HEAVEN DIDN'T EXIST. Nev Bourne knew better. When she was sixteen years, four months, and three days old, her faith had shattered, like stained glass in a church bombing. Since then, she'd only believed in what she could see and feel. Tonight, on Earth, in San Francisco, on a lovely Friday evening in the late summer of 2045, she was feeling absolutely fucking divine sitting alone in her self-adjusting Memeron chair watching the steam swirl up from her espresso. There was no place Nev would rather be than the Qbito office, after everyone else had vacated the premises, leaving only the faint hum of Tenderloin traffic to remind her of the world below. She could have spent eternity in this very moment: the final sprint before she completed the code for an update that promised to bring the real world a big step closer to paradise.

It was a bit late for caffeine, even by Nev's standards, but sleep wasn't on the agenda tonight. Maybe, if she finished the code in time, she'd grab a power nap on one of the irregularly shaped floor squiggles that the human resource engineers referred to as 'social settees.' She wanted to be in the office at daybreak to begin the weekend of diagnostics before Monday's public rollout. The previous October, Noel Kusuma, Qbito's founder (and according to his business cards, 'Chief TimeLord'), had scheduled the SavePoint 2.0 alpha to be released on the Monday morning after the autumnal equinox, for reasons that neither Nev nor anyone else at Qbito were privy to. But if Noel commanded, his will would be done.

Nev was so close she could taste it—the metallic tang of that final keystroke, the magnetic pull of logic snapping into place, the final lines of code stretching out before her like a book that had already been written. At this point, her brain had already finished, and all that was left was to follow along with her fingers. Her hands flew at lightning speed along her holo-

keyboard, eyes tracking the characters hovering in space before her, as she smoothed the wrinkles and the ripples in the code, making it fresh and crisp as a hotel bedsheet. When she got into the groove like this, Nev could spend hours without looking away, locked in perfect symbiosis with the machine, to the point where she could barely tell where she ended and it began.

A buzz behind her ear snapped Nev from her reverie. Jared's avatar—a cheesy 3D selfie in a vintage trucker hat—blinked in the periphery of her viz. Thanks to Qbito's IT department, Nev had the latest EyeVee Pro model, an over-the-ear stereoscopic universal controller with retinal projection, movement tracking, and 12G connection speeds. It was great for manipulating hundreds of lines of code, but not so great when Jared's goofy grin crowded them out in annoyingly high resolution. She blinked and shook her head quickly to clear the pop-up, but before it disappeared completely from her field of vision, the icon was replaced by his brief, unsubtle message:

U up? Coz I am. 🍆

Jared was like a snack, good for the occasional late-night indulgence, but lacking nutrition and not worth the extra weight from over-consumption. She tried to limit their encounters to once a week. If the diagnostics went well the next day, maybe she'd ping him afterwards as a treat.

Can't tonight. Nose to the grindstone.

As soon as the message vanished into the ether, Nev set her viz to Do Not Disturb before Jared could respond with a picture of the real deal. *And lead us not into temptation.* The words echoed through her head in her mother's strident voice. That was a visitation she could really do without. If only it was as easy to tune out memories as it was to turn off her messaging app. *Be*

gone, Satan! Nev took a deep breath and returned to the task at hand, settling back into the

groove, gearing up for the final sprint.

SavePoint 1.0 had been revolutionary. Not in the way that tech companies usually mean

it—which is to say incrementally more interesting, useful, and/or lucrative than whatever

previous wondertech the product obsolesced—but actual, honest-to-goodness revolutionary. First

on the battlefield, then in hospitals and construction zones, and finally in the mass market for the

past two years, SavePoint had transformed the way people worked, loved, lived. It was almost

shocking how something that had at first seemed like a device from a futuristic game was so

quickly absorbed into the ebb and flow of social life and popular culture, as though humanity had

been waiting for it all along, had a special place set aside for it in the hollows of their collective

eye sockets.

SavePoint's premise was simple; its applications were infinite. A dorsolateral prefrontal

cortex implant installed via the orbital cavity behind the right eye constantly tracked your vitals

and coordinates in spacetime and transmitted the information back to the cloud. SavePoint was

designed to serve as preventative insurance. In case of disaster, simply execute a pre-

programmed, custom-designated 'undo' gesture, and the quantum mainframe would restore you

to your coordinates five seconds in the past.

The mechanism was based on Rovelli's principle: loop quantum gravity predicted that

elementary temporal leaps were small, but finite. Or something to that effect; no matter how

often Kusuma explained it, Nev could never quite wrap her head around it. Anissa had tried her

best to translate the theoretical physics, but Nev's mind remained stubbornly grounded in

pragmatics, which was all she needed for her part of the code. Noel was the Silicon Valley

wunderkind who'd made his fortune (and his ridiculous title) for being the first to figure out how

to translate Rovelli's theory into a functional product. Nev was just there to wrangle the data.

SavePoint was already raking in profits beyond what any of its earliest angel investors had projected in their rosiest scenarios. From Kusuma's standpoint, SavePoint 1.0 was simply the tip of the proverbial iceberg, and the profits were, well, icing on the cake. The real point of the technology wasn't the benefits reaped by its users, but from them: data, loads of it, about every mistake, made at every point in time and every place on Earth, by millions of paying customers. Those data, fed back into SavePoint's system, could accomplish a lot more than simply change a life or two. They could, Kusuma believed, change Life as we know it.

It was Qbito's Chief Marketing Officer, Madison Barnett, who had realized that SavePoint's predictive potential could also exponentialize the company's profits. Despite the cost—and the cost was steep—customers weren't using SavePoint merely for insurance against devastating accidents. As the Qbito team had known even before the first beta testers had their units extracted, customers were actively *planning* disasters and then using SavePoint to undo the consequences. Since launch, the mechanism had found a boom market on the recovery circuit. SavePoint allowed users, in every sense of the word, to scratch their itches and keep to the straight and narrow, all at the same time. To have their cake and icing, too. Take a drink. Hit undo. Punch out your boss. Hit undo. Make a pass at a random stranger. Hit undo. The casinos ran interference to block the mechanism at the tables and slots, but that didn't stop people with the gambling bug from making side bets at GA meetings on the shirt color of the next loser to walk through the door. There had been rumors on the dark web of far nastier uses. Sex play taken too far, then taken back. Tracheae uncrushed.

Nev didn't judge. After the first month or two, she barely batted an eyelash. She collected the data, crunched the numbers, assessed the deviation between design and usage, and hammered

away at the alpha code for SavePoint 2.0, developing algorithms that would suggest to users when they should hit the button. The holy grail, of course, was self-undo, a fully automated global network that would give every SavePoint user—and, by extension, the billions of people around them—the best possible day, every day, all their lives. It would do for human perversion, sin, and plain stupidity what self-driving cars had done for traffic on the perennially congested Bay Bridge.

Along the way, the massive tranches of data Nev collected were already giving Kusuma his best day, every day. Maddy, poached from a job running an online retail giant's home surveillance devices division, had surpassed Qbito's already hefty installation and service revenues by slicing, dicing, and productizing every piece of information users provided unwittingly about their darkest secrets, their deepest desires, their most tragic mistakes. Pharmaceutical companies, financial services, and insurance behemoths all leapt at the data, bidding it up to stratospheric values. With the SavePoint 2.0 launch, both the volume and the value of the data would explode again, leaving the stratosphere behind for the cosmos.

Maddy acted like she could will this vision into existence through sheer brute force. Every couple of hours, her professional headshot avatar would show up, hovering at the edge of Nev's viz, asking question after question about the team's progress on the code, the timeline for completion, the possibilities for new, increasingly specific data insights. She was definitely involved in one of those executive sorority cults, where the women chanted self-actualization mantras while reporting their weekly calorie counts. Nev had been approached several times over the years, but having escaped one sect, she had no plans to ever join another. She preferred to be alone, which might explain the involuntary shudder that passed through her when Nev realized that Maddy was hovering again, this time in the flesh, the harsh track lighting reflecting fractals

off her long shiny brown hair.

"Can I help you?" Nev asked, pushing her own springy, brown curls away from her aching eyes. Maddy smiled tightly, her eyes narrowing.

"Just checking in… to see if you need any help finishing up."

Not a chance, Nev thought. Maddy might know coding better than half the new recruits in Qbito's cubicles, but early in her career she'd made the strategic decision to exploit her many talents in the service of marketing rather than product development. Why buck the patriarchy, when you could manipulate it for fun and profit? Maddy had long ago turned a deaf ear to the siren song of source code, and Nev had no interest in letting Qbito's chief marketeer mar her elegant creation with graceless patchwork. Besides, she was nearly at the finish line, all by herself.

She forced herself to smile back, her facial muscles straining slightly at the unusual request.

"Nope, thanks. I'm good. I'll be done in…" she looked up and to the left at the timestamp on her viz; about twenty past. "…maybe fifteen minutes, max." Maddy looked skeptical. "Seriously, Mad, I'm almost there. I just need… Would you please?" Maddy nodded curtly and turned away.

"Ping me the second you're done," she said over her shoulder. "Noel's breathing down my neck." The door clicked shut behind her.

I'll bet he is, Nev thought to herself. *That's an image I didn't need in my head.*

Where was she? Oh, yes. Just a few finishing touches. Nev scanned her viz for code smells. Everything looked tight. No duplication. No dead code. No indecent exposure (unless you counted the trash folder of dick pics that Nev's brogrammer underlings dropped in her viz

throughout the day—reason number thirty-one she liked the office best when she had it to herself). The code smelled as fresh as a wheat field after the rain. Nev sighed, drawing the recycled office air deep into her lungs. It didn't taste quite so sweet.

The night sky through the windows was bright from the city lights. Even the double-paned glass couldn't entirely keep out the racket from the encampments. Each year, the number of ceegees—or "climate refugees," as MetaNews called them—living along Market Street seemed to double. Like a Moore's Law for abject misery. Wave after wave came to the city from each newly dehabbed point on the world map. Jakarta. Oklahoma City. Miami. San Salvador. San Francisco had opened its gates, declaring itself a sanctuary city to the world's climate refugees, but of course there wasn't enough space or money to house them, especially with the city locked in battle with the Feds following the 2040 census hack, and every self-respecting startup shielding its taxable revenues in a double Irish crypto sandwich.

Nev supposed living in the camps was better than drowning, but living near them got to be exhausting. When the profits from SavePoint 2.0 started rolling in, just in time for her options to vest, she'd have enough capital to buy a penthouse in one of the eco-towers built at the peak of Mount Sutro, after the 2040 wildfire ripped through the eucalyptus grove. Fifteen minutes from the office, at least until the Bay finally rose up and swamped the Tenderloin too, forcing Qbito to new digs. Whatever future the climate wrought, her Qbito paycheck guaranteed that Nev would have the resources to adapt and survive. She'd learned self-reliance the hard way. Maybe the only way.

This one's for you, Faith, Nev thought, as her fingers tapped out <<run>>.

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