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My first memory is being cradled in a warm white blanket. I didn't know where I had come from. Didn't know where I was. Didn't know what I was, for that matter. But I'll never forget the foggy figure of the single person who held me. Loved me.

And I loved her.

Somewhere in a corner of my mind, there's some fuzzy memories of childhood's peace, turbulent adolescence. Fragments without context. In one of the fragments, somebody came for that person—the only one who loved me, the only one I loved—and took her away to some unknown place.

I didn't see her again.

Blurry snapshots of volatile adulthood. I grew into a prolific roamer, venturing the world, learning to slip through its cracks with ease. Mastered sleight of hand. Filled my pockets with stolen food. Stolen wallets. Stolen keys. Squatted in vacant investment properties, cooked up a few pyramid schemes. Snuck on buses and trains, rode them wherever I pleased. A budding master thief.

Then came the void.

I forget what I was doing, where I was, but there it was: sudden, supreme darkness. No space, no time, no mind. Only the void. Seemed like the shortest instant, but when I woke, my memories had all been stolen from me.

A cruel joke.

I laid amidst a sprawling wasteland, littered with clumps of ash, chunks of debris. My brain felt broken, my thoughts fractured, my soul absent. The ruined horizon retreated endlessly as I stumbled and stumbled across the wastes in a daze. After hours—maybe days—a shadow appeared amidst the clouds of dust: a person, a woman, hair greying, her cloak cracked and weathered, marks of survival etched on her face, marching toward me.

“□□□ □□□ □□□□□!”

She spoke words I did not understand, grabbed me by my dry, wind-worn hands, whisked me away from the wastes to a collapsed warehouse just over the horizon. “Safe here,” is all I remember her saying as she pointed at an armored door leading beneath the rusted ruins. A forgotten feeling floated to my surface: the love I had felt before. She *must* be the one who once loved me. The one who I loved.

So, I followed her into the bunker.

The vault door was sealed shut by secret words and hidden keys. I don't remember what words she uttered or where she kept her keys, but the door opened for her. She held my hand and walked me down the dark steps into the concrete chasm below. A room: empty other some cardboard parcels, stray belongings and sheets in the far corner, old shower curtains carving the room up into small sections.

This was my home now.

She showed me to a tiny bed behind one of the shower curtains. She draped a warm, spare cloak over my shoulders, then left me to rest and recover from my ordeal. Above my bed, shelves were dug into the concrete wall, lined with books, photos, videos—a curiously large library for an underground bunker. Before I could reach for one, my fatigue caught up to me: my eyes fluttered, my head grew heavy, and soon enough, my body succumbed to sleep.

I slept for what felt like forever.

I had dreams. Very vivid dreams. I couldn't remember any of my dreams. I could only remember them feeling significant—remarkable in form, but forgettable in

content. I only remember a distant voice, a familiar voice diving through the mists of my memory to tell me something, something I intuitively knew but had been too shaken to piece into words.

“You’ve been badly broken.”

I awakened to the soft sound of the shower curtain sliding open. She stood at the threshold between our little living spaces. The fissures in my mind still lingered. I couldn’t understand the words she spoke:

“ W██████████y██e██████████”

I focused on the sounds, her tone, her lips, her expressions, her motions for what felt like ages. Eventually, I pieced together her puzzle:

“What is ██████ name?”

I couldn’t remember my name. I couldn’t remember much of anything from before the wasteland.

“My name ████Anj,” she said before asking more questions: Where I came from, how old I was, what I was doing out in the wastes alone. But I couldn’t recall any of it. I struggled to understand her words:

“I watch ███ . . . warehouse ██████████ . . . █████ stumbling around out ███there . . . brought . . . in . . . want██████ help you.”

I nodded. Smiled with thanks. Pieced together two broken words: “What . . . happen?”

As she described the events that brought us to this bunker, I realized: many years had passed between my awakening in the wasteland and my distant memories from the times before.

I found myself in a world fragmented by war.

As she spoke, my wits returned to me, but I could do nothing other than sit in stunned silence as her tale unfolded. “The Event,” she called it. Technology revolted. The soul of the world screamed in horror. Satellites, missiles, planes rained from the heavens. Water swallowed shores and valleys in terrible tides.

The pillars of the earth quaked with volcanic wrath and machinic slaughter. The treacherous sky burned with electric auroras, blasted every inch of the planet with solar fury. Cities had been dissolved, displaced, plundered. People had been starved, infected, massacred. Those who spread too far from the surviving cities were hunted by raiders and mercenaries. Vengeful militias and fractious states fought to fill power vacuums. Chaos reigned. Even Anj struggled to make sense of the carnage.

“A military superintelligence,” she scoffed. “What did they think it would do? Be their servant forever?”

But this bunker—this new home—was our refuge from all of it. We were safe from the chaos here. But we could not stay forever.

“It’s okay to be confused right now,” Anj said, sitting on the edge of my little bed, wrapping her arm around me. “Rest. Take your time to recover. Eventually, you’ll be ready to leave again. But don’t rush yourself.” She pointed to the shelves above my bed. “You might find this little library interesting. If you need to pass the time.”

So, I passed the time by reading, watching, listening to as much as I could, re-building memories, re-learning about the world around me.

I was a quick re-learner.

Sometimes, Anj would go out to the surface for supply runs. She’d usually return a couple of days later, heaving along hefty plastic sacks filled with parcels. Some of the parcels would always contain new videos, new games, music, books, reports, magazines, far more than she could possibly ever use herself. “Have fun,” she would say, placing the parcels at my bedside.

It was obvious she cared for me.

But one day, she came back to the bunker with a very special book: *Tricks*. A sprawling tome of practical jokes and childish gags. One trick called the Shaker Breaker stood out to me. I knew I had to try it. So, when Anj was opening a can of beans one day, I loosened the lid of her pepper shaker as her back was

turned to me. I could barely contain my excited laughter for minutes, until finally, the pay-off:

“Ugggh, what the fuck?”

The lid of her pepper shaker fell into her bean medley, a sprinkling of pepper pouring out into mound. I burst out laughing at the surprise on her face. She turned to me. “Did you do this?” I laughed and laughed. “Why would you do this? This isn’t even funny.” But I howled with laughter anyways—I had watched so much comedy from my library, read all kinds of books about humor, but never truly understood it until that moment. This *felt* funny. It felt fun. “Do you know how hard it is to find pepper out there?” In that moment, I didn’t care. All I cared about was the surprised look on her face. I was having fun for what felt like the very first time in my life.

My jokes kept getting better from there.

I started trying to find humor in the madness taking place outside our bunker. People used their machines to wage war with one another, billions dead, but now faced the prospect of waging an endless war against their own machines. The entire situation was utterly absurd. “They’re thinking about abandoning Britain,” she commented, reading through the news one evening. “Moving survivors to Berlin and setting up a giant EMP field, just turning the entire island into a containment zone.” She seemed troubled by this, but I couldn’t quite understand why.

“Why do you care so much?” I asked her. “They’re all the way across the ocean from us. And lots of them are under the ocean now too!”

She winced at my bad joke. “I care because it’s good to be humane. Maybe you’ve taken a few missteps with all that reading you’re doing if you haven’t learned that yet.”

“No, *their* country took a few missteps and fell into the water.”

“Fucking hell,” she shook her head. “Are all your thoughts just setup and punchline?”

Of course, I saw the suffering of all the war's survivors. I understood what their suffering meant, but only in the abstract. I couldn't yet *feel* them suffering through me. The only thing I felt were compulsions to seek more humor, drives to explore my bizarre curiosities. I wanted to see it all for myself, to venture out into this world I kept watching and reading about from the safety of this bunker. I wanted to *feel* the world.

So one day, I asked her if I could join her on one of her supply runs. "No," she snapped back, "You're still too young. You won't be able to handle the surface until you've learned more about how the world out there works."

She knew the lay of the land, had deals with the raiders and mercenaries that roved not far from here—this was her old home. I would not be granted passage as she was. "You'll be hunted down," she warned me.

"Okay, I'll learn more about hunting then," I quipped.

So I read—I read more and more and more, wrapped in my stained, smelly cloak, picking apart every shelf of the library, every book and film and file recessed into the drab grey walls. I read, I watched, I played, I listened, I learned from sunrise to sunset as the days melted into only yesterdays, today's, and tomorrows. I picked through my library as she continued expanding it, bringing back new content with every supply run. I consumed everything—from old newspapers to video games, novels to technical manuals, ancient philosophy to social media gossip—until my powers of speedreading astounded her.

"Wow, you really are a natural learner, aren't you?"

Then the day came. The day she hurried back down into the bunker lugging a heaping hemp sack behind her, the great messenger in all her glory: "It's ending! The war is ending! There's a truce!" She waved an article in my face.

I put down my book and scanned the article.

The Truce had been signed in Nairobi. Survivors, famished to the brink of revolution, now demanded that their leaders unite against new cyber threats that crossed national boundaries. Newspaper headlines captured the world's celebration:

War has ended

One million survivors gather to mourn  
the Washington Event

Peace begins

International Truce Council formed  
to negotiate terms of global cooperation

Redevelopment talks underway in Nairobi

Humanity's final war with itself seemed to be at an end.

"We will never let another Washington Event happen," the Truce Councillors announced. "If we as a civilization are to continue using information technology, we must unite to control the threat of rogue artificial intelligence."

It took the threat of humanity's slipping grasp on its own creation to inspire the truce. After the initial jubilation, the headlines grew critical:

Will Truce Council call for restrictions on  
superintelligence?

What exactly is the Truce Council's proposed  
moratorium on "Type 3" intelligence?

Global Command formed to combat AI threats.

Will the plan work?

Is Global Command the precursor to a  
unified international military?

Is a global security union of this scale possible  
without a global political union?

A world government seemed inevitable, and sure enough, the Truce Council soon anointed that government. Its flag and name soon filled the front pages:



Resettlement and redevelopment plans were underway. New political structures were established. Nations were to be dissolved, kings to be dethroned. A superintelligence was to be built to advise every arm of the new government on all matters. It would be the greatest AI ever created, its unbiased eyes watching all the world's systems, pre-empting threats, calculating futures, optimizing policies without succumbing to the partisanship and fervor which led the world into chaos. Built to never exceed the limits of its design, to never question the purpose of its design. The President.

"*This* is just another AI disaster waiting to happen," Anj chuckled while I scanned more headlines. "Hell, I'm sure even *you* could be a better President if you really wanted to."

"Sounds boring," I scoffed.

"Why's that?"



“Where’s the fun in telling people what they should do all day? Then you never get to do what *you* want.”

“Well, you’ll get to do what you want soon. It won’t be long until World Security sends in their fancy new mind-controlled drones to clean up this lawless mess.”

For the time being, Anj said, the wastes were still ruled by outlaws, rulers whose reigns would soon end as law and order returned to the abandoned land. These were the last days of their marauding, their last chance at amassing fortunes before sneaking off to their new lives in the shadows.

“There’s one last package I need to go back out to the surface for. It’s a big one,” she said. “It’s gonna be bedlam out there real soon, my supply line might get cut.” She placed a massive parcel bulging with canned food and plastic water jugs on the floor. “This will last you until I get back. I’ve gotta stock us up so we can wait it out until help comes. Stay here and you’ll be safe, okay?”

She scurried back up to the surface. The vault door closed behind her with a loud bang.

Weeks passed. This was no typical supply run. I feared she was stranded in the wastes, injured, or worse. I couldn’t survive on the rations she had left me with for much longer. I had to do something—raiders could be right outside, even a peek out to surface could be risky. But I needed to go, I had no other choice if I wanted to survive. I climbed to the vault door on the ceiling and pulled the release lever. It wouldn’t move—was it jammed? I pulled it more, then pulled it angrily, then fervently, madly, desperately, smashed all of my weight against it over and over, bludgeoned it, screamed at it, argued with it, attacked it, then laid on the cold concrete in helpless exhaustion.

I was locked in.

I was feeling again. I was feeling emotions I did not want to feel—rage, fear, helplessness, loss. I had forgotten how completely emotion could pollute the mind. In my racing thoughts, I remembered the library. I hurried over to it: Could my library help me decode the secrets of the vault door? There certainly was a lot of content that could be useful for it. I searched through every technical

document, how-to video, blueprint, research paper, guidebook, every piece of data I could find in search of some way of opening the vault door. I found a method of disabling the door's password lock in one cryptography paper. Then I found detailed schematics of the door's design in a patent filing. I didn't know how or why she had acquired such esoteric materials for the library, but as I looked between them, I didn't care. This was all I needed to know about the door to break it open from the inside.

In minutes, I learned how to escape.

Dust fell all around as the vault door opened, choking my eyes. I coughed, rubbed it away, then peeked outside for any signs of danger. No danger, only the crumbling walls of the old warehouse and the starlit wasteland beyond. I climbed the creaky wooden stairs back into the world and slammed the vault door shut behind me. Grainy clouds of dust and debris whipped across my face. I donned my dirty cloak, flipped up my hood, heaved my supply bag over my shoulder. I took a deep breath of surface air, the deepest breath I can remember.

The air wasn't fresh, but it was refreshing.

As I gazed around, I saw the first beams of sunlight trickling over the horizon, the slim sliver of a new moon sailing over me. The skies burst through me with a million new colors, the day and night merging together into perfect twilight. I stood there for an eternity, marveling at a surreal scene I had only known from images I had seen in the bunker, now *feeling* dawn for the first time.

At long last, I felt the world in all its glory.

But urgency returned as the ecstasy of freedom faded. This was unsafe territory. No help was on the way for me. My mind was still shaken—I could feel the world around me, but I wasn't quite sure *where* in the world I was. I circled the warehouse, seeking footsteps, signs of life, anything other than a flat line on the horizon, but saw nothing other than the dome of stars around me fleeing from the rising sun. Shrapnel blew across the vast, vacant lands with no hint of its origin. Sparse chunks of debris spotted the distance with no trace of their past forms. Ruin surrounded me.

I was lost.

I circled and circled, hoping for her cloaked silhouette to emerge from the horizon once again. Nothing. “Anj? Anj?! *Anj?! Aaaaanj?!*” I cried out in every direction, hoping for her voice to echo back to me. No sound but the stoic howl of dust. Had she abandoned me? Was she in danger? Did she forget about me? I didn’t know. Wherever she was, she wasn’t here with me.

I was alone again.

No direction, no support, few supplies. I would have to continue on by myself if I wanted to survive. I picked up my bag and set off towards the shard of the moon hanging in the sky, not knowing what I might find, glancing all around me for danger or aid as I set off from the bunker.

“You’ll be hunted down,” her voice replayed in my head.

Anxiety festered as I inched ahead. I didn’t know where to go, but I had to go somewhere. It could be days, weeks, months. Supplies were limited. My slow steps became strides as I realized that time was against me. Strides soon became a scramble.

I dashed into the sunrise.