainwright had to bundle Orson into a taxi and draw their attention back to her before he could get away. She'd thrown a twenty at the driver, who kept the whole thing even though he only took Orson around the block to meet the car service.

When Orson got back to his corner, more reporters were waiting. He dodged them and maneuvered down an alleyway. He slept that night tucked behind a dumpster, a ways away from his usual haunts.

He was awoken by someone talking loudly at him. “Hey. You Jefferson? Orson Jefferson.”

“Whazzat?” Orson blinked into the dimness of dawn. His bones were cold and stiff. It must be early.

A hand pushed a business card in his face. “I’m Manuel Reyes. I’m with the *Sun Daily Post*. I want to offer you an opportunity.”

“I think you gotta talk to my lawyer,” Orson said. He wanted to go back to sleep.

“Your lawyer stonewalled me. I think the appellate court’s verdict is going to come down in your favor, Mr. Jefferson, and that our state will be the first to rule against forced Investing. This story’s going to be big, and I want to help you get it out there. We’re talking speaking engagements, better appearance fees—I can get you a book deal with one phone call. You won’t even have to write it; I’ll do that part. No need for any crowdfunding when we get through.”

“Whazzat?” Orson said again.

“There’s a lot of admiration out there for your high-mindedness in shutting that down, by the way. You and your lawyer are right that it would have screwed over your appeals process without a trust set up beforehand—I assume that’s what you’re doing for your appearance fees? But it’s a brave move, sir, turning down money that would get you off the streets in order to save the little people, and there’s a lot of public goodwill for you right now. I can help you build that hero narrative. The Man of the People.”

Orson frowned. He took the card.

“So you’re on board?” Reyes rubbed his palms together. “We can set you up a—”

“I’m gonna think on it,” Orson said.

“We have to jump on this fast. The groundswell—”

“I said I’m gonna think on it.”

* * *

He called Jasmine on his flip phone. They met at their usual coffee place, and he slowly laid out what the reporter had said.

“You didn’t know?” Jasmine’s eyes became wide coins. “There was a whole social media campaign to raise funds for you—hashtag ‘Help Orson Stay.’ Future Choice put out a statement and said no, said it was a—um, a conflict of interest with the legal liabilities? Or something? Basically that you wouldn’t have legal grounds for the appeal if you had the money to opt out of Investing in the first place.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks. “Oh my God. I should have told you. I thought, you know, you didn’t seem to want to talk about it, or maybe you weren’t supposed to or something. I’m so stupid!”

Orson remembered scattered instances now, of her slyly joking about him being so famous online or the profit in going viral being as good as Investing. He hadn’t known what she was talking about. So he’d done the thing he usually did when he didn’t know what someone was talking about, which was not say anything at all.

“Is it,” he asked slowly, “is it normal on the TV shows—the people they have on, do they get paid for that?”

“I never took much notice, but I think it depends on the contract. . . .” Her face went stretched and taut like she was about to cry. “They’re taking advantage of you, aren’t they? Oh my God.”

He’d never wanted her pity.

She reached out and grasped the frayed cuffs of his coat. “We have to stop this. What can I do?”

Orson mulled. “I guess I oughta talk to my lawyer,” he said.

* * *

He barely got two words out to Wainwright. “This isn’t about you, Mr. Jefferson,” she snapped. “This is about an institutional system. If you want book deals and a speaking circuit, they’ll be ten times as lucrative after we win at the Supreme Court.”

She said “we,” but it didn’t sound like she was including him in that.

“I only want . . .” His tongue twisted over itself.

“What do you want, Mr. Jefferson? Is it worth more than what the hundreds of people shuffled into forced Investment every day want?”

“I want to know what’s happening, is all,” he said finally, with Wainwright waiting so impatiently her expression was like a tapping foot.

“Fine. I’ll have my assistant call to update you in simple language.”

She means layman’s terms, he thought. That’s what she means to say.

It didn’t soothe him.

* * *

Orson knew the verdict had come down because the reporters came in taxis and cars and poured out onto his street corner, flashbulbs whiting out the world and microphones stabbing like polearms.

He gathered he had won.

He tried to escape down an alley again, but they followed him. No wonder people wanted doors, he thought, so useful for shutting in people’s faces.

He finally lost the reporters, or bored them enough by not answering that they went away. He wandered in an unfamiliar part of town that night, looking for someplace to sleep until a man came out of the dark and tried to stab him.

Old reflexes took over. The would-be attacker ended up on the ground bleeding from his skull, his knife arm at a twisted angle.

Orson stared down at him, and adrenaline clogged his senses in a suffocating static, his mouth filling with the taste of metal and smoke. The world became like the panel of a comic book, flat and frozen and not even a little bit real.

It was a long moment before he fumbled out his flip phone and dialed 911.

* * *

“This was an assassination attempt,” Wainwright railed. “Someone out there is determined to preserve their precious system.”

Now that he could think again, Orson figured it much more likely the attack had just been a random mugging. He didn’t have any money, but he had a good coat and halfway decent boots and a blanket in his backpack, and he’d known of people getting knifed for less.

But Wainwright sailed off to spin it for the cameras, declaring the whole world was so against them that the government would send a catspaw to destroy their case before it could rise to the national level. Her assistant called Orson later that day—he was still at the police station, being interviewed by serious detectives again and again—and informed him in simple language that Future Choice had set up a trust for him that would be used to provide housing. One they would oversee. The crowdfunders were out in full force again, apparently.

Orson wondered if Wainwright was going to start charging speaking fees for him. Prance him around as a show pony and get paid this time.

Maybe she’d already been charging fees, and there was another trust labeled as being for his legal fees. He’d signed an awful lot of papers for her, most of which had been in dense legalese.

“I can’t believe them,” grouched Jasmine, after she’d gotten the story out of him. She’d started questioning him more closely, tugging out bits he wouldn’t naturally have shared. “Your attorney waves her lawyer wand and boom bam, you have rent money without it even affecting the court case? Why the hell didn’t they make this happen weeks ago?”

“I dunno,” Orson said, even though he was pretty sure he did know.

“Will you come stay with me until your housing gets set up? I only have a studio, and there’s two of us living there already, so there’s not much space. And I don’t think Maria will like having a guest, but she can deal for a few days. I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you.”

“Nah,” Orson said. He was thinking he’d call Wainwright’s assistant and make them get him a hotel. Just to see what they’d say. He’d probably be able to sleep if he bedded down in the bathtub.

“Can you walk away? Give up the case? I’ll help you get a job somewhere. My sister knows organizations who help disabled vets get back on their feet.”

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He flinched at the word “disabled.” He hoped she didn’t see.

“I dunno,” he said again. “I won, so don’t they get to come at me now?” It didn’t seem to fit together that he could win and then walk. The other guy had to have his chance to hit back.

“Orson.” She touched his arm. “What do *you* want?”

His reflexive thought was that he wanted his corner back, his familiar corner where he knew the good places to go when it rained and every once in a while he could panhandle a few coins to buy a Ho-Ho. But that didn’t feel like a dignified answer.

He wasn’t even sure if it was a true one, or if it only felt true.

“I don’t know,” he said.

* * *

The wheels of justice turned slowly. Wainwright and her organization were doing all sorts of lawyerly paperwork things, as dutifully reported by her assistant, but rarely anything Orson had to put in a personal appearance for. With the state law overturned, his next big court appearance would be for the highest court in the land.

He waited in a long-term boarding house, with the finances handled by Future Choice. A kept man, he supposed.

He slept on the floor most nights. Every so often he tried the bed, for variety. Sometimes he woke up and his hand wasn’t on his backpack anymore.

Jasmine had pushed him to search around for other lawyers. “They’re using you,” she argued. “You should get a second opinion.”

They were using him, sure, but changing lawyers sounded difficult. Wainwright and Future Choice were the devils he knew, after all.

“At least call that Reyes guy,” Jasmine urged. “The one who wants to write your life story. Set yourself up for after the Supreme Court decision. You need a plan.”

This was what he had liked about his corner. No need to plan anything at all. No need to make choices.

As the weeks passed, two other states ruled forced Investment unconstitutional, one under the eighth amendment and the other under the ninth. Wainwright’s assistant told Orson this in simple language. But Orson’s case had been the first, the assistant assured him, as if this was the gravest of concerns. His case would be the one to reach the Supreme Court, and Wainwright and Future Choice would trailblaze their way to justice.

And then Wainwright’s assistant called one day and told him the Supreme Court had declined to hear his case. The lower court ruling would stand. Forced Investment would remain banned here but not elsewhere, not yet.

The reporters didn’t swarm. The news caused barely a whimper. The public had moved on, and the groundswell against forced Investing was in other parts of the country now.

Orson was a free man. Technically, he had won, even as the people who represented him had lost.

* * *

The boarding house informed him he was paid till the end of the month. He tried calling Wainwright to see about the trust fund, but neither she nor her assistant took his calls anymore.

He tried calling Reyes, not with any sort of plan as to what he wanted, more because he figured he should. The man brushed him off in less than a minute and hung up the phone.

Orson wasn’t a story anymore. He’d missed his moment.

“I guess I’m back where I started,” he said to Jasmine in their coffee shop. It was what he’d wanted, wasn’t it?

Wasn’t it?

She sniffed. “Orson. I was going to wait until after your case finished, but now . . .”

“What is it?” He’d been so preoccupied with the events of his own life he hadn’t been thinking much about hers. Had she been quieter lately? Guilt folded in him, an odd old echo of the last time he’d cared about someone.

“My sister’s coming home.” She lifted her chin and clasped her hands tightly against each other on the table. “She . . . she wants to Invest. And I’m going to do it with her.”

Orson didn't know what to say.

"It's a smart plan. We don't have any other family, and . . ." She sniffed again. "I'm stuck. Just treading water. I'm in debt and counting pennies against each paycheck. My sister's going to help me get out of the red and then—the military has a program now where she can opt to get her pension for a reduced time but keep having it hit while she's investing. It'll build fast that way." She tried to smile. "She says we'll sleep for the better part of a century and then start over together, never having to worry about money again."

Jasmine's sister was right. It was a smart plan.

"I'll miss you," Orson said.

She nodded. A tear slid down her nose; she brushed it away. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave you like—I was hoping you'd have the book deal, or—"

"I only wanted my corner back," Orson said, still not sure if it was true.

"Will you promise me something?" Jasmine asked. "Will you reach out? Find someone who matters to you. Someone. Anyone."

He said yes because he knew it would make her smile through the tears, and she could leave without regrets for her better future.

* * *

Orson had a week left at the boarding house, but he went back to his corner that night. He sat on the ground against the brick. The wind cut colder than he remembered. The night felt darker.

He went back to the boarding house and lay on the bed. Stared up at the stucco plaster of the ceiling.

What do you want? Jasmine had asked.

He hadn't wanted anything for a long time. He hadn't *wanted* to want anything for a long time.

He had his old life back now. No reporters, no lawyers, no one forcing him to take a one-way trip to the future. Even Jasmine was leaving.

Everything would be like it had been before.

So why was he so restless? Why did everything feel itchy and uncomfortable, like a shoe that had gotten too small?

What do you want?

"I don't know," he said to the empty room.

* * *

The next day, Orson sat in the sun on a park bench for a long time, thinking. Then he panned the money for a bus ticket, shouldered his backpack, and rode downtown.

He'd been told years ago where the local DAV was, had seen the ads for it on benches and billboards since, but had always pushed those choices to another day. In reality it still took him more than an hour to find the right place. As he hiked around the urban canyons searching, passersby averted their eyes from him.

Just like old times.

He didn't know where to go when he got there, but when he pushed through the front door, a sharply dressed young man with a military haircut caught sight of him lurking and crossed the lobby to greet him. "Can I help you, sir?"

Orson didn't have a good answer to that question.

"I don't know," he said finally. His voice creaked, as if he hadn't used it in a long time. "I think . . . I might want to make an investment."

The man nodded smartly. "A lot of former service members are taking that approach. The first step will be making sure your pension is straightened out—I won't lie, it can be a bear of paperwork, but we've cleared a lot of the backlog since investing opened up so many new options for military families. We can hook you up with—"

"No." Orson shook his head. "No. I don't want to go away to some future time. I want to invest in *me*."

The man paused, listening.

ANALOG

“I’m here because . . .” Orson still wasn’t sure. But he’d promised Jasmine he’d find someone who mattered to him, and he supposed that person might as well be himself. “I’m here because I don’t know.”

But he wanted to figure it out.

The man’s eyes softened, like he understood something Orson couldn’t put into words. “I saw you on TV, didn’t I? You’re the man from the court case. Orson Jefferson.”

Orson nodded.

“Well, Mr. Jefferson. I’m glad you decided to come in.” The man held out a hand. “I’m former Sergeant Mark Crespin. Welcome to the present.”

S.L. Huang justifies her MIT degree by using it to write eccentric mathematical superhero fiction. She is the author of the Amazon-bestselling Russell’s Attic series, and her short fiction has appeared in Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and The Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy 2016. She is also a Hollywood stuntwoman and firearms expert, with credits including Battlestar Galactica and Top Shot. Online, she is cheerfully opinionated at <http://sl-huang.com> and on Twitter as [@sl_huang](#).