



Illustrated by Eldar Zakirov

# You Must Remember This

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Jay O'Connell

"Who brought me back to life?"

"I can't tell you that." The heavysset woman in the beige chair across from me was middle-aged, with neat, tightly curled hair and laugh lines radiating from the corners of a pair of dark, compassionate eyes.

My tongue felt thick and sticky in my mouth. "Well, that effing sucks." I took a sip of water.

I couldn't get a rise out of this woman, a serene social worker type. I wasn't sure if I found her bedside manner reassuring or annoying.

Probably both.

"And you were never *dead*. You were archived. Like a video on pause. We don't say, 'brought back to life' either, or 'resurrected.' We say 'restored,' or 'rebooted.'"

"How was I . . . archived. What is that?"

“You were caught up in an industrial accident, a catastrophe. Your body was preserved for thirteen years.”

Christ, *rebooted*? More computer metaphors taking over the language. Great. “So, it’s 2055 and I’m still twenty-seven. But I was born in 2015?”

“You were paused for thirteen years. Think of the archival state as a coma—”

“—a coma that fixed my back. Regrew my teeth. And detoxed me.”

“Yes. That kind of coma.”

“Tell me who you people are again. Sorry. This is confusing.”

The woman radiated patience. Despite myself, I found her presence calming. “I’m Asha, your restoration counselor. I’ll get you up to speed on what’s going on out there.” She gestured at the cloudless blue framed by the office’s huge picture window. “So you can take care of yourself.”

“Um,” I said. I’d been doing a crap job taking care of myself, but that was my business. The last thing I remembered was passing out cocooned in trash behind a dumpster.

I’d come to, stumbling down a corridor, naked under the soft white robe I wore now. Asha had lead me here, to this empty room with its window and the rectangle of blue sky and the potted ferns in the corners and the two welcoming beige chairs. She’d held my hand until coherent sentences could form. My memory shivered and stuttered like an old, gas-powered car on a winter morning.

“Can I check out?”

Asha sighed. “You can sign a petition for immediate release. If a judge decides you’re not a danger to yourself or others, you can leave. If you’re temporarily committed, you can appeal the judge’s decision to the Zeitgeist. That will take five seconds. But why not use our services? We don’t bite. You’re prepaid for a five-day rehab. Beats sleeping rough.”

I snorted. Like Asha knew what sleeping rough was like.

“And what is the Zeitgeist?”

“The Zeitgeist is what the catastrophe that archived you evolved into. This is a longer conversation and our time is almost up. For now, just think of the Zeitgeist as the circled Z icon in every computer interface: a digital assistant.”

Great. Another AI slave bot. What did you want to bet they’d given it a woman’s voice?

Asha’s seriousness bugged me. I didn’t want to attend her support group. I hated groups. “I’ve been on ice for thirteen years. What’s the big deal? I’ll watch a few videos and get up to speed.”

Asha shook her head. I wished she had a notebook or computer or something, but no. She just *looked* at me. Unnerving. Asha had told me the interface glasses and mobile devices I was used to had been replaced with implants in people my age. Direct neural feeds. So her computing environment was always available, driven by tiny eye movements and subvocalized commands.

Was she really looking at me or was she filling out forms? I shivered. Wearable computing was off-putting. Implants were worse.

“Did you learn about exponential change in school?”

I nodded. It had struck me as arrogant, thinking you could predict the future. People made the future, and people weren’t reliable. I knew that much.

“You’re wired to think linearly. You adjusted to accelerating change your whole life, but your brain perceived that change as a straight line. It isn’t. Change is a curve with an ever-steepening slope. Change gets faster as it gets faster.”

I sucked at math and didn’t want to talk about exponents. “I don’t believe in your Singularity. Zeitgeist. Whatever. Why am I here? Tell me in short sentences.”

“The Zeitgeist didn’t know what you were for. It didn’t understand where you fit in the scheme of things, or its plan, assuming it has one, which is still up in the air, thirteen years after the Catastrophe. You weren’t deleted because the Zeitgeist never deletes anything. It makes an archive—”

“Has everyone been brought back?”

“No. About 50 percent of the archived have been rebooted.”

“Why is that?”

“Restoration is very expensive.” She quoted me a figure, and converted it into a currency I understood.

I whistled. That much coin would pay for four years tuition at a private university! No way could Mom have scraped that together. I knew this for certain, what with my unpaid student loans and all.

So I asked the question I found most troubling. “Who would pay that for me?”

“I don’t know,” Asha said. “The Zeitgeist preserves the donor’s anonymity. I’m sorry.”

Someone dropping mad coin and saving my loser ass was harder to believe than waking up in the future. “This is effed up.”

Asha nodded. “You’re right. It is.”

The Zeitgeist sounded like bullshit. Like science fiction.

I hated science fiction.

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## 2

The room Asha left me in overlooked a lush park with a pretty pond with ducks and stuff surrounded by huge leafy trees. The last thing I remembered was the freezing night behind that dumpster, but it looked to be midsummer now.

Thirteen years had vanished in a single blackout.

From this height the park’s lawn looked like a putting green. Men and women in white ambled along paved paths, alone or in twos and threes, sometimes accompanied by people in gray jump suits. In the five minutes I stared out the window I didn’t notice any children, old people, or cops, though a few anonymous drones buzzed by that might have been police bots.

The blue sky was filled with crisscrossing contrails. Something like a blimp, but shaped wrong, inched along the horizon. The rounded rectangle shape was *massive*. There was something nauseating about an object that gigantic in motion. It reminded me of huge UFOs in bad SF movies.

My room featured a king-sized bed with a fancy headboard in front of a huge TV, a wardrobe, and a small desk . . . and a doorway to a private bath!

I shivered with pleasure at the thought of a hot shower. The bathroom lights ramped up as I entered the white-tiled space without ever reaching that operating-room glare. The floor was a heated, soft-textured material that looked like tile but wasn’t. The sink and toilet were pretty standard, as was the shower stall and the tub, but one whole wall was a mirror and I found myself kinda falling into it.

I’d sort of died and been brought back to life or rebooted or whatever, and *fixed*. I had to check out the merchandise.

But first, that shower. If you’ve taken plumbing for granted your whole life, I can’t explain how wonderful it felt. If you’ve lived outdoors for any length of time, you know what I mean. I climbed out warm and pruny and dried myself with a big fluffy white towel.

So, the bathroom wall *acted* like a mirror but it wasn’t. The glass hadn’t fogged in the steam, and when I touched the cool surface, a little interface thingy bloomed—a little spherical gizmo—and as I spun it, the room reflected in the mirror spun with it. The view was dizzying at first, but I got used to it.

I’d been a wreck near the end, my lower back all effed up, teeth knocked out in fist fights, the ones I still had decaying, going yellow-brown. I’d lost weight and muscle tone for years. The skin on my face and hands had that coarseness you see in the chronically stoned . . . big pored, reddened and raw.

My skin in the mirror was perfect, not pale but not super tan or weathered. I peeled my lips back and examined my teeth and gums. My gums had bled since middle school. I pressed my fingertip into the bubblegum colored tissue and it went white without oozing or hurting and then pinked up again. My teeth were whole, unchipped, tartar free.

I couldn’t figure out if I had my wisdom teeth or not. I’m not sure how many teeth you’re supposed to have and I didn’t want to look it up. I’d had my wisdom teeth out, back when I was on Mom’s dental. They said I didn’t have enough room in my jaw. I assumed they were still gone.

My eyes traveled down my body. I had hair everywhere I'd had hair before, and I'd never done anything about my hair because why would I? I wasn't wasted-looking anymore, but I wasn't buff either. The muscles I'd built up training as a wrestler weren't a natural part of me, and I guessed if I wanted them back, I'd have to earn them again.

I'd seen MRIs of my back, seen the disk damage and displaced tissue, and we'd talked about fusing vertebrae in the future, when the pain got bad, but then I lost my insurance and the pain got bad and there wasn't anything to do about it but self-medicate. Synthetic opiates were more affordable than surgery.

Everything felt good now. I bent over at the waist and touched my toes, a nicely challenging stretch that hurt in a good way. I leaned from side to side, twisted this way and then that. My back just worked. Without pain.

Oh. No pain *anywhere*.

The scar on my knee where I'd had a benign tumor removed when I was in first grade was still there. I cataloged a handful of faint white lines on my hands and arms, flesh wounds that had been stitched up over the years. I dug around in my scalp, and found a seam of keloid on my forehead just above my hairline. I'd been riding a bike without a helmet and flew over the handlebars, concussing myself on a curb.

If they'd grown me a new body from DNA or whatever, they'd touched it up I guessed. I was reborn, but still me. The me in the mirror felt more like me than the me that had wrapped herself in a trash bag behind that dumpster thirteen years ago. Last night.

I grinned.

Sooner or later, the future would regret bringing me back, but until then, I was going to make the most of it.

Back in my room I puzzled out the text on the spines of a dozen books in a glass-fronted bookcase beside the TV. The *Bible*. The *Torah*. The *Koran*. The *Upanishads*. *Dianetics*. Something called *Oprah's Way*. Not appealing. Reading makes my head hurt.

I had my choice of men's or women's underwear, a white shirt, pants, or pullover dress in the wardrobe, but the mini fridge with the complicated readout was empty. I hung up my robe, put on panties and a shirt but skipped the bra and pants, as I wasn't going to be appearing in court or going to a job interview.

I felt weirdly elated; I was getting a second wind. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to *do* something. For the first time in a long time I wasn't scrambling for a fix, food, or shelter.

It was nice? But I felt . . . itchy.

I climbed on my bed and bounced up and down, using it like a trampoline, palming the ceiling at the apex of each jump. I was pain-free. My back was fixed. My body worked.

The TV bonged and came to life, displaying a woman's head and shoulders. Asha smiled at me. I stopped bouncing and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not Asha," Asha said. "I'm a sim, her assistant. I'm not a person, but I'll answer your questions when I can and remember those I don't, so when you meet with Asha again in person tomorrow, she will know what you need. You have been credited with a five-day rehabilitation. That's not much time, so you should prepare for tomorrow's session until bed."

Her image slid to one side of the frame and a menu lit up behind her. Asha-sim read them out loud, one by one.

YOU'VE WOKEN UP IN THE FUTURE. NOW WHAT? was highlighted. The next choices read:

HISTORY LESSON: WHAT DID I MISS WHILE I WAS GONE?

USING YOUR ZEITGEIST FEED: MOBILE, GLASSES, CONTACTS, OR IMPLANTS?

HOW DO I ACCESS MEDICAL AND PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES?

HOW DO I FIND THE PEOPLE I KNEW?

HOW DO I FIND HOUSING?

HOW DO I FIND WORK?

And so on. I was bad with teaching bots and digital assistants.

Asha-sim stopped talking and looked at me expectantly. I slid to the left. Her eyes tracked me, like in an immersive video game.

“Getting through all this is going to take forever.”

Asha-sim nodded. “You have a learning disability.”

I sighed. “Duh.”

I had been diagnosed with this and that, tons of lettered acronyms, but nobody could do anything about them, except prescribe pills that gave me anxiety attacks and left me sleepless, nervous, and skinny. I twitched like a squirrel all through middle school.

Asha-sim nodded. “Treatment for your disorder has been included in your rehab.”

I snorted. “No thanks. I took ADHD meds. I hated them.”

“Modern treatment is a single pill. Your disorder will be permanently repaired in minutes.”

I asked her to repeat that, thinking I’d misheard. She did. I hadn’t.

“Sounds like bullshit.”

“Modern treatment isn’t pharmacological. The pill releases nanobots into your bloodstream that rebuild small but critical regions of your cerebral cortex. Less than a tenth of 1 percent of brain mass is affected. The core of your identity will not be altered.”

“Brain surgery in a pill?”

“Good metaphor,” Asha-sim said.

I repressed an urge to tell her what to do with my metaphor. Something about this conversation was bothering me. My guts felt all twisty. “So. Should I do this, do you think?”

“That is your decision,” she said.

“What’s the downside?”

“That’s a question I can’t answer. Complaints about the procedure are rare, to the point of being statistically insignificant. This subject has been flagged for discussion at your next session.”

I’d taken so many drugs, legal and illegal. The pills they gave to fix me. The pills I took when the fixes didn’t work. I’d downed so many pills not knowing what they were or what they’d do. Stuff cooked in pop-up fabs by phreaks and tweakers and sold on the street or via backnet delivery drone.

What the hell.

I said yes to the pill. She read the disclaimer. It wasn’t as scary as the horror show voiced to upbeat music in the big pharma ads I grew up with. No instant death, paralysis, cancer, skin falling off, shortness of pants, blah, blah, blah. I tuned out at some point and said yes, yes I understood and agreed to the terms of service, yes I released the rehab center from all legal responsibility, yes, yes, yes. Get on with it!

I was told to look in the medicine cabinet, which was empty except for a single pill bottle. Inside was a single capsule. I chased it with a glass of water from the tap.

“You’ll want to sit,” Asha-sim said. “You may experience a moment of dizziness.”

I snorted. That was funny. A whole moment of dizziness!

I sat. Asha-sim smiled at me. A clock appeared on screen, a big white round public school job with black numbers. I flushed, my face going hot as a numbness seeped through the back of my throat and up my nasal passages into my sinuses. My lips went all thick and rubbery. These symptoms vanished in a matter of seconds.

I pointed at the menu on screen. The items lit up as I moved my finger. Standard gestural interface. I called up the history lesson.

I read twenty pages without a break with no headache. The characters leapt off the screen, expanding into words and sentences without a shred of effort. It was like I didn’t even see the letters or words anymore. The text was like a voice in my head. I could read faster, though, than a voice could speak.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

The disability had been a part of me. Always. Deep down, I’d worried the LD talk was BS to make me feel better and work harder. My meds were just *speed*; they worked for everybody, learning disabled or not. Students used them as study drugs. Kids like me were fed them every day because we weren’t trying hard enough. We were lazy. Undisciplined. All the words my father called me growing up. When he was still around.

Only, I guess, I wasn’t lazy.

How much of my life had been an accident? A biological mistake? Fixed in five minutes by a pill?

I tabbed into the “HOW TO FIND PEOPLE” menu and discovered my mom had died three years back. A stroke. Something clenched tight inside of me. She hadn’t left a note. I hadn’t been named in the will. So, somehow, I didn’t feel anything I could name at the news of her passing.

Mom hadn’t been interested in aggressive life-extension techniques, and she’d never been archived; that wasn’t even a thing you could buy yet, so she couldn’t be restored. We hadn’t spoken in years. Our last conversation had ended on a sour note, after she had cut me off. Tough love, she called it. I’d told her to eff herself. I’d intended to get back in touch, after I got my shit together.

So much for that plan.

I found obits for an astonishing number of my friends. Many folks from our decaying exurb had ended up addicts. My best friend Joy from high school, who I’d fallen out with, had also been archived and never restored, proving that bad things could happen to pretty people. The only people I cared about from my time on the street went by nicknames and there was no easy way to find them.

My father was alive and kicking in Blacksburg, Virginia. I crept his social media. He had two very feminine looking daughters in middle school from his much younger wife. His profession was listed as “business process re-engineer,” whatever that was. Their house looked wonderful, lots of glass and brick, roofed in solar panels, with a swing set and vegetable garden in the huge back yard. The re-engineering thing must be very lucrative. My mom had paid his way through an MIT computer science degree before he dumped us. We’d lived like church mice afterward.

I’d slapped Morty in the face the last time I saw him, when he told us he was remarrying. And called him Morty instead of Dad. That was the last I’d seen him.

I noticed the single message pulsing in my queue, and I assumed it was some stupid sign-on greeting from whatever billionaire owned the network, but the sender was listed as anonymous, which was weird, as it had gotten through the spam filter. I opened it.

\* \* \*

BEST WISHES IN YOUR NEW LIFE.

MAKE THIS ONE WORTHWHILE.

THIS GIFT IS FREELY GIVEN.

IF YOU FEEL A DEBT, PAY IT FORWARD.

SIGNED,

A PERSON YOU ONCE KNEW.

\* \* \*

So I dug around in the history lesson to figure out *why* I’d been archived. My college debt was partly to blame, the price tag attached to my freshman year of failure. Children and matriculated students and those with mortgages had been given passes for having a zero-net worth, but the unemployed and unemployable, those lacking post-secondary education, with criminal records or sizable unsecured debt had been *vitrified*, stacked like cordwood, and eventually stored digitally in the Commonwealth data cloud. Archived.

I had been all the bad things at once.

I used the TV, which was really a console version of my feed, to order dinner: mac and cheese and two liters of Zephyr lemon-lime soda. The boxy thing I’d thought was an empty mini-fridge made grinding noises for ten minutes and then pinged.

Not a *Star Trek* replicator, but some kind of food printer.

I wolfed down half of the mac and cheese, which was white and thick with real-ish cheese, richer than the orange boxed stuff I enjoyed. I overdid it and then went to the bathroom and threw up. I lay in bed and drank a whole two-liter bottle of soda, burped for a few minutes, and felt much better.

The sun had set without me noticing, the room’s illumination gradually replaced by a lovely diffuse ceiling panel glow. I removed the *Bible* from the bookcase and lay in bed and paged

through it.

Let there be light. I liked that. I zipped through twenty pages or so of Genesis. The *Bible* appeared to be a regular leather-bound volume, but the paper was slick and I could tap on phrases and bring up glossaries, definitions and alternate translations. I petered out in the “begats” section, which no translation could make interesting.

Speaking of begetting, had it been my father who resurrected me?

The message didn’t sound like him at all. Jonah, my brother, might have wanted to bring me back, but the chance of him having the coin seemed remote. I couldn’t find Jonah; he didn’t have a mobile, a social media account, or a public feed address. He’d gone off the grid before I’d left home for my freshman year of college. Last I knew he was mushroom picking in the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Would Morty have dropped that kind of coin on his wayward pansexual daughter? He hadn’t been interested in helping out back when I was picking out colleges.

Morty was a tool. My mom’s divorce attorney had been completely incompetent, too, and we’d paid a steep price for that as family.

I dimmed the lights and pressed my face into my pillow and screamed. Then I cried for a longish time. I guess it was about my mom. We hadn’t spoken in such a long time, though.

Maybe it was a side effect of the pill.

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### 3

The future history made my head hurt. The history itself, not the reading of it.

I’d only been “archived” for thirteen years. It didn’t make sense, how much I’d missed.

Oh. Right. Exponential change. *Effing* math screwing me again.

I was born in 2015, and while we had a ton of AI when I was growing up, none of that “intelligence” was really *intelligent*. Nobody introduced sex bots to their parents or uploaded themselves or anything.

If you were sober, you could figure out if a bot was one in a minute of conversation. That Turing test thing. Nothing had ever passed it while I was alive. That I knew of. Not that I was paying much attention to tech while I was living on the street.

We had computers in everything: wearables, mobiles, smart houses and cars and buildings and cereal boxes, plus drones and robots up the wazoo. Stuff talked to you all the time and none of it was alive. Old farts prattled about how effed our weather was, but if you grew up with it, the awfulness felt normal. Food prices went up and down, coastal areas flooded, and big cities spent bazillions pushing back the tide.

So what the hell had archived me, exactly?

The event was called the Commonwealth Catastrophe, or the Catastrophe for short, if you lived in the affected region. The so-called super-intelligence spill archived about a third of the sixty million people inhabiting the coastal megacity that runs from the northern suburbs of Boston to the southern suburbs of Washington, D.C.

The spill had released self-replicating nano-thingies that had spread like wildfire. Rivers of grey goo had boiled through the megacity, converting entire neighborhoods, landfills, and industrial parks into blocks of networked *computronium*. The *Zeitgeist*, as this stuff was called by the technorati, fiddled with everything in the quarantined megacity over a five-year span and then retreated, turning back into an inscrutable and mostly obedient digital infrastructure.

So the powers that be were now some amalgam of the ultra wealthy—who had escaped the Catastrophe unscathed—and a colony of superintelligences—or one superintelligence; they weren’t sure still what was in that computronium.

I didn’t see how the new boss could be any worse than the old boss, so I stopped worrying about it. The real question was what did I do now?

I spent an hour a day with Asha and had as much time with her sim as I felt like. I was still subject to sudden waves of fatigue and a kind of free-form irritation as I adjusted to my new body. Asha compared the process to breaking in a pair of new shoes. She said I’d feel normal again as time went on.

She helped me create a profile for the job boards, a kind of deluxe resume that included full-body holographic imaging, brain scans and an extensive video interview. We set up my temporary housing, and I looked for something more permanent based on the kinds of gigs Asha said were within my reach.

“This is effed up,” I said, looking at the numbers.

Asha nodded. “You’ll be able to eat well and live indoors if you work a few hours a day.”

Cheap as dirt, AI-driven, kiosk basic medical care was affordable without insurance. Human doctors cost a ton, but nobody in my social class used them. Human therapy of any sort was pricey, too.

Still, it all seemed too good to be true, until a few hours of web browsing exposed me to the quality of life enjoyed by the shareholding class. Vast estates. Floating pleasure cities. Effortless travel. Exquisite food; the printed stuff had a certain flatness. Again, only poor people ate printed food. The upper crust had the promise of immortality. Legions of eager human servants.

“Poverty is relative,” Asha said. “Almost nobody lives on the street anymore. But we still have poor.”

I remembered her saying that rehab beat sleeping rough. She’d neglected to mention that homelessness wasn’t really a thing. But she’d never lied to me. Asha was all right.

But my thirteen years of storage spoke poorly of my family and friends. Well, I couldn’t blame my deadbeat friends or my brother Jonah. There was no way he’d ever be rolling in dough.

My fab wouldn’t make any fun drugs, but it didn’t balk at whipping up alcohol and tobacco, and while I was no longer physically addicted, I craved a high desperately. After my last day with Asha creating my profile and lining up temporary housing, I retreated to my room and conjured up a bottle of top-shelf booze and two liters of ice cold, name-brand cola. The fabricators were good with branded garbage food. No more store-brand soda for me!

The first sip of Rum and Coke made me groan with pleasure.

The fizz, the acid bite, the smoky heat. The caffeine and sugar perked me up while the booze calmed me down. Throw in the pack of Native American cigarettes (No additives! Practically organic!), and the huge TV, and I was halfway to heaven. There were about a million hours of shows and movies from the last hundred or so years included in my rehab.

I’d been absentmindedly chewing the nail of my right forefinger while browsing the media catalog. Before I did any more damage, I fabled some dark blue nail polish. The purchase decremented a credit-counter in the lower left corner of my display by a decimal fraction. Huh. Not free.

Turned out, nothing here was free. But nothing cost much either.

I put on an oldies music channel and painted my finger and toenails, listening to crappy pop music from my high school days. Then I drank and smoked and watched TV. Eventually I felt super itchy and lonely, and I found myself crying again uncontrollably.

Which, like I said, was nuts.

I spiked my Coke with the rest of the rum, jammed some smaller ice cubes through the spout, and wandered around the park outside my window, breaking open-container laws. If there still were such things. I fed the ducks some bread I’d whipped up in my fab for this purpose. I sat on a bench and smoked and watched people, feeling no need to introduce myself. Nobody approached me. I wasn’t giving off an approachable vibe.

I finished my booze and afterward kept falling down on the footpath, skinning my knees, and bruising my palms. At some point I noticed I wasn’t wearing any pants.

Someone in a gray jumpsuit helped me into a wheelchair and took me back to my room.

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Asha comped me another twenty-four hours rehab out of her pocket. I thanked her, feeling irritable and ashamed. She told me to pay it forward. I resisted snarking at her for being a saint. I’d met her sort before. People that made you feel bad about yourself when you disappointed them. People you sort of liked who were too good to think of as possible friends.

We talked about my addictions. One thing led to another, to another . . . to here.

We sat in the big soft chairs in her office.

Tiny glowing script scrolled around the blue pill in my open palm, an identity alteration warning. When I looked at the capsule, a pop-up window in my wearable interface appeared. (I'd decided to use the interface contacts.) The disclaimer in my wearable was longer, and much, much scarier than the spoken version.

"Is there an antidote?"

"No."

So there would be no going back. I had a weird thought. "What about my learning disability? Can I get that back?"

"No."

"Someone should have warned me about that."

"It was in the terms of service you approved."

"I didn't notice it."

Asha nodded. "You need to pay more attention to such things."

She was right and hard to stay mad at, though I tried. My mouth was dry.

"Your substance dependence is deep seated, a much bigger part of your identity than your learning disability. That pill will change you at a deeper level. The person that needed drugs and alcohol will be gone."

I nodded. I poked the pill with my fingertip.

"You will feel differently about your memories. Your past will feel alien. Perhaps disgusting. You may need additional interventions to feel normal again."

There were plenty of things I remembered that I already didn't like. That didn't scare me. What did was the idea of having to fill the void this would leave behind.

I had known plenty of people that weren't addicts. I drank and smoked and drugged with them. Substances were *fun* for them. They wouldn't dream of drinking in the morning to take the edge off. They got hangovers and then abstained, for days, weeks, months. They quit altogether, to take jobs with mandatory drug screens.

All of which had struck me as incomprehensible.

I mean, you have this intolerable feeling inside, and it's bad, horrible, and you can fix it, you can make it go away. Of course you do that. Sure, in the long run it ruins your life. But what is the point of living when you feel so *effing rotten*?

"You don't have to take that," Asha said. "You can do twelve-step. Use medication to stave off cravings. Make the transition to a new identity slowly. Step by step. Then take the pill. Lots of people do it that way."

I hated twelve-step. With a passion.

I picked up the pill between thumb and forefinger. I'm the type that rips off Band-Aids. I leap into freezing water rather than slipping in by degrees.

"Five minutes?"

"Closer to fifteen," Asha said. "And you'll want to lie down."

The chair I was sitting in gently shifted and seethed, slowly lengthening into a sofa.

I lay down and swallowed the pill.

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#### 4

I'd assumed I'd end up on assistance or disability or something, as a rebooted loser addict from the past, but I didn't qualify. Asha told me very few did, now that addiction was fixable. I found the prospect of looking for work terrifying and exciting at the same time. I remember my last counseling session with Asha vividly.

I was giddy and scared and ready to jump into a bigger, wider world.

"So, what about that base income thing everyone was rioting about?" I had asked.

"UBI never happened," Asha had said. "We had the Catastrophe instead."

I'd nodded. That made sense.

I did qualify for temporary subsidized housing, an apartment in a suburb served by this new, to me, gondola-based transit system. Those cute little aerodynamic pods hanging from disturbingly slender wires. Sometimes you got your own pod, and sometimes you might get a two,

six, or eight person unit. They reminded me of a ride over an amusement park I'd taken once as a kid with my father, back when he still lived with us.

I loved the sky gondolas. I wondered when they'd get boring.

I used them coming and going to my first paid gigs, two face-to-face support groups; one for former addicts trying to fill the holes in their minds and daily schedules, one for the newly res-ur-rected.

These groups were both total bonefests.

I partook, for a while, and in six weeks racked up more sexual partners, four men and three women, than I had while I was on the street. Speaking of periods, I was glad there was a cure for them, too. There was a movement against that, back to nature hippie bullshit, if you ask me. No thank you. Modern science was awesome.

When it wasn't temporarily murdering you.

I was paid to go to the groups, so I went. But I don't like support groups, and when the payments stopped coming, I stopped going.

Asha told me to avoid a net implant for at least a year. Voices in your head and icons and overlays in your vision 24/7 could tip a resurrectee over the edge. So I continued to use interface contacts, which made me look a little dorky, which I guess was okay. I was done with hooking up for a while anyway.

After support group payments ended, I worked the job-boards. I excluded sex work or stuff that was nonsexual but creeped me out (the paid friend/entourage thing) from my searches and still ended up with plenty to do. None of it made much sense to me. I did a ton of interviews. Screenings for big mysterious projects underway throughout the megacity. If I qualified for the project, I'd be contacted. So far, I hadn't been.

I worked as a courier for six weeks. Movers and shakers had become convinced that no encryption could protect a message from the Zeitgeist, and had taken to conducting conferences in Faraday cages stripped of tech, blanketed in Gaussian static. They shared the contents of these meetings as handwritten scrolls of parchment, wax-sealed with signet rings. I am not making that up.

But as a sign of the rate of change still messing with everything, a company popped up offering robotic couriers with animal brain-based control systems. There were animal rights protests over this, which pushed the company to steer clear of cute, mammalian brains, including monkeys, dogs, cats, dolphins and horses. They ended up using lizards and crows, as I recall.

So I was out of a job and back on the boards.

I bought a gym membership and started working out for the first time since the back injury that had tanked my college career. I had been a wrestler. Yeah, a woman wrestler. Got a problem with that? Good. *God*, my dad hated my wrestling. He hated most sports, but particularly anything *pugilistic*, and he had a disgust for muscles on women.

He'd told me that. More than once.

Anyway, my injury put an end to the wrestling, and my scholarship, and provided me with addictive opioid painkillers. Which led to flunking out. The house of cards that was me tumbling down.

My new body was robust, and the dehumanized healthcare system cheap enough so that if I hurt myself, I could fix whatever broke. I started pumping iron in earnest, pushing myself to the brink of overload. I used a cheap AI trainer bot, just a voice in my wearable. I didn't need a human to motivate me at the gym. I never had.

There were a bunch of new wrestling- and fighting-related sports, and the return of some old ones that had fallen out of favor as people obsessed over permanent brain injuries adjusted to these injuries not being permanent anymore. This amused the hell out of me, like the smoking in public spaces thing coming back, now that you could cure lung cancer with an over-the-counter spray.

You didn't even have to pay for the spray. You scanned these little holographic stickers from your cigarette packs. Free treatment was a loyalty program thing.

Blacknet, the seedy side of the web as I had known it, didn't really exist anymore, and I

searched in vain for a hacker who could crack the Zeitgeist and find out *who the hell had re-booted me*. Was it my father? Could I have misjudged him?

So I contacted a private detective. She said she could probably find out who put up the coin without hacking the Zeitgeist, which she said gently wasn't a thing.

But the finding out would cost me quite a bit.

Which meant figuring out a higher paying gig. Or a career, even.

I was attracted to the Death Matches. No-holds-barred fighting. Okay, the "no-holds-barred" thing was bullshit, as real fights to the death never last long and are no fun to watch. The so-called Death Matches were really the new pro-wrestling. I'd loved pro-wrestling as a kid, to the dismay of my few friends. My friends, who had ditched me when I became an addict.

My best friend Joy, who had tolerated my pro-wrestling fandom but not my joining the boy's wrestling team, had been archived. My dad wasn't around to sneer at me now. My mom would never be more disappointed in me than the day she died.

My career path was completely up to me.

I spent a few bucks on a kid's figure-rendering program called New You, which let you create customized dolls. Most kids went with variations on franchised characters, maybe mapping their faces onto them. New You made their money selling the printed figurines, which were cheap, or the expensive robotic, AI-driven action-figures that kids walked around with perched on their shoulders like witch's familiars.

I didn't have money for living dolls, but it was a great package for designing my Death Match character. The gym combined with legal bodybuilding drugs had transformed me into something even more sculpted than the woman I'd been my freshman year.

But I'd been born thick. God knows where I got that—both my parents and my brother were skinny, fine-boned types. After a year on the wrestling team, my dad said I reminded him of an East German shot-putter. I had to look up what that meant. They were Soviet athletes that took male hormones. I'd never done that. I'd earned my muscles with hard work.

I'd cried about that, late at night when no one was watching.

I watched a ton of old movies looking for inspiration for my character. I settled on a post-apocalyptic film franchise I'd always loved. It had started out crappy with all male heroes, but the re-booted films had women in lead roles.

I fell in love again with Anima. Of course she was skinny and pretty underneath the make-up, with a nicely shaped shaved head and perfect teeth and blue eyes glowing from the black stripe painted across her face, but she still kicked ass. I combined her model with mine and started making tweaks until I ended up with something, someone, totally new. Something totally *me*.

I named her Victoria Violence.

That night I fabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels and walked five miles to the Charles in the pre-dawn gloam. I loved the taste of Jack, which reminded me of campfires and the caramels my father used to give us when we were little, before my tomboy thing had gotten old.

I didn't need to drink more than a mouthful or two, for the taste. I sipped it as I walked.

I found a footbridge with my interface—there were tons of them now—and climbed the ramp up to the center of the span and stared into the river.

When I was a kid, you needed shots if you fell in. I considered a morning swim and decided against it. I had a good feeling about Victoria Violence, which I tried to tamp down, as my good feelings always led to terrible ones.

Still, I toasted whoever had brought me back from the nothing. Luke-warm whiskey burned down my throat. I drank till I'd had enough.

The bottle plonked into the river. My bank balance ticked down in my wearable as some unseen camera fined me for littering, but I didn't care.

I was going to make some serious coin. I was going to find my benefactor.

*And thank the hell out of them.*

\* \* \*

When you're an addict, there's the thing you want that you know you shouldn't have, and you

want it all the time. Your life is built around this. Getting more of what you need, and recovering from having had it.

Sure, it's a nightmare, but it keeps you busy.

That twisty rotten bit of my brain had been rebuilt . . . but a nameless ache was still there inside. Only now it didn't have a name. I wanted something. I needed something but I didn't even know what it was, or if I'd ever find it. Or who I would be, if it ever found me.

I had yet to make a friend in the future. I'd fallen into bed with a half dozen fellow losers from my support group, but nothing stuck. I felt no desire to keep in touch, and the feelings I guess were mutual.

I watched old television and then felt bad about wasting time. My bank account was dwindling, but I didn't go back to the job boards. I spent money I shouldn't have and attended Death Matches and remembered that feeling that wrestling had given me when I was a kid. I watched archives of matches back five years, to the beginning of the sport. I absorbed the mythology of it.

I blew my remaining cash hiring a stylist. Someone who could turn me into my New You model.

Someone who could turn me into Vicky Violence.

\* \* \*

My attempts with makeup sucked, and I wasn't going to half-ass Vicky. I found a guy with an awesome portfolio and a five star rating on a job board. His name was Olim and he was tall and lean in that drag-queeny way, pretty and strong looking, with golden, pink-tipped hair that fell in artful cascades around his shoulders.

I'd blinked him the models I'd created for Vicky, and he'd been enthusiastic about the gig.

"Retro Apocalypse *chic*," he said. "I love it."

So I went to the South End in a sky gondola and took a seat in the red leather padded dentist chair in front a mirror wall. He fussed over me, murmuring and taking measurements. He positioned my head with long tapering fingers in that way hairdressers do that for some reason doesn't feel weird.

His loft studio was huge, cathedral like, with tall windows admitting dramatic shafts of light streaking the exposed brick. There were sumptuous black and white photos of scantily clad men and women covered in fantastic tattoos; some traditional and some modern. All tasteful. No flaming skulls. There was a row of neon retail signs, advertising drinks and coffee and one-hour dry cleaning, and framed vintage movie posters, including that one for Armageddon Express, which showed Anima in tattered fatigues holding a bloodstained machete.

He noted my gaze. "I'm an Anima fan too."

"Those are yours. The tats . . . the body art?"

"Collaborations," he said. "With the people who wear them. But yes, it's my ink."

"You're rich?" The space seemed too big, too centrally located, to be affordable by a body artist or hairdresser or whoever Olim was.

"God no," he laughed.

I raised an eyebrow. I disliked rich kids playing at poverty.

"Oh! It's my place, isn't it? This is all *ra dioactive*, honey." He slapped his forehead. "You don't remember the dirty bomb? You were on ice? Nothing like a little cobalt sixty for making affordable housing! The South End is full of artists again. All the software folk skedaddled before cancer cures went over the counter. The Zeitgeist shows no interest in fixing the problem."

I nodded, feeling queasy. The gondola had mentioned something about an environmental advisory. I hadn't asked for clarification. I thought it meant muggers or smog or something.

"You can't feel the radiation, darling. It just gives you cancer. I'll comp you a Cure-All. I buy them in bulk. Cancer doesn't kill anybody anymore, they told you that after they thawed you out?"

"Yeah," I said. His coupons reminded me of the way movie theaters reimbursed you a few bucks for parking when I was a teen. I regarded myself critically in the mirror. The look was

perfect, but . . .

“All this has to stay put,” I said. “I mean, I’m going to wrestle like this.”

He blinked and nodded. “Oh. You were serious about that?”

I felt my nostrils flare. “Why is me becoming a Death Matcher *funny*?”

Olim snorted. “Calm down. I think everything is funny. I thought you wanted to *look* like a Death Matcher.” He smiled at me, and I felt the quick flash of anger recede.

“Sorry. Can you do it? Make my look work in the ring?”

He laughed. “I never have, but I can do anything. It will cost more.”

He said that, but didn’t go over his original bid. He poured a ton of time and effort into me over the next few days.

Olim made a bunch of tweaks to my makeup concept, adding some dimension to the carbon black mark across my eyes, contouring my cheekbones. He infused a permanent nanoparticle-based makeup into my skin and an adjustable pigment to my lips. We added red bioluminescence to my contacts, which washed out my interface, rendering it monochrome, but that was a small price to pay for wicked glowing eyes. My lip color fluctuated with my heart rate, melting from a cobalt blue into a flaming, cherry red.

He shaved the sides of my head creating a mohawk, spiked my remaining hair with super hair gel, and then inscribed my bare scalp with dark, swirling tattoos. The itch of the needle pinning flesh to bone bled through the pain block, but I toughed it out. In the old day, this much ink would have taken a half dozen sessions, but with the new auto needles and programmable dyes, he finished me in a single excruciating four-hour session.

When he was done with my scalp, he made me bite down on a funky mouthpiece, which at first felt like the wacky teeth they gave out in kid’s birthday party goodie bags. In a few seconds they’d adjusted themselves to the contours of my mouth. He got that faraway look that people had when they were lost in their interface. Then he rotated the chair and pointed my face at the mirror.

I smiled. My teeth appeared to have been filed into needle sharp points. My half-numb jaw dropped. The combined effect—eyes, makeup, hair, scalp, and needle grin—was mesmerizing.

I blinked at the woman in the mirror. “Holy crap. I’m beautiful! And *terrifying*!”

Olim smiled modestly. “You were both already. I made it obvious.”

I bit my lip, which broke the illusion of the holographic teeth. “Um . . .”

Olim raised his eyebrows. I felt stupid mentioning it. But I had to.

“I wanted my teeth filed into points for real. Your ad said you did body mods.”

Olim grimaced. “Sure you want to wreck your teeth?”

“Yes. I need them to be real.”

He furrowed his brow. “Are you allowed to bite people in the ring?”

“Technically, no.” I had a plan for the teeth. Death Match fighters, like the old pro-wrestlers, didn’t actually hurt each other. Like in pro-wrestling, your opponent was more of a spotter than your adversary. Which didn’t mean that Death Matching wasn’t a sport. It was brutal and difficult and painful. Being a Death Matcher wasn’t a thing just anyone could do.

So Olim strapped me into the dentist chair and numbed my face and carefully filed my teeth into points.

He outsourced the fabbing of my costumes, which were ready the following day.

I wore a silver studded belt, anklets, and gauntlets. My feet were bare. My fingers and toes sported diamond talons, which were removable.

I could toggle off the makeup, the scalp, and the glowing eyes, but my filed teeth would be part of me twenty-four/seven. Olim outsourced a pair of more sophisticated dentures . . . oh, okay *smart* dentures. I could slip them over the points and still feel my teeth like they were real, through the prosthesis.

That said, I seldom wore them.

I enjoyed my pointed smile.

\* \* \*

I spent another day with Olim expanding my wardrobe beyond the few sketches I'd come up with. I didn't worry about the radiation. He was right, you couldn't feel it. I loved this new/old South End, and was attracted to the people here, but I felt awkward when Olim wasn't within arm's reach. I didn't know what to order in the restaurants. I worried that the hip and stylish folk might see me as a kind of dinosaur. Completely out of it. I mean, I was.

We waited for my gondola together when he'd finished the job. He watched me devour a chilidog I'd fabbed at a corner kiosk with a look that combined disgust and delight. My molars weren't filed, and I'd gotten the hang of eating even with the pointed front teeth.

I wiped my face with a paper napkin, which I tossed into one of the perpetually empty trash bins. These devoured whatever was thrown into them, converting them into feedstock, which was piped throughout the megacity, like electricity, and data, and water. Jesus, did they convert sewage directly into feedstock? I burped, feeling the echo of the chilidog burning at the back of my throat and decided not to think about it.

I sort of missed real garbage.

"I really like you," I told Olim. My face felt hot as my gondola approached.

Olim smiled guardedly.

"Do you want to be friends?" I blurted it out without thinking because I knew, if I thought about it, I wouldn't say anything.

Olim cocked his head. "Nobody has asked me that since I was in kindergarten."

"Yeah, well, I just did."

"You know I don't sleep with girls?"

Of course he didn't. "This isn't about sex."

"Good. You're adorable, but I don't think of you that way. Sure honey. Blink me. I'll take you out dancing."

That wasn't going to happen, but I smiled at the thought. We'd figure out stuff to do. He hugged me goodbye. I didn't hug back. I wasn't a hugger and didn't intend to become one. Olim found my stiffening in his arms hysterical.

He really did find almost everything funny. I wondered why I didn't. It seemed like a good way to get through life.

My gondola arrived, lowered itself, and opened its gull-wing door. There were a couple of teens snuggled inside who looked annoyed at having to take on another passenger. I smiled at Olim and then into the gondola, and the dude flinched at my pointy grin.

I enjoyed that.

I climbed into the capsule as Olim roared with laughter.

\* \* \*

## 6

As I kid, I worked in stage crew, enjoying being around theater, but I knew I'd never get on stage. Nobody would cast me in a major role. I might make it into the chorus or play an extra, but I'd never look the part in any of the half-century-old plays favored by high school drama departments.

So I never auditioned.

But I loved the improvisation, the skits, the drama, in pro-wrestling. So I watched the pretty theater kids from the wings, and then I wrestled, the only girl on my all-boy team. The two worlds were separate. Sports and theater.

There were a dozen or so girls in the league then. The insurance rules had been changed to allow us to actually compete when I was little. The first girls in the mostly boy leagues had been forced to sit on the benches, but not anymore.

I loved the focus of wrestling, the discipline of cutting weight, the camaraderie. I got along with the guys on my team . . . as one of the guys, which suited me fine.

Mostly.

\* \* \*

The promoter I met with was this skinny person with a shaved head and piercing blue eyes I couldn't clock. When I asked them for their preferred pronouns, they said they, which I'd

expected.

Good manners from when I was a kid were still good manners.

We wrote my backstory together. Vicky became a veteran of an Eastern European war I'd been unaware of, who had been archived by the intelligence spill which engulfed Germany, Austria, and Slovenia three years after the Commonwealth Catastrophe. Vicky had been resurrected to avenge her people, which I thought was pretty cool. Better than what I'd come up with.

I spent ten hours over the next week with an acting coach working on my Eastern European accent. Then the promoter introduced me to October Riot.

She was a statuesque blonde with a lighting bolt tattoo across her face (programmable, of course—she could toggle it on and off the way I could my makeup). In the ring, she wore an electrified silvery unitard. She had a thickly-muscled upper body, which contrasted nicely with long feminine legs. She was gorgeous, and reminded me of my old friend, Joy.

We hit it off, and I did this weird thing where I spilled my guts. I told her about what had happened to me: the archiving and my whole life story. She was a good listener. Nothing like Joy, as it turned out. I told her about my time with Olim.

"So, they're real," she said. "Your teeth?"

"Yup. Feel 'em," I said.

October leaned forward and pressed her index finger against my left front incisor hard enough to draw blood. She held her finger up, letting the crimson drop slide down her onto her palm.

"Ouch," she said, licking the blood away. "You hit an artery with those choppers and the fight ends fast," October said. "Even with sealants. Sever a nerve or tendon . . . It's problematical."

I called up an interface surface on the table between us and modeled bite locations, with blood loss simulations. October nodded. "Oh! This makes sense. It's doable." Blood loss was generally controlled by the bleeder; wrestlers triggered their own injuries in response to pulled kicks and punches.

"If this is too much, just tell me," I said. "I have an idea for the finale that doesn't involve biting you at all."

"No," October said. "This will work. We can make this work."

Those words, from a stranger, made me tear up. The only person who had ever said I could make anything work was my mom, and she'd said it, over and over again, as we tried different meds and nothing ever worked well enough.

Even when she'd kicked me out, after the accident, after the second failed rehab, and cut me off, she'd said she wasn't giving up on me.

She said she knew I'd work it out. Someday.

October, to her credit, acted like she didn't notice my leaky eyes. We scripted that first match together in a rental gym in the South End.

Vicky would be the Heel, the bad guy, October the Face.

As the date of the match approached, I had a hard time sleeping. Or keeping down food. I worked out. We rehearsed the bout once in the ring, without a crowd, Gaussian network jammers in place to prevent anyone from spying on us. Spying on October, I mean; I was still a nobody.

Finally, I would get my time on stage. Like the pretty theater kids.

The thought was wonderful and horrifying.

\* \* \*

I'm not going to bore you with the details of that first match; you wanna watch it, it's online and cheaper than a cup of coffee. Search for Vicky Violence vs. October Riot at the Boston Garden and sort by date.

Stepping into that stadium as my introduction echoed, bathed in the roar of the crowd, was the high point of my life to date. I reveled in the audience's impotent fury as I took advantage of the ref's distraction to sink my teeth into October's left trapezius, her shoulder, the muscle that stabilizes the scapula, spraying my face and the side of hers in bright red blood.

October had an oxygenator implant and nanobot sealants, which worked like a charm. The

whole match went off without a hitch. She had lent me money against my future earnings for my new wrist cuffs, these chromium bands Olim hadn't approved of, but which were more than decorative.

And so in the end, the third fall of three, while October stood on my wrist, her fist pumping in victory, in the half second before the pin was called, I flipped over and chomped down on my own forearm as I blinked the signal that detached my left hand. An impressive if pre-programmed gout of blood jetted from the stump, which I aimed at October's face, before hurling her blinded to the mat, one-handed for the surprise pin.

The crowd went nuts.

My severed hand and wrist were both capped by the bracelet; the cap kept the tissue oxygenated. Reconnecting the severed body part didn't even require an autdoc visit; you just mated a fitting in both caps and twisted.

Collection collars had been used in the Death Match circuit before, but the combination of the use of my teeth, which were real, the abruptness of the turnaround, my jetting blood used as a weapon, my character, our personal chemistry: all of it together released this perfect howling joyful agony. Catharsis and rage.

The bad guy had won. Wasn't that just like the world?

And oh, how they ached to watch us fight again, to see me suffer.

I carried October from the ring slung over my shoulder, with my severed hand held between my pointed teeth, both of us drenched in blood. October whispered warmly in my ear,

"I think we've figured out something you're good at."

I took my severed hand in the other and waved it over my head, smiling my pointed smile into the roar of the happy and furious crowd.

\* \* \*

## 7

Death Match coin paid the PI I hired to find my brother and my benefactor.

I was going to pay my patron back for my resurrection. *They* could pay it forward if they wanted. I couldn't be in anyone's debt.

I hoped—no, I *prayed* that my benefactor was my father.

Even if that meant I'd misjudged him. I could live with that. I wanted to think of my father in a different way. I wanted to remember a man that wasn't a total POS. Maybe that guy had been hiding inside of Morty all along?

And I'd been too angry to see it?

I graduated out of subsidized housing to a condo closer to the city, a floor-to-ceiling slice of a two-story, legacy brick building, a refurbished ball-bearing factory. For the first time in my life I had no neighbors living above or below me. Instead I had a roof deck with huge potted ferns that looked over a pretty landscaped courtyard.

My condo was equipped with a dishwasher, laundry machines, AC, and a Viking brand auto-chef.

On a whim I went to the Catholic cemetery where my mother had been buried. I thought briefly about buying flowers, but she was gone and she'd never know, so what was the point? There was nobody around I needed to impress. Just me and a buried body.

Two minutes after I'd disembarked from my single-unit gondola, it started raining. Why wouldn't it? I squished through the grass and fallen leaves, making my way along the pulsing orange line laid down by my interface contacts. I had one of those collapsible raincoats in my pack, but I didn't bother taking it out. I let myself get soaked. I found her stone easily enough, a modest one among hundreds that were almost identical.

A gardener bot clicked and hissed a dozen graves down the line, trimming the grass around the stone and vacuuming dead leaves. I composed an angry blink to the cemetery. They should keep the effing bots farther away from mourners. Show more respect.

Huh. I was a mourner. I hadn't known that, until then.

"Hey Mom," I said. I noticed the tombstone had three names, set on a triple-wide plot. Three names, two with just birthdates. Dorothy MacMurphy. No beloved wife or mother. Just our

names. Maura MacMurphy. Jonah MacMurphy.

She had not felt beloved, I guess, for a long, long time. Though I remembered a time, when I was little, when she had been loved. At least by me and Jonah.

The rain made it hard to know when I'd started crying, or when I stopped. I stood there until I was freezing, shivering violently, trying to say what I had to say and not being able to. But refusing to give up.

"You worked hard," I said. "I'm sorry we couldn't make it work. I'm sorry I was sick." I'd finally bought into the idea that my LD and substance abuse weren't really my fault, though how I'd handled them was on me.

I kneeled in the grass and touched her headstone, which was cold and slick.

"I'm sorry I disappointed you," was all I had left. "I wish you were still alive."

Now my knees were muddy. Great. I stood up.

I needed a drink, and I knew the drink wouldn't help, so I'd skip it. I'd go to the gym instead and let myself get beaten to shit by a sparring bot and then sit in the steam room longer than was medically recommended.

Next time I'd bring flowers.

\* \* \*

## 8

The PI found my brother still haunting the wilds of the Olympic peninsula. Jonah wouldn't take my money to come visit, and I didn't want to fly west just yet. I have a thing about air travel. I hate it. Corpse class, the newest version of flying coach, where they intubate and pack you into a cylinder, didn't appeal to me, either, even if it was cheaper than taking the bus.

Jonah consented to a telepresence call on my dime, two days out.

And for the first time, in a long time, I got drunk, really drunk, and as usual, drinking didn't help me feel better, and I felt no urge to keep it up. Hangovers suck.

I took a gondola to a rental TP suite. I didn't have one in my condo. I could have afforded one, I suppose, but there was no one else on the planet I really wanted to call.

"Hey Jonah," I said.

The hulking man sitting at the other end of the table in the virtual room looked mostly as I remembered. I hadn't seen him for three years, though it had been sixteen to him. He had been two years my senior when he'd hitchhiked out of my life, but was now eighteen years older. He still radiated the quiet strength I remembered. He'd made some attempt to tame the huge rusty mass of his beard and comb his long, frizzy auburn hair, both now threaded with grey.

Jonah nodded. "Sup," he said.

I wanted to hug him, but he'd refused a haptic interface. I was lucky that telepresence didn't transmit his smell.

The tenth of a second lag was barely detectable. Jonah never reacted quickly anyway. His diagnosis, like mine, had changed over the years. Basically, he didn't like to talk. He didn't do well with other people. He wasn't a reader, and worst of all he'd never played a video game, which had made him a social pariah.

Jonah was gentle and calm and a perfect bully magnet. He'd stopped me, a half dozen times, from killing the kids who pestered him. My interventions never seemed to help. So I stopped trying to save him, and eventually, the bullying faded away.

Jonah smiled a snaggy, yellowed smile. He gestured, taking me in with a single grubby hand. "Good," he said.

I grinned.

He flinched at the sight of my filed teeth. Damn it.

"Fight?"

I nodded. "It's okay," I said. "I fight fair. For money. And fun. Death Matches."

Jonah nodded. He didn't completely understand, I don't think, but he had always taken what I said at face value. He had trusted me completely.

"Come and live with me," I said. "I have a big place. It's really nice."

Jonah grimaced. He made this rolling "come over here" gesture.

I'd visited him exactly once after he'd left home during my freshman year, before the accident, opting out of spring break spent in the dorms. I'd flown west on the red-eye to visit him in the temperate rain forest where he made his strange and solitary living. He wandered a huge rain-drenched expanse of old growth woodland that was as silent as he was. Every now and then he found a mushroom or truffle or whatever that was worth a thousand bucks a pound. He paid a huge yearly license fee, and so he barely survived, but he didn't need a ton of money to keep his camping gear in order. He was a vegan, subsisting on dried beans and rice, mushrooms, and edible greens from the meadows and fields.

The only tech in his kit was this scrambler/stunner gun that he used to destroy the darknet poacher-bots that he competed with. All the mushroom hunters carried them.

Even though my visit had been short, I'd started to lose my mind after a few days. Jonah didn't talk. When I used my mobile, it bugged him.

"I can't leave my job now." I had matches scheduled every three or four days for the next month or so, with gym time and daily rehearsals on top of that.

"Someday?"

I nodded. Maybe someday. Maybe.

"I'm sorry. About what I said. When you left," I said. "Very sorry." I hadn't apologized during my one visit. I'd just pretended that the ugly scene had never happened.

He nodded. "Understood," he said. "Okay," he added after a minute. He puffed out his cheeks, and glanced about the darkened space, obviously uncomfortable. He hated being indoors. He smiled again. "Bye?"

"Bye, Jonah." I said.

\* \* \*

## 9

Then the PI found my benefactor.

"It's not your father," she said.

One part of me was deeply satisfied at being right. The little kid in me shriveled up a little, but my eyes stayed dry. I'll say one thing about support groups: however bad you had it, someone else had it worse, and they told you all about it. This shouldn't make you feel better, but it does.

The man who had given me this new life was a guy I'd gone to high school with named Nicholas Jain. I barely remembered him as a lanky, geeky kid of Indian extraction who had been a friend of Jonah's. Well, not really a friend—he'd been assigned by a counselor to Jonah's social group at lunch, but he'd sat with him and tried to interest him in video games. There had been a dozen or so awkward hangouts. My mom had had hopes that Jonah had finally found a friend, but Jonah ended the relationship himself abruptly.

"Fight," Jonah said, shaking his head. I didn't know if he meant he had had a fight with Jain, or if it was just him not wanting to play the first person shooters that made up most of the social interactions for boys aged ten to twenty-five in those days.

Jain was living in a WorkLife dorm space, which was odd, as he was a professional tech guy of some sort and could have easily afforded a private apartment or his own condo somewhere on the sky gondola network. These urban dorms were popular with young professionals, often located within an easy walking distance of their work campuses. Transitioning from dorm life to these intentional communities was easy, like never leaving school.

They even had resident advisors who helped mediate conflicts between floor-mates.

The very idea of this sent shivers down my spine. Like parents, but worse.

Jain had been in the year ahead of me at school, my bother's year. Jonah been held back, I think because of his social issues. I'd always been passed, even though my academics sucked.

I didn't want to give Jain the chance to say no, so I just showed up at his building after work unannounced. I punched the "private" number I'd gotten from my PI, including my social media profile as an attachment.

I'd dusted off my old Life Log account, which had been mothballed, and added some new photos and videos of me as Vicky Violence, a well as links to Vicky's pages.

Jain answered after five seconds, voice only. "Um. Hello?"

"It's me. It's Maura," I said. "From high school. Jonah's sister. I want to thank you."

There was a short pause. "You're welcome. I sent you a message."

"I read it."

Another pause. "So . . . why are you here?"

"To see you."

"Uh. Why?"

Jain was already pissing me off. "We need to talk. Buzz me in. Please."

He did. I took the elevator up to his floor. There was this big communal living room area, with two big, sunken, upholstered conversation pits, separated by a giant fireplace.

People chatted in little groups in one pit, and I noticed the network-block icon hovering over them, slowly spinning. Nice. Nobody was distracted by their feeds in that space. You knew if someone was paying attention to you. On the other side of the fireplace, a half dozen people in colorful haptic gym gear whirled and spun in front of a giant screen that displayed their avatars in furious combat in a ruined city. This was an oldie I remembered, called Powertrip, featuring a multiethnic, multinational gang of superheroes. The gamers all had implanted feeds, so their movements were particularly silly looking to me without the headsets I was used to, like some kind of alien folk dance.

Jain walked me to an empty conference room with a small table and four chairs. The glass wall looked out over a crowded city street. Autonomous vehicles slid by, faster and tighter packed than I remembered, and pedestrians and cyclists used elevated open walkways. There was no way to be hit by a car, unless you leapt off the walkway. This kind of Disney Tomorrowland crap was everywhere in the megacity.

I'd agonized over what to wear, which isn't like me. My stylist had a wardrobe she'd picked out for me, for Vicky-out-of-costume type interviews, but I wasn't comfortable in that stuff, so I'd worn jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers. Christ. I'd dressed like I had in high school.

Jain looked a little frightened in his business casual attire. Freshly pressed tan slacks, some self-cleaning fabric, blue button-down shirt. No tie. He was still tall and slender, with delicately sculpted features and huge cheekbones. Thick dark eyebrows and crazy long eyelashes. Professionally cut and styled jet-black hair, not receding, thank god, though now that I mention it, I hadn't seen a receding hairline since being rebooted.

Okay. Nick Jain was still awkwardly adorable.

"Thanks," I said. "For rebooting me."

Jain chewed his lip briefly. "You're welcome?"

"Why me?"

Jain looked out the window for a second. "We went to school together."

"There are a half dozen people archived from your graduating class. Why pick me?"

Jain shrugged.

"Digging people out of storage isn't cheap. You didn't pick me randomly."

He stared at me for a long time, saying nothing, as if he was waiting for me to continue. As if he expected me to know the answer to my question.

He sighed. "I don't want to be a dick, but I'm really tired? I just wanted to watch some TV and get to sleep. I have a big day at work tomorrow."

I felt my nostrils flare.

"Big day," he repeated with less conviction. "Really big. Huge day."

"I thought it was my *dad*," I said. "I thought he brought me back. He's still alive. He has money. He could have done it, but he *didn't*. He has a new family."

Jain closed his eyes. "That's terrible. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," I said. "Look, let me take you out for a night on the town."

"You don't owe me anything." He opened his eyes. He did look sad.

I smiled my pointed teeth at him. He twitched his head back, as if he was afraid I might bite.

"Getting tired of hearing that. Friday night. Make yourself presentable. Drinks are on me."

He gave in. We agreed on the New Frontier in Central Square at eight o'clock.

“Uh. This is a friend thing,” I said. “I don’t want to hook up.”

He nodded. I couldn’t read his facial expression at all. And for the first time, I felt nervous. Why had he picked me? Maybe it had been at random.

I had to find out.

\* \* \*

## 10

The New Frontier was a microbrewery that catered to the MIT graduate school set, an airy space bounded by exposed brick filled with tables made of slabs of polished laminated stone. The rafters were packed with a network of conveyor belts, robotic limbs, and pulleys.

You ordered your drink in your wearable, or if you wanted to be retro, by tapping up a menu on the tabletop. Human bartenders made the drinks, because, duh, it’s a bar, and then the robot lifts and pulleys and conveyers moved the drink to your table, where it was lowered from above in a dumbwaiter tray.

The place was packed on a Friday. It was Kaiju Battle night, and young professionals in motion capture meshes animated the holographic monsters slugging it out over the pool tables.

Jain was still clad in his business casual, the exact same outfit, and I wondered if he was one of those people that wore a uniform to save mental effort for more important things.

I was wearing a cropped tank top that showed off my guns and hard-won abs. I’d dialed my makeup back to something modest, and agonized over whether I should snap on my non-scary teeth. They felt like a lie to me now. More and more I really was Vicky Violence. I compromised, bringing the teeth in my pack. I could put them on if I needed them.

I’d settled on black alligator-skin pants and motorcycle boots with a low heel, the same brand I’d worn in high school. I didn’t read as Vicky without the spiked mohawk and scary glowing eyes, so there no danger of being recognized. Not that I was recognized often. I might be big in Japan, as my analytics suggested, but I was small beans in the megacity.

Jain’s eyes locked with mine from across the bar, and for a half-second, something flickered in his face, tugging at a buried memory, but then he waved and glanced over at the bartender and the moment fizzled. Something inside me itched, trying to get out.

We sat across from each other in a two-person booth. The polished stone table was actually *amalgamite*, a dense polymer left behind in some places by the Catastrophe. Small objects were preserved within the translucent depths, like flies in amber. Vaping pens, keys, watches, obsolete wearables, fitness trackers, wedding rings, piercing studs.

The Catastrophe had not been without human casualties, not this close to the epicenter. Several thousand individuals had dissolved completely without a trace, before the evolving goo had started vitrifying people.

A sudden bout of unexpected shyness had me studying a coin embedded in the table, a five-dollar Obama coin floating in a constellation of junk drawer oddments, little screws, paperclips, mysterious metallic doohickeys.

“So you wanted to see me,” Jain said.

I nodded. “I never thanked you, I don’t think, for being my brother’s friend back in high school.”

Jain rolled his White Russian between his hands, mulling this over. “We were better friends in middle school,” he said. “And please don’t thank me. I liked Jonah.” His expression was pained. “We never knew why the friendship petered out,” I said.

Jain pushed the drink away, puffing out his cheeks.

“My mother was afraid of Jonah,” he said. “We got into a huge argument over it, one day when he was visiting. I think it scared him. He never came back.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well. That sucks. We thought it was because he hated playing first person shooters. That you’d grown apart.”

Jain shook his head. “We didn’t play video games when he was over. Well. We invented a game together.”

He took another sip of his drink and grimaced.

“You don’t have to drink that if you don’t want to,” I said. “Tell me about the game.”

"I don't remember all the rules. It involved rolling dice and building Lego towers and bridges. Inventing the game was most of the fun. The rules changed all the time."

"But Jonah isn't . . . ah, verbal?"

"We communicated fine. Words and gestures and facial expressions."

I felt a brief pang of jealousy, which was ridiculous.

"I'm really sorry about what happened," Jain said. "I was bad at standing up to my mother back then."

"You were just a kid," I said. "Don't sweat it."

I found myself recalling a recent Death Match, a particularly gory one. I smiled, showing my teeth, and a couple at a nearby table did a double take.

"You don't think I was sorry?" Jain said sharply.

"No. I know you were," I said. His flash of anger at my pointed smile was attractive. "I was thinking of something else."

"Huh. Well. Parents are effed up," Jain said. Grimacing, he polished off his drink and ordered another using the tabletop.

"I'm not an alcoholic anymore," I said.

"Good," he said. "Was treatment for that included in your reboot?"

"Yeah," I said.

Jain fell silent. Looking at him I felt a memory struggling to surface. A purposefully fake-looking holographic dinosaur roared above a nearby pool table, spewing fire at a three-headed hydra with two spiked tails. Jain watched the combat, his face limned in the reddish glow of NeoTokyo in flames. The girl operating the hydra was skinny and smoking hot in a fishnet haptic body suit worn over virtually nothing else. Jain seemed fixated on the Kaiju.

Was Jain gay? "I talked to Jonah the other day," I said.

His attention snapped back to me. "Really?" he said. "How is he?"

"Good, I guess," I said. "He's still Jonah."

"That's good. How did you find me?"

"I hired a PI," I said.

"Ah," Jain said. "Wow. So. He told you?"

"Told me what?"

Jain blinked. "About me, I mean."

"Yeah, I just said that."

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a little nervous. Lots of stuff going on at work. I'm finishing up my bit of a big contract. If you don't mind, I'm going to get drunk."

"Knock yourself out," I said.

He stared at the table looking glum. I fumbled with what I wanted to say next. His next drink arrived. Drinks, really. Four shots of different candy colored liquors and a fruity looking chaser in a chilled glass.

"Aren't those girl drinks?"

"Without a doubt," Jain said. "I like them." He removed the lid from one of his shots and it burst into a brilliant yellow flame.

He blew it out and downed it. "Liquid courage," he said. "Girly style."

I laughed. My God he was adorable. "What do you need courage for?"

He shrugged. He peeled off the lid of his second shot, the pink one, which trembled and sent up a tiny mushroom cloud that smelled like roses. Jain coughed and waved it away before downing it in a single gulp, grimacing.

I tapped up a blunt, a tobacco/cannabis mix, which arrived a minute later via dumbwaiter. A tiny plastic weightlifter held the joint aloft. I looked for the bartender, who caught my eye and gave me a wink. I flexed my bicep at him, and he grinned.

I felt warm inside. One nice thing about not being an alcoholic is that a drink or two can give you a nice buzz. And you can enjoy that buzz without needing more.

"So I watched a bunch of your Vicky stuff," Jonah said. "It was awesome. You're killing it."

I did my *aww shucks it ain't no big deal* thing. Which was bullshit. I thought it was a huge

deal.

“You like playing the bad guy?”

I nodded. “It’s liberating. Having power and not being afraid to use it. No mincing around, worrying about other people’s feelings.”

“You were never afraid,” Jain said.

I laughed. “When I was in school? I was terrified.”

Jain raised his eyebrows. I took a hit off the blunt, and the tobacco and fruity weed mixed with the tang of the beer and released a flood of nostalgia so deep, so hard, that it literally curled my toes. I closed my eyes and let my head rock back. I’d spent many of my teenage years in this state. God, it felt good.

When I opened my eyes I could see that the booze was hitting Jain, too. The tension in his forehead had melted away, finally. He met my eye and sighed. He smiled nervously.

And our past came roaring back.

\* \* \*

## 11

I was limping through the tail end of my freshman year of high school, just barely holding myself together. Yeah, I was bullied. I’m guessing you figured that out already.

I’d just snuck out of the house, through the window, and down the emergency rope ladder into the side yard where Joy was waiting for me, lurking in a pool of darkness created by a burnt-out streetlight. She frowned at my appearance as I loped into view, handed me a lipstick, and unbuttoned and removed my flannel men’s shirt and cinched the arms around my waist, leaving me shivering, feeling over-exposed in my white tank top.

She nodded grimly. “Better.”

Joy and I ran track together after school. I wasn’t built for running. She was tall and willowy, I was broad-shouldered and thick thighed. Joy ditched me when I went out for wrestling my senior year. I was summarily blocked and defriended. Ghosted. She breezed past me in the halls, pretending not to know my name.

I’d thought of Joy as my best friend.

I was never sure why she had wanted me around in the first place. I’d worried that she kept me close so she would shine brighter. I mean, I wasn’t *horrible* looking. But maybe I was like that banana people include in photos of tech gear. I provided a sense of scale for Joy’s hotness.

Joy summoned a ride. Her parents gave her a ride-share allowance, mine didn’t, and the tiny smart car (yes, things were smart even back then) ferried us across the tracks to the schmancy suburb that composed half our public school district.

We were lucky, the folks on my side of town, that the people on the other hadn’t been allowed to incorporate and exclude us from their well-funded public high school. Oh, they had vocational courses for us, but you didn’t *have* to take them if you didn’t want to. My parents rode me hard to keep me out of the vocational track where I probably belonged.

The party we were headed toward was at Jon Don Hellman’s. Jon was the son of an orthodontist who had added a soundproofed wing to his McMansion so his son could practice drums without driving the family nuts. Jon’s band was called The Nameless, and the party was in his practice space.

Joy slid open the sliding glass door, releasing a cloud of cannabis and beer-scented air, tinged with the whiff of tightly packed, overheated teens.

Grids of LEDs taped to the walls sprayed pulses of shifting, vivid color through the crowded room, in a rhythm that was supposed to induce altered brain states. It sort of worked. After staring a few seconds, the walls bulged and receded as if they were breathing.

The band was loud, and other than Jon, not very good. They performed breathless covers of decades-old music. The singer was badly miked. Dancers stuttered in the strobing play of color and shadow.

Joy handed me a bottle of cheap big-box branded Peppermint Schnapps she’d brought with her. I’d been told not to accept a drink from anybody unless I saw it being poured. A guy I didn’t know, a senior, passed us a blunt. Smoke drizzled from his nostrils, so I figured it was okay to

take a hit. Nobody seemed to care that we were freshmen. Joy and I had gotten high a few times before, but weed was still a novel experience. I took a puff, and coughed. The pot had been mixed with tobacco, which I hadn't ever smoked before. The combination hit me hard.

"That guy is staring at you," Joy said. She passed me back the bottle of Schnapps. I took a swig that tasted like toothpaste dissolved in rubbing alcohol.

I looked where Joy was pointing but didn't notice anybody looking our way. I took another puff and coughed. "No he isn't."

"Don't be obvious. He looks away when you look at him. Move your eyes, not your whole head."

She was right. He was looking at me. He was familiar, a friend of my older brother's but I'd forgotten his name. He was sort of hot. Tall and skinny and dark with aristocratic looking features that reminded me of a fashion model.

"He's looking at you," I said.

"You would think," Joy said. "But no. It's you."

I puffed the joint. I was getting used to the tobacco. "So?"

"You owe me that dare," she said.

I felt a sinking in my gut. We swapped dares. There was never any truth component.

"Go and kiss him," Joy said.

"I can't just walk up and kiss a guy I barely know. That's harassment."

"Not if you're a girl. You are a girl, right?"

"Ha-ha," I said. "And don't be sexist. It's still harassment. It doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl."

Joy rolled her eyes. "Don't be political. Just go ask."

"Just walk up and ask if I can kiss him?"

She nodded, grinning like crazy. "You owe me."

The idea sort of appealed to me? I was half-drunk and fully stoned. And while Joy had had a half dozen boyfriends, I'd had none. This seemed like as good a way of starting a relationship as any. You figured out if there was physical attraction *first*. Instead of getting fixated on a friend and finding out later they thought you were gross.

It all made perfect sense at that moment. I'd go and ask.

I pushed my way through the crowd to Jain, because of course the guy was Jain. He pretended not to notice me making my way to him. He peered at the band through the smoke, refusing to acknowledge my presence at his side. I snapped my fingers in his face.

"Hey!" I said.

He blinked down at me.

"Can I kiss you?" I shouted over the music.

His Adam's apple bobbed once. He looked scared but nodded.

"You have to say it," I shouted. "Out loud."

He leaned in close to my ear. "Yes," he said, much too loudly. I flinched. "Sorry! Yes. I would like to kiss you. For you to kiss me, I mean. Yes to both those things. . . ."

His voice trailed off. He looked helpless.

I liked that and moved closer to him. Our lips touched. The kiss began all tentative and awkward and then deepened as we both relaxed—thank you dope and alcohol—and we discovered a new language of lips and tongues and sighs, our bodies pressed tightly together.

We both came up for air, and then retreated to a dark corner, settling into a pile of beanbag chairs for the long haul. I gently brushed his roaming hands away from my sensitive regions. I was enjoying the kissing. I didn't need anything else. He responded to my cues instantly.

I felt safe, and warm, and accepted in a way I hadn't known possible. In a way I hadn't known I'd needed. I felt so good it hurt.

When the sirens pulsed outside some unknowable time later, neither of us could form coherent sentences. The cops showing up ended the party abruptly. We slipped out the sliding glass doors together holding hands and tumbled into the undeveloped land behind Jon's house. Joy skittered past us with a tall boy, a basketball player, beckoning Jain and me deeper down the

path into the woods.

I wasn't ready for that. Not then. Oh, but maybe soon, I thought. Maybe soon.

I gave Jain one last, long, lingering kiss and then said goodbye and ran all the way home.

We never spoke again.

\* \* \*

## 12

Jain picked up his final, antifreeze-blue shot and extended it to me in a toast. I tapped the shot with my beer glass. I was now furious with him. He slammed the shot on the table and the glass misted over. A sheet of ice bloomed on top of the trembling liquid. He cracked it with his knuckle and knocked the shot back.

He crunched the ice with his molars. His eyes crept up, meeting mine, and he smiled tremulously. His face was flushed.

"You remember me now?" he said.

The beer, the pot, his angular face in the game light had brought it all rushing back. This wonderful, horrible thing I'd completely suppressed. "You never called me, after the party. You never texted."

"You didn't either," Jain said.

"I assaulted you. So *you* had to reach out to *me*."

"You didn't *assault* me. You asked if I wanted to kiss. I said yes. Out loud."

I waved that off. "That's bullshit," I said. "You were being polite. You didn't want to be seen with me afterward in the cold light of day."

He laughed. "God, I wanted to call. You must know that? We kissed for an hour. Nobody kisses someone for an hour to be polite."

If I'd been sober I would have put it together. He'd already said it. I touched his shoulder. "Tell me." My voice was doing things that embarrassed me, but I pushed on. "Why didn't you call?"

He downed his chaser and held his forehead with one hand, eyes closed. "My mom didn't like you or your brother," he said quietly. He burped. "Excuse me."

"No," I said.

I reached across the table and gathered up his shirt collar, jerking his face close to mine. I raised my fist. I caught myself at the last possible instant and patted his cheek instead of punching his lights out. Then I let him go.

Jain hadn't flinched. "I'm braver now. Than I was then."

"Well. You're full of girly liquid courage."

He nodded.

I slammed the rest of my beer and dried my mouth on the back of my forearm. "Let's go back to your place."

Jain arched his brows. "I thought you said—"

"For God's sake, I just want to see where you live, okay? I'm not going to jump you. Jeeze. I promise."

"That would be okay," Jain said softly. "The jumping."

My face warmed. "Don't count on it. I want to be friends. If that makes any sense. My mom is dead and my dad is a shit and my brother is a hermit. Joy is a bitch and she's still in storage, and practically everyone from my side of town OD'ed before the Catastrophe. So that leaves *you*. You're going to be my oldest friend. Got it?"

My eyes were watering. This place was too full of smoke.

"That makes sense," Jain said.

\* \* \*

The night was cool, but it wasn't raining so we walked back to Jain's place in silence. I wanted to hold his hand, which was so stupid, as I'd wanted to deck him a few minutes back. I felt this jumble of emotions I couldn't sort out. I didn't understand the obeying your parents thing, but I had to. I had to understand it if I wanted to hang out with Jain.

I still didn't know why he'd rebooted me. Okay, so we'd tongue wrestled for an hour. I had forgotten the whole thing, or repressed it or something. How important could that night have been

to him? He was a good-looking man earning serious coin. No way had he been *pining* for me for nineteen years.

That wasn't possible. Was it?

He stood close in the elevator, not moving that polite distance away. I took his hand and squeezed it. He smiled without looking at me.

"I'm not going to jump you," I whispered.

"I know," he said.

We got off at his floor. The apartment suites ran around the perimeter of the floor in a U shape, with the central lounge having a window wall that was the gap at the top of the U. The floor tiles absorbed the sound of our footsteps in a way I recalled from the hallway in my temporary housing complex. The door recognized his palm and eased open, the lights coming up in his tiny single apartment.

His suite was a quarter the size of my condo. The PI had dug up a little background on Jain. I knew how much he made. What the hell was he doing with his salary? Giving it to his parents?

The place was walled with shelves full of geeky stuff. Spaceship models. Action figures. Books and comic books in plastic bags. There didn't seem to be a bed, until I looked up and saw the seam where it came down from the ceiling. The coffee table folded itself flat to the floor, by the look of it.

"Huh," I said. "I'd like a drink."

"Sure," he said.

I unzipped my boots and took them off and threw them in the tray by the door. "You have seltzer and lemon?"

He nodded.

"Real lemon. The kind you slice. Not lemon-flavored fabricated crap?"

He nodded again. "I'll get it," he said.

He retreated into the galley kitchen. I threw my pack on the sofa, unzipped an outer pouch and popped in my prosthetic teeth. Then I started methodically poking through Jain's stuff.

He had two wardrobes and I opened the first and discovered I was right, he wore a uniform. Besides the khakis and button-down shirts, he owned three pairs of identical loafers. I perused his small paper book collection, his shelf of vinyl record albums. I opened the second wardrobe and let out a little yelp of surprise.

There was a woman standing inside, arms folded over her chest, her eyes closed. She wore a cosplay costume, vaguely kimono like, and was built a little like me, broad shoulders and hips, but she had pixie-cut cobalt blue hair, and *ka wai i* facial features. Big eyes, tiny nose, pale blue lips that echoed the color of her hair, an elfin, pointed chin. She was super cute and eerily familiar.

I'd watched this show, when I was a kid. I knew her name. She was a stone lord, which meant she could levitate earth and stone.

"Well, this is awkward," Jain said. He handed me my drink. I took a single sip and set it down on the coffee table. I hadn't been thirsty.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend, Jain? Or boyfriend?"

His Life Log status was currently single, but he hadn't hidden its history, and I'd seen a half dozen relationships over the last ten years. None of them lasting longer than six months.

Jain sighed. "Yup. Plenty. Nobody my parents ever considered marriage material. Lots of hurt feelings, over the years. So I gave up on dating."

"But a boy has needs," I said.

Jain closed the door on the bot. "Can we not?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. It's none of my business."

"So why are you here?" he said. "Other than to violate my privacy and punish me for bringing you back to life."

"Don't be like that," I said. "I don't care about your bot. I'm not a prude. You know that. Just tell me why you rebooted me, and I'll go away and never bother you again."

"I thought you wanted to be friends," he said.

"If you wanted to be friends you would have contacted me. You didn't have to tell me that you'd rebooted me. You could say that Life Log alerted you that I was back. You never did. I get that. It's not like we ever did anything but kiss that one time. So why did you save me?"

Jain sat abruptly on his sofa. He rested his face in his hands. I sat down next to him an arm's length away.

"I was a sad kid. My parents are the kind of people that probably shouldn't have ever had children. They didn't like themselves, each other, or me, I don't think, but they had my life all planned out from the very beginning. The plan didn't bother me much when I was little. Stuff like scaring Jonah away I learned to ignore. But more and more, I found I couldn't stand it anymore. I wasn't going to follow the plan. They couldn't accept that. They still don't. But they won't let me alone, either."

Then you should run away, I thought. Strike out on your own. Cut them off completely. But I didn't interrupt.

"I suffered from depression, but my mother didn't believe that her flesh and blood could possibly need a therapist. Not with their perfect parenting. I hid my illness from them as best I could, and they didn't see it, because they didn't want to. I ended up watching those movies, reading those sites, about how to . . ."

He looked me in the eye. "You know."

I nodded. I knew.

"I had the pills and the plastic bag and the big rubber band all ready to go. And then Jon invited me to his party, out of the blue. We weren't even friends. And I thought, what the hell. I'd see what it felt like, to be bad. Drink and smoke and whatever."

"I was the whatever."

He ignored my comment. "My mom figured out I'd snuck out after the fact. She went ballistic. She locked down my phone, my computer. I was *grounded* for six months. I couldn't even look at you, I felt like such an idiot. Nobody gets grounded! That's a sitcom thing. I thought maybe you wanted me to call? I couldn't. Then I worried if maybe you'd forgotten the whole thing.

"Anyway. After the party. After you, I stopped looking at those sites. I threw away the pills."

"Why?"

His eyes were so effing big and brown and warm. You could swim in the stupid things.

"Because I knew good things could happen. Beautiful things. Out of nowhere. Like a bolt out of the blue."

I had been his beautiful thing.

Something was breaking open inside me. I fought for composure and won. I mean, I'd gotten used to having my limbs pop off in the cage matches. But it was a close thing. "If you had had the guts to just talk to me, in person, you could have been a good thing for *me*. I needed good things, too."

"I know," he said. "And I'm so sorry."

He looked away, at a starship model hovering near the window on some invisible filament. Or maybe it was magnetically levitated; what did I know. It was the size of a basketball, spherical in the front, with a complicated looking drive apparatus made up of clusters of cylinders at the back, exquisitely detailed, with sparkling lights glittering from its tiny windows. The ship looked familiar, but I couldn't place the franchise.

"Anyway, I couldn't leave with you in storage. So I worked another year and a half, to pay your way out."

"Leave?"

"Your PI told you. I'm going into storage at the end of the month. Rebooting you set me back, but I just made my final payment."

Something in my face indicated that I had no idea what he was talking about.

"You didn't know? I'm going to be a colonist on the *Dauntless*."

That's where I'd seen the ship. I'd watched a video about the project. An expedition to the closest exoplanet with atmospheric life markers. But the ship was still on the drawing board.

"I don't get it. Why are you going into storage *now*?"

“The Zeitgeist isn’t stable. The economy is a joke, a mass of subsidies designed to keep marginal people off the street. No offense. God knows if any of us will have jobs in ten years. The Zeitgeist respects property rights, or at least it has till now. But who knows what the future holds. I’m pretty sure the *Dauntless* is going to happen. There’s a ton of resources invested in the effort.”

“You keep ignoring my question,” I said through gritted teeth.

“God knows how long my parents will live. I’m guessing forever. I can’t cut them out of my life, and I can’t live my life with them carping over my shoulder.”

“How long before you leave?”

“They say fifty years to build the shipyard; another hundred for the ship. Two hundred twenty-seven years for the voyage. But I won’t be awake for any of that. I’m not crew, I’m a colonist. I’ll wake up in orbit around Jannada. That’s the exoplanet that—”

“—I know what Jannada is!” I hadn’t remembered the name but I got the idea.

I was devastated, aching, furious and horny, and my buzz was gone. It was stupid to pursue this thing with Jain. I knew that now.

“So you’re really leaving,” I said.

“In a few weeks. That’s why I wanted to remain anonymous,” he said.

Something wasn’t adding up. The year and a half thing. “So you *waited* to reboot me until you were almost ready to go?”

He nodded. “I didn’t want to get . . . entangled. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” *Effing* mama’s boy. *Effing* coward.

“I can’t leave Jonah,” I said. He hadn’t even asked me to go with him, and of course I hadn’t saved a fortune but there was no reason to bring any of that up.

Jain nodded. He looked so sad. “Of course you can’t.”

I went to the door to let myself out. Jain followed me carrying my boots.

I slapped them out of his hands. Eff my boots. I’d walk home barefoot. I jerked open the door.

He spun me around and kissed me without asking, hard and deep. Had he forgotten about my teeth? Maybe he had gotten braver. I was glad I’d put in my prosthesis. God it felt good. Nobody had ever kissed like Jain and maybe nobody else ever would.

“We’re making this worse,” I gasped.

“I know,” he said. “Just shut up. Please.”

For once, I did. We tore off each other’s clothing. I mean, Jain had spares. We made love for a long, long time. Jain had a staying power comparable only to a few women I’d been with from the cage match circuit. He read my every cue. I read his, too. We started out like a pair of crazed animals but as the night spun out we both slowed down, moving more and more slowly, staring into each other’s eyes, face to face. Savoring every second.

I left afterward, while he was sleeping. I dressed as quietly as possible in the galley kitchen. I blinked up my bank interface and transferred the bulk of my savings into an account keyed to his name. We were even now. I wrote a message on his fridge display. Three words. Thanks for everything.

I added three x’s underneath and then erased them.

We weren’t in high school anymore.

\* \* \*

### 13

I cancelled my next match and set a total privacy block on my feed. I dialed comfort food into my autochef and ate while listening to pop music from back in the day. I sat in the living room and wolfed down macaroni and cheese, the orange kind, and crunched potato chips and drank gallons of soda. I could practically hear myself putting on weight.

This snatch of conversation at the bar with Jain came back to me. He thought I’d known something, when we’d been talking about Jonah. I texted a question to my PI, who I wanted to kill for missing the stuff about the *Dauntless*, and authorized additional payment.

I painted my finger and toenails with clear polish. I didn’t want to go back to biting them.

My mom used to make Jonah and me watch these terrible old movies. Well, most of them were terrible, but some stuck with me. I flipped through my old Life Log history; I’d integrated that with

Mom's movie feed, so I could see what she'd inflicted on us. There was this one, with this song that had stuck in my head for months. Black and white. The male lead was ugly as sin, the woman was luminously beautiful. This was a big thing back then.

Still, that song. Still the same old story . . . I closed my eyes and remembered Jain's kiss. That first one. So long ago.

My message queue flashed, the PI who I'd given a bypass for my block, and I read his note. Jain had been paying Jonah's mushroom license fee off and on for years, whenever Jonah came up short. They texted back and forth infrequently using the phone that Jonah kept in the locker where he took his supply deliveries. Jonah's one and two word prompts had led to Jain sharing links about Jannada, the so-called "habitable" exoplanet circling a "nearby" red dwarf star. Jannada's free oxygen levels were similar to Earth's during the late Paleozoic. Back when the forests we still burned as coal when I was a kid were being laid down, teeming with six-foot-long centipedes and buzzed by dragonflies with three-foot wingspans.

Jonah kept asking about the size of the mushrooms on Jannada. Jain said he didn't know for sure. But that they could be huge.

I punched up the old movie with the earworm and watched it again, and the song filled me to overflowing, drowning out the other voices in my head. Which was an effing relief. I watched the film again. I'd switched to the sweet stuff at that point, Rocky Road ice cream, my father's favorite, and Little Debbie snack cakes washed down with ice-cold milk. I had no business messing with Jain's life.

He'd done a good thing for me without any thought for himself. He had to get away from his family, and he'd found a way to do it that didn't involve slapping. He'd worked to make that happen, for years and years. He wanted to colonize an exoplanet. He wanted to make his lifelong dream a reality.

I blocked future communication with him and signed the order with a ten-year crypto-key. I would not distract him. I would have disappointed him sooner or later anyway. I always did.

*I was the hill of beans.* Jain deserved a better life than one with me.

I called Asha. She texted me a referral, for a new therapist, someone she thought could help me better than she could. "After you call that number, you won't be my responsibility." She gave me her personal number, and told me not to be a stranger. When I asked why, she said she'd lived a life a lot like mine, which blew me away. She'd seemed so well put together.

"People can change," she said. "Sometimes. But it's a slow process."

I thought about rolling myself back. So I could be my old self again. This person who matched my tragic backstory. If I sold my condo, I could almost swing the cost of the reboot from my original archive.

I'd had some lucrative offers, janky stuff for private clients, Vicky super-fans. Not sex, exactly, but things I'd wanted no part of. A few of those gigs, and the condo, and I'd have enough to make myself back into what I'd been. My old life had been terrible, but the way I hurt now was worse.

I went to visit Jonah instead.

\* \* \*

Flying corpse class wasn't that bad.

This was the way that Jain would travel to the stars. Oh, they didn't archive you for corpse class, but it would feel the same. You wake at your destination with no memory of the flight, like a jump cut in a movie. I rented a unicopter at the airport and flew over the raucous greenery of the Pacific Northwest to the Olympic mountains, which were so effing beautiful they washed away the lingering stink of my self-pity at letting go of Jain.

Maybe I was one of those people that could change.

The Olympic peninsula dangles off the upper left most tip of the continental US, past the mountain range that bears its name which blocks humid air and condenses it into the torrential downpour that makes the country's only temperate rainforest. The climate and the pristine environment meant mushrooms, tons of them. Jonah was part of a modern, wandering army of subsistence-level hunter-gatherers.

I let the unicopter swoop into a scenic detour, which the craft was happy to do, as I was being

charged by the hour. We spiraled over Mt. Olympus, the highest point in the range, with four of its original eight glaciers still surviving, achingly white and glittering in the noonday sun. We buzzed Mounts Constance, Deception, Washington, Stone, and finally The Brothers, the twin peaks that had inspired this freaky old TV show Morty had made us watch when we were kids. The show had been wildly inappropriate for a ten-year-old, intermittently funny and touching and repulsively violent. Just like Dad. Maybe someday I would tell him I was sorry for cutting him off.

Someday.

The unicorn dropped me in a field outside the visitor's station where Jonah kept his locker. He met me in the coffee shop. We hugged until his stench overwhelmed me, and I summoned an auto cab and made him accompany me to a nearby motel where we spent an hour in the bathroom cleaning him up.

He tolerated this for my sake.

I bought him a few supplies, a new solar panel for charging his bot stunner and plasma lighter, and I got a fancy waterproof smart coat which would keep me alive in the wide variety of horrific weather conditions we might encounter in the forest. I got us both some super expensive hiking boots and then we rode back to the park and hit the trail.

As we marched, Jonah discovered six or seven patches of buttery yellow chanterelles, cleaned them with a brush and packed them in hard plastic cases with complicated looking lids.

We hiked for hours in silence, finally making camp in a small clearing as the sun set. I gathered wood, and Jonah made the fire. Everything was wet. I had no idea how he managed it. I'd resumed working out like crazy, using the new bodybuilding drugs, but the hike had still taken it out of me. I'd brought these clever folding chairs that weighed a few ounces each; carbon nanofiber struts and some sort of polymer woven mesh, so we sat around the fire in our raincoats in the drizzle without getting our asses wet.

The partially clouded sky above purpled and blackened. The stars emerged and the fire sputtered and crackled, sending up a delicious smelling smoke. I remembered spending time with Jonah when we were kids. Just being in the room with him, feeling like he was mine. Like we were part of each other. I'd been brokenhearted when he had told us he was leaving. I hadn't been able to tell him that. Instead I'd called him names and slapped him around.

I heaved myself out of my chair to kiss Jonah's forehead. He grunted, wiped off my cooties with a hand that had already become amazingly dirty, and hauled himself out of the chair to make us dinner.

After we'd wolfed down a plastic bowl of my brother's signature beans and rice, he rummaged in his pack and fished out his mobile, which I didn't think he carried with him. He tapped a few times and handed it to me.

On the small screen Jain was sitting on his sofa looking glum, eyes on the camera. The message was pre-recorded.

"You blocked me. Look. I don't know you, and you don't know me. So this is probably out of line. But give me a minute, and I won't bother you again. I'm glad I rebooted you. I'm sorry I didn't call, back when we were kids. But I'm not sorry about leaving Earth. I'm not doing it just to get away from my parents. That's a bonus. But it's not the real reason. I'm going because I've always wanted to go. You remember that about me, I think? I was a space geek. I still am. I always will be."

He made that welcoming and wise hand gesture, from that old show.

"Long life and happiness, Maura. Or are you Vicky now? I never asked. Whoever you are. Oh, that money you gave me has been used to reboot your old friend, Joy. Who I recall was a truly horrible person. You don't have to talk to her if you don't want to. Consider your debt to me erased. Paid in full. And forwarded."

He chewed his upper lip, his forehead stitched in some agony of indecision. "I should stop."

*Please don't*, I thought.

Jain laughed, and I knew he was laughing at himself, not me.

"What the hell. Live your life, but if you want, save your money. First, do everything and everyone on Earth. And if you still want something that the Earth can't offer, come with me. With us. I

can't promise anything. Maybe we won't even like each other. Don't come for me. But come with me. I'd love to wake up in the future with you."

He sniffed. "O brave new world. That has such people in it . . ."

He wiped his eyes. "Sorry about the Shakespeare. I'm such a dork. Good night, Maura. And good luck."

He stared into the camera a half second. "You're a great kisser," he said. The clip ended.

I handed the phone back to Jonah who was studying me intently. He held the glass slab aloft, pointing it at the sky. He had one of those apps that identified the stars. He swung around until he was pointed in the direction of Orion and then pivoted very slowly until he stopped, making a satisfied sound. He gestured me over.

*Ngamo*, the star that the *Dauntless* would one day set sail for, was dim, not visible to the naked eye, but it lit up on the mobile's screen. The journey would be one way. The crew and passengers of the *Dauntless* would establish a self-sustaining colony . . . or die trying.

I'd always hated science fiction because it was *fake*. A dream that didn't deliver, filled with streamlined spaceships that went *whoosh* in the vacuum to places that could never be. With aliens so much less alien than the people I'd known on the street.

The *Dauntless* wasn't like that. She wasn't a dream. She was a *plan*. There's a difference.

"Go," Jonah said. I started, snapped back to the here and now. Jonah's smile was elusive in the flickering firelight under the heavy beard, but it reached all the way to his eyes, which were crinkled at the corners. He nodded and touched my shoulder.

He gestured, from me, to him, and then up at the sky. "Go."

"You want to go? You want us both to go?" I said.

He nodded. "Friends," he said. He meant Jain, I think.

I took a shuddery breath of the cool air and stared into the night sky, so deep and dark. And welcoming. A woodland creature scurried nearby, rustling in the sodden shrubbery. A stiff wind shook a blast of belated rain from the nearby forest canopy, splattering us and making the fire pop and hiss.

I wiped the rain out of my eyes. "Maybe," I told him. "Someday."

I wondered if I meant it.

\* \* \*

That night I lay on my air mattress drowsing to the comforting rhythm of Jonah's breath. Wind and rain rattled the tent as I lay motionless, swaddled in my heated sleeping bag. That damn song, from the movie, was going through my head, but I didn't mind.

The fundamental things of life . . .

Maybe we'd both forget about Jain in the years to come. I was still changing, growing. I didn't know who I would be tomorrow, let alone in ten years. Or twenty. It would take me at least twenty to save up the coin to buy us a stake in the *Dauntless*.

But maybe a new world would need people like me. Maybe the discipline I was gathering, the toughness, would be useful in the depths of space. On Jain's brave new world.

It might have monsters that needed killing. Wouldn't that be fun?

I smiled my pointed smile, thinking about the future.

I was looking forward to it.

*Jay O'Connell's third piece in Analog is this novella, set in the same Zeitgeist future history as his story "Solomon's Little Sister" in Asimov's a few years back. In his Zeitgeist humanity survives the looming climate crisis in a wave of exponential technological growth, with some unexpected consequences . . . but he doesn't want to spoil it for you. You can find where to get the other Zeitgeist story, and those to come, at his site, [www.jayoconnell.com](http://www.jayoconnell.com). He dedicates this story to his brother John, his Father's Father, and his son Lucas, for reasons he'll explain to them when they read this.*