



JOHN THOMAS-WURTH

THE ANGLES
OF CATS

The Angles of Cats

By
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*Cats no less liquid than their shadows
Offer no angles to the wind*

--ASJ Tessimond, 'Cats'

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Yvon Hintz's awesome cover art
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To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.
Emily Dickinson

CHAPTER 1

2012

Somewhere, in some universe, with all the possible trillions of seconds to inhabit, it must be lunchtime.

David Bradshaw stopped to gaze around the rugged Tasmanian wilderness but disappointingly, no fast food outlets presented themselves. If anything, the wilderness simply gusted a little harder, lifting his dark, bluntly cut hair and chilling any exposed skin. His stomach registered its own commentary with a meaningful gurgle.

"Well, that wouldn't be in the movie."

He rubbed absently at his midriff and tugged the heavy jacket he wore closer. It resisted movement, heavy with objects in the many pockets. David patted the pockets as he resumed walking, but failed to find anything edible. He sighed as his long fingers drew out another empty Violet Crumble wrapper and tucked it back into the equally well-pocketed trousers.

Still, being hungry often did have its compensations. Like ... right now. A familiar sideways twist in his gut: he jerked to the left to keep up with his stomach. And blurring, as if his eyes had just filled with water. He hunched, but still stumbled a few steps until the ground seemed to firm beneath him.

He squinted into the now cloudless sky, then looked down to find asphalt under his feet instead of the rough track he'd been walking. He hastily moved to one side, but the only thing moving in the now still and warm day was an empty coke can, which rattled across the highway in his wake. His eyebrows rose. Well, it certainly wasn't National Geographic any more. With a shrug he undid the jacket and slung it over his shoulder, also loosening the tightly snugged shirt collar as he walked on.

On either side of him the wilderness had somehow morphed into farms and farmlets, neatly fenced. Sheep grazed, birds cawed... and ... he sniffed, yes, definitely petrochemicals. He took all this with his usual expression of mild interest, but his mobile face broke into a grin as he crested the next hill. A few kilometres distant was a service station, maybe even a roadhouse. Just what the stomach ordered. David picked up the pace.

Inside the roadhouse, the short order cook and owner had plenty of time to appraise her new customer as David ambled up the highway. Ten years of running a 24 hour a day truck stop in a fairly remote section of the Deloraine Highway had given her ability to assess people, and she immediately pegged David as "Backpacker. Likely to be ravenous but cheap. Bet he orders a hamburger. Watch out for fleas."

She was right about the burger.

What she didn't anticipate was the 5 minute delay while David searched through his pockets for money. It wasn't that he couldn't find any. It just seemed always to be the wrong type.

"Travel a lot do you, mate?"

David looked up from a handful of Danish krone, oblivious to the disapproving tone, and crinkled a smile at her. "You have no idea."

He eventually pulled a crumpled wad of notes from a more recessed pocket and the roadhouse owner, whose name tag identified her believably as "Marge", reached over to pluck out a \$100 note from the bunch. "This'll be what you're after."

"Oh, really? They're pretty. Thanks.. er.. Marge. "

She levelled a gaze at him. He spread his hands and offered his best crooked half-smile. "I don't see those often."

She huffed a laugh. "Eh. Me either." She rang up the order on the till and handed him a shower of change. "Where you from then? Can't pick your accent. English for sure, but...? Bit o' the Indian? Ah, I know - Greek!"

The engaging smile stayed but went vague. "Oh, you know, here and there. Been all over really." He frowned as he thought it over. "Now you come to mention it, I can't actually remember where I was born. Might have been Montreal. Or was it Budapest? Hm." He scratched a cheek just starting to bristle with a 5 o'clock shadow, and nodded thoughtfully. "Nnnn..yuhp. I reckon it was Melbourne."

"Melbourne?"

He might as well have said "Place where rats go to die". David shrugged.

"Culturally diverse, apparently. Good restaurants. "

A pause hung in the air over this assessment.

"I'll get your hamburger." She disappeared into the kitchen leaving the little swing doors to deliver their own opinion.

Unruffled, David collected a copy of the local paper and retired to a booth to read the comics. It was a small paper and he didn't think he had much chance of finding a new Gary Larson cartoon, but before he could check, his eye caught the screaming headline "Tassie Flu - the New Ebola?". ... Ebola? He massaged his left temple, activating the dictionary implant. He closed his eyes while it initialised and blessed yet again his decision to install the older model rather than the newer "direct neural access" version. There was something just downright unsettling about having information pop up in your head without knowing the

source. David preferred the good old "point & click" optical interface, and had even plugged for the archaic "book style" skin customisation. So after a few seconds of mentally flicking through the "book" hanging before him, David found the reference and looked mildly revolted. "Surely not," he muttered. He sighed. "Comics, stick to the comics."

"Beauty, i'n't?" Marge slapped down a plate loaded down with hamburger, chips, tomato sauce, chips, one lettuce leaf, a curl of carrot and chips. She was beginning to recognise David's vague look and added, "The bass. I saw you staring at it just then. Biggest one ever caught in these parts."

David's focus shifted to the far wall, staked to which was an enormous stuffed fish. His smile stretched diplomatically. "Never seen anything like it. You must be ... " *nauseated? Lacking in taste?* "... proud."

"Caught 'im m'self," she confirmed.

He relieved Marge of her cutlery and napkin allowing her to set down the coffee next to the plate. "Thanks. Uhh... I don't suppose this virus thing is too prevalent in these parts then?"

A gleam entered her eye. "Well, they reckon it started in Lonnie - Launceston to you tourists. Can't get much closer than that. Dunno if anyone's died yet." She drew in a meaty sniff. "Nasty, tho. Eats ya from the inside. They say it--"

"Remind me to ask you again after lunch," David stopped her hastily.

"Heh. Right. Enjoy." Dusting her hands and looking pleased to have disgusted yet another customer, Marge retired to the kitchen.

It was late afternoon when David emerged from the roadhouse, his pockets once again loaded with sugary supplies. He'd not gone more than a few kilometres down the highway, and was juggling the latest cryptic crossword while munching on a Violet Crumble bar, when a large drop of rain plonked down on 2 across. He gazed up at the darkening sky and gave it a sour grimace. It responded by starting to rain in earnest. David sighed.

"I'm getting off this damned island if it kills me."

Tucking the crossword and pen back into his jacket, he pulled the collar up and stared around for possible shelter. The township was still several kilometres distant, but across the road offered at least a decent clump of trees against the faint hope of a short Tasmanian downpour.

He hunched and ran.

A squeal of tyres was all David needed to *shift*, though the blaring horn added a nice adrenaline incentive. All the alarmed motorist saw was a man in a heavy pocketed jacket swing around in midstep across the road and blink out.

Perhaps there was a bluish swirl in the spot where he'd been, but he was a bit too busy to notice just then.

David knew that *shifting* while moving was not a good idea if you could help it. But it was a sad fact that he rarely *could* help it. *Shifting* back midstep, off balance, he felt an ankle turn under him and went down with a thump and curse. He just had time to register that it was full day before more tyres squealed. He grunted and rolled to one side but knew it was not quickly enough. He smelled the petrochemicals from the vehicle and a sharp scent of petrichor before the car connected with his shoulder. It got him off the road at least.

The car responsible shuddered to a protesting halt and then stalled, as if suggesting that was quite enough to expect of an aging utility for one day. Inside, the female driver stared, stricken, into the rear vision mirror, but saw no sign of her victim. She focused on the steering wheel, willing her knuckles to release their death grip.

Oooh. Bad choice of words. Lia shook her head, wrestled with the door mechanism and eventually shouldered her way out.

On the open road, quiet and inoffensive again, it seemed suddenly unreal. "Did that really happen?" she muttered to herself. She contemplated turning around and getting in the car again. "Ungh. Coward."

Before she could make any other excuses she trotted to the shoulder of the road and peered over. Yep, there he was. Face down. In the scrub. Oh god, there were documentaries that started like this. Usually with "most wanted" in the title. And just how, the next thought followed on inevitably, was she going to explain it to her 9 year old daughter?? Neika was safely in the care of the education system right now. Possibly learning that, while "library" was spelt with 2 Rs, you shouldn't worry too much about getting it right, it was the *thought* that counted. Right. Write, even.

Lia shook herself and set to half sliding, half running down the embankment. But when she reached the man, she hesitated. Should you move someone who was unconscious? She compromised by reaching out to prod him.

"Uhh... are you okay?"

"Mmph."

"Oh thank god!" Then: "YOU IDIOT!!! Are you **crazy?** Sitting in the middle of the road??? You could have been killed! I could have killed you. Do you have any idea how much bad karma that is??!"

She sat back, breathing heavily. "OK. Okay. I can handle this. Can I? Yes, I can. OK. Okay. How?"

"You could start by helping me up."

Lia stared at the man. What she actually heard was more along the lines of "Ymmmssshllllluuuu", but once he'd said it of course, it was blindingly obvious.

"Sure. Sure. Right. I knew that."

Gingerly, she put a hand on his shoulder. David's scream sent her back into the bushes with a yelp of her own and more hyperventilating. She coughed. "Ah. Sorry. Hurts, does it?"

Her victim had made it to his knees. Lia peeled herself out of the scrub and crabbed over again, tentatively putting out her hand to help, but she hesitated, unsure as to where to actually touch without doing more harm than good. The man's features were set in pain as he tried to stand without jarring the shoulder any further. Stand. Right. Good first step. Having defined the problem a little more concretely, Lia gathered herself and slipped under his good arm.

"Look, just lean on me a little. Can you stand? Does anything else hurt?"

"sokay. It's just the shoulder I think. I'll be okay."

Lia liked the voice. It was a baritone, not as deep as some she'd heard, but rich. And even through the pain she heard the amused timbre - good for a man to have a sense of humour, oh yes! Particularly if you're going to sit in the middle of roads. And the accent ... now where the hell was that from? She thought English at first, all posh and proper, but there was a definite Australian base under the educated accent, and you just couldn't fake Australian. He had to be a national.

Half standing now, she realised he was taller than he'd looked in the scrub and likely to be heavy if he fell. On her, most likely. Great. She manoeuvred for a more secure hold and said,

"Here, this way, it's not as steep."

They managed the slope and made it to the side of the waiting vehicle with no major disasters. David grabbed the roof rack frame with his good hand and pulled himself up to more or less his full height, then turned to lean his back against the car.

"Ahh, better. My thanks. Most people don't usually stop."

Lia, who'd dived into the front cab of the ute for a medical kit, stuck her head out the passenger side window and grinned. "What, you do this a lot?"

"Not," he said sincerely, "if I can possibly help it."

Lia laughed. She pulled her head back inside the truck, hunted up the rest of the supplies and emerged bristling with bandages and antiseptic.

"Okay, I've got ..." But her would-be-patient was nowhere to be seen. She rounded the truck to find him sitting on the ground, his back still to the cab, and

mentally traced his downwards slide. Unconscious of course. With his head titled back against the car he looked for all the world like he was taking a Sunday nap. Lia estimated his weight at about 95 kilos and sighed.

"Oh..... nuts."

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"Mum! What are you doing with a dead guy in the car?"

"He's not dead honey," Lia called from the phone booth. Her raised voice cut directly across the path of Neika's 4th grade teacher. Weakly, Lia sketched a wave. "Hi, Mrs Delamare, how's it going?"

Mrs Delamare paused, mouth open to reply, but seemed not sure how to answer and eventually skirted the phone booth with a worried frown. Lia sighed and put a hand to her head. She raised her voice again. "Ahh.... just ... will you give him a poke for me?"

"Sure!"

They were parked in the school's pick up zone and Lia had taken their arrival ten minutes before school finished as an opportunity call ahead to Mersey Hospital near Devonport. But of course she'd been placed in a queue and Neika had already galloped to the car in the daily educational exodus. She thought gloweringly of her unreliable mobile phone. It might only be a year old, but she was definitely going to bash it against a fence post this time. Her attention snapped back to the phone. "Ah! Miyoko Ettinger please."

At the car, Neika enthusiastically carried out her instructions, causing David to jerk and snarl "m'awake already!" This was obviously not his first poke today.

"Did Mum do this?" she asked, investigating the copious bandaging. She recognised her mother's "all or nothing" style of medical attention. However David, struggling for consciousness, answered,

"Well, I don't think she **meant** to run me over."

Neika's eyes widened at this juicy titbit. "Cooool! Wait'll I tell Courtney!"

"Annika Jane Bethany Trescari! You will do no such thing," Lia growled, reaching the car and hustling her daughter around to the driver's side door. "C'mon, hop in. You'll have to sit on the bench seat." This suited Neika, who could observe her mother's vehicular damage first hand. David couldn't help an answering grin at this avid inspection.

"Want to see where the bone sticks out?" he asked *sotto voce*. Lia cut off her daughter's yelp of enthusiasm with a shift into first gear and a sharp U turn into the school traffic.

"Look! For a start, I didn't ... *run over* so much as 'gently clip' him. He'll be fine." She stuck her hand out of the window to wave at another parent, wishing for the hundredth time she hadn't been forced to stop at the school first. "After I get him to Miyoko," she added under her breath.

"Auntie Miyo, great! Hey, can I get fish and chips for dinner in Latrobe?"

"No," she said automatically. "Well, maybe. We'll see how long it takes with Miyo. Now don't annoy Mr ... uhh... you know I never did catch your name, what with all the fainting."

David repositioned himself against the doorjamb. "I prefer to think of it as occasionally rendering myself unconscious." He stuck out his good hand over Neika, who was still hopefully trying to get a glimpse of shattered bone. "David Bradshaw." Lia shook back over Neika and the steering wheel. The calluses on his hand surprised her. She hadn't marked him as a tradesman or labourer, but she supposed a backpacker took what work he could.

"Mr Bradshaw. Hi. I'm Lia Trescari. We live out Sheffield way. Y'know, in case you need to serve me with a writ or anything."

"Oh mum, he won't sue you." Neika got in her shake with David as well.

"I won't," David agreed, settling back. "I may not even survive the car trip."

Neika giggled, but Lia raised an eyebrow, detecting no irony in his voice. David sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't like vehicular travel. Prefer walking." After a beat he added, "Please only poke if I snore."

Neika, halted mid-poke, stared at her mother, who shrugged. "Fair enough. Hate snorers."

David's mouth curved.

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Unfortunately, he did snore. But Lia stopped her daughter poking on the basis that it seemed like a natural sleep. She certainly never read anywhere that people who slipped into comas snored. The man looked as if he could use some decent sleep, too.

It was heading towards mid afternoon when they pulled up outside Mersey Hospital, but the lengthening shadows made it feel later. Lia blew her breath out as she switched off the ignition, and reached over to give her daughter a hug.

"I have to find Miyoko hon. Can you keep an eye on our friend for a bit?"

"What, I'm actually allowed to be in the company of a stranger for 3 seconds?"

"Don't get smart. And if he tries anything, just whack his sore arm. But I really want you here in case he... well.. you know.... " she waggled her hands.

"Runs away? Falls more asleep? Oh I get it - dies! Cool!"

"Savage. I'm going to lock the door, OK?"

Neika rolled her eyes. "If it makes you feel better."

"It does," she assured her, and pressed the central locking button on her key ring. As usual, the mechanism didn't work, and Lia thumped it a few times. Neika leaned over and locked the door from the inside with a "happy now?" look.

"Stay. Put." Lia gritted. And hurried away, because it looked like Neika was about ten seconds from poking. Just whom, she wondered, was she protecting by locking that door?

Inside the hospital, Miyoko Ettinger saw her friend hurrying up the emergency entrance and gathered up a "new admissions" file. She knew she should suppress the grin she felt rising to the surface, but it was difficult. Lia Trescari was an annoyingly capable and independent person who weathered all kinds of disasters, large, small and daughter-related, with even-handed efficiency. It was unworthy perhaps, but it gave her not some small satisfaction to find her perfect friend flustered and dishevelled - which Miyoko felt most days just standing next to her.

"OK," she said, gathering her up, "tell me what happened on the way to the car." She snagged a passing wheelchair with orderly attached.

"I ... I... well, I ran over this guy."

Miyo's grin escaped entirely. "This is a new approach for you."

"Oh knock it off Miyo! He's got a dislocated bloody shoulder, probably concussion and now he's in a coma." She drew in a breath which was meant to steady but proved all too shaky. She shook her head angrily. "Well I think it might be."

"Sorry. Sorry. Right. But ... it's not really like you. Were you distracted?"

"No! That's just the thing. One minute the road was as clear as a bell, the next he just well, appeared there."

Lia grimaced, very aware of how it sounded. But Miyo just took her elbow and steered her towards the doors. "Never mind about that now. Dislocated shoulder you say? We can fix that."

They reached the car then, and Neika popped the driver's side door with an expert twist and thump. "Hi Auntie Miyo!"

"Hiya chicken! Been good?"

"Course!"

Miyo bent to peer into the cab and raised an eyebrow at this cheery endorsement. "Wake up, little Suzie" was blaring from car's CD player while Neika had obviously been honing her medical skills on her unconscious patient. David was covered with every size and shape band aid possible in the medical kit. The smell of antiseptic wafted out to them. Cotton balls artfully adorned his ears and open shirt at the neck. Lia put a hand to her head and adopted what Miyo called "the Neika pose". Miyo stifled a snort by dragging a hand over her mouth, plugging for the all-purpose medical "ahh-mmmm."

Seeing the expression on her mother's face, Neika switched off the music. Into the sudden quiet, David's drawn out snore seemed even louder.

Miyo and Neika exchanged glances and dissolved into giggles.

"Am I the only one who thinks this is serious??" Lia demanded, but she bit her lip on her second look at the peacefully unconscious man.

Miyo just waved the grinning orderly forward, not trusting herself to speak.

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Two days later it actually dawned rain free and sunny in the greater Devonport area, however Miyoko was not having a good start to it.

"Mr Bradshaw!"

She hated yelling in hospitals, and she liked running in them even less. Especially when she was the one forced to do both. She caught up with her problem patient just as he exited the main doors of the hospital. Technically, she couldn't prevent him leaving, but she felt compelled to at least make a convincing medical stand.

" Now ... now are you sure you're OK?" *D'oh!*

He flashed her an annoyingly sunny smile from under all the bandages. "Right as rain." He cast a wary eye at the sky.

He didn't look right as rain, but frustratingly, there wasn't anything Miyoko could do to keep him at the hospital - short of strapping him down. Tempting, but unfortunately illegal. The dislocated shoulder was the simplest fix - a quick pop back in while he was still unconscious. Miyoko was more worried about the concussion; her preliminary tests had showed some truly strange results and she was keen to pin down what was going on. But for some reason he was adamant about refusing any kind of scan - even an x-ray, for Pete's sake. Said it was against

his religion. Good argument, that. Watertight these days. It was only after he started claiming that hospitals in general were against his religion - while consuming hospital food in quantities sufficient to (almost) bring a smile to the faces of the kitchen staff - that she got suspicious. Still, what could you do? Miyo mustered the best medical argument she could think of.

"You ... you're still wearing the hospital's ID tag!"

"I am? Oh, I am. How careless." He removed the wristband and handed it back with a gracious half-bow. Miyo realised she should never play poker. "Thank you for your excellent care, Dr Ettinger. Now I really do have to move on." He hesitated. "I ... believe you know Mrs Trescari in a social sense."

Miyo's eyebrow quirked. "Better use the 'Ms', she's rabid about it. But yes, we're friends."

"I wonder if you can't let her know I'm grateful for her kindness. And please reassure her that the accident was not her fault."

"It wasn't? Running you over in broad daylight?"

David grinned - a real smile - and Miyo blinked. It transformed his face from genial but slightly vacuous to .. well, ...sharp. And intelligent, a little disturbing in its intensity. A bit like a rabbit getting caught in a spotlight. She rubbed her nose absently.

"I really did drop in from nowhere," he was saying mildly. "Truly. Not her fault."

Miyo opened her mouth to reply, but there was very little you could say to a statement like that without starting a whole new conversation. One she wasn't sure she wanted to get into, at least not without psych services present. She was still trying to figure out how to pose the first question when David tipped her a casual wave conveying both thanks and goodbye and wandered off.

"Oh.... nuts."

With a sigh and a shrug, Miyo turned her back on her ex-patient and walked back into the hospital. It irritated her that she would have to tell Lia her victim had voluntarily discharged himself, but if she knew Lia, that news would be well received. She liked hospitals about as well as the enigmatic Mr Bradshaw.

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Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory.
Albert Schweitzer

CHAPTER 2

2012

It was good to be on the road again. Hospitals were claustrophobic at the best of times. David knew that elevated stress levels were an ideal recipe for *shifting*, but that was not good news if they installed you on the 7th floor and the time you *shifted* to didn't have a 7 storey building.

Better to be ground floor and stationary. Always.

Better yet to avoid hospitals and infrastructure completely, really. Yep, the open road for him.

You bet.

"Damn. I'm hungry."

He thought fondly of the hospital cafeteria. If only hospitals weren't so consistently *interested* in a person.

He sighed and went to activate the neural implant for a GPS style map of the area. His hand contacted the bandaging there and he decided for the low tech approach, digging into his various pockets to retrieve a well mangled tourist booklet of the island. He did stop briefly to consult the date stamp on a letter from someone's mailbox - 21 February 2012 - and checked the date with that of the booklet - only a decade or so variance. If there was one thing you could say about Tasmania, he thought wryly, it was a decided resistance to change, so the 2023 print date of the tourist booklet should prove no real hindrance to locating places.

"OK. Food first. Escape second."

The map showed Devonport still a good 10km further on. He'd make do with what this smaller town of Latrobe had to offer, and make his way into Devonport ... later on. He was, after all, now at least 50km further progressed towards his goal, thanks to the overly conscientious Ms Trescari.

Escaping an island for someone with David's unique .. challenges meant only one thing: a ferry journey. It was, after all, how he got here in the first place. But getting aboard a ferry wasn't nearly as problematic as staying aboard one. For a start, he suffered from acute seasickness - yet another recipe for *shifting* - and just the knowledge that you might be in for a 15 metre fall into icy cold water at any moment was enough to get the stress levels rising.

David turned off the main street leading away from the hospital and headed in the general direction of the town of Latrobe, thinking back to the circumstances which had landed him on this very hard-to-leave island. It felt like he'd spent years wandering Tasmania, but he knew from experience that the many *shifts* could

make it only seem that way. That, and the year-round all-pervading cold. It might well only have been months in metabolic time. Still, the details of his trip to the island were anything but clear. He had a hazy memory of a *very* pleasant night in Melbourne involving several bottles of a superb Barossa red wine, members of a local theatre sports company, some general bragging and daring ... and possibly a confession on his part about disliking of any kind of vehicular travel.

David didn't like to dwell on his condition when they'd loaded him aboard the poor sod's truck and strapped him into the fresh fruits section. Suffice it to say that in the 10 hours it took to cross the Strait he'd somehow lost all desire for mangoes. Fortunately, the ferry had only been several hundred metres from shore when realisation (and consciousness) dawned and he'd *shifted*, unable to control the surge of panic.

David often read about the kayakers and swimmers who pitted themselves against Bass Strait. If he ever did make it off the island, he rather fancied awarding himself a medal for being the first person to swim the rotten thing *involuntarily*.

He sighed, pocketed the booklet, and headed for the leafy green reserve he'd just spotted. The last thing he wanted to do was walk down the main street of Latrobe looking like the poster boy for the latest Frankenstein movie.

As David settled down on a bench seat in the well maintained park, the sun emerged fully from behind a cloud. He groaned and tipped his head to the sun, soaking it in, and felt his body begin to unwind from a tension he hadn't even realised he'd been carrying. Warmth was *good*. Tentatively, he reached up to explore the extent of bandaging around his head. Hmm. Had worse. Long fingers picked deftly at the bandage and it came away in swaths. He tucked it into his well pocketed jacket - always a handy thing, bandaging - and considered the remaining damage. Need a mirror, he decided.

He glanced around the park but it was deserted. At this time of the morning he supposed everyone was involved in their usual routines for getting to work, school or just out of bed. He reached into yet another pocket and produced a small black sphere, pleasingly sculpted with a pattern of the moon's seas and craters. He opened his hand and it floated gently up and a little away. Automatically, he reached up to his temple to activate the implant, and sighed. It was harder, but he could activate the link mentally. The custom designer up in 2418 had frowned on his use of physical props such as shoulder lifts, chin jerks and tilts of his head to navigate the implant, and had even tried hard to talk him out of the very old fashioned book interface, arguing it made the user lazy and didn't maximise the potential of the neural net. David agreed with everything the designer told him, and then used whatever worked best.

Well, pain was a very good motivator to learn new skills, he decided, and sat quietly for a few moments, concentrating on the string of concepts, words and musical tones which served as a wake-up call to the technology in his brain. It took a couple of tries and left him with a mild headache, but he was finally rewarded with a definite sense of a click (on!) and heard the soft piping of notes

which announced successful access. He made a face; he'd have to do something about that one day. It sounded too like that damned tune so many computers used on start up in this century, and he didn't much care for the comparison.

The familiar brown leather encyclopaedia style "book" appeared in front of him and he mentally flicked the pages to "holo". The black of the sphere faded in the front and a soft light, almost undetectable unless you were very close, bathed David's head and torso. He clicked into "receive" and examined the shadowy person who materialised before him. He'd found that if you thought of it like a seriously good 3D mirror, it wasn't so disconcerting, but even so the face staring back at him with the bruising, cuts and scrapes came as a bit of a shock.

"You look worse than I feel," he murmured to his image, and grinned as the shadow-David parroted the same words only a fraction of a second out of step. He resisted the urge to pull a really stupid face. Instead, he prodded carefully around the remaining sticking plaster, wincing as his fingers touched a tender spot. A bit too fresh to remove just yet. Still... he regarded his alter ego critically, and reached up to tug at a few clumps of hair near his forehead. It obligingly covered the plaster, straightening to a nice mop-like curve. He dragged at a few more wavy locks, trying to pin down the sudden sense of 'not quite right'. Wasn't his hair usually straight? Mostly? He hardly remembered. He frowned as he regarded himself more closely. *Brown* eyes? Didn't they used to be blue? Or at least that weird combination of blue/brown. And the nose ... now surely he'd have remembered breaking it. And .. was it always that long?

He leaned back, frowning, trying to reconcile memory with current appearance. He considered tapping into the net to access the selection of dummy accounts and identities he left set up over the centuries. There were at least three he recalled from the early 2000s, and they all had photo identification. But ... well, it was confusing enough just switching between time streams without any notice. It was likely his memories were of a time he'd had to ... blend a little more than usual. And that time could have been 20 years ago or yesterday. It was amazing he could still remember his own name.

No. He decided against it at the same time a woman entered the park pushing a child in a stroller. He caught sight of her through his own hologram and lurched to his feet. The hologram lurched up with him, disorientingly close, and he stumbled a few steps forward. He reached for his temple to deactivate the implant, yelped, and then swore richly. By the time he looked up again, the woman was a quickly retreating figure along the footpath. David looked dismayed for a second, realising all too well the picture of drunken derelict or worse he must have presented. But then his usual good humour asserted itself, and he snorted. What were a few stray hairs, poor memory and temporal incontinence against that depressing scenario?

Taking a deep breath, David stuck his hands in his pockets and turned in the direction of Latrobe. Surely it was lunch time.

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“Shoes in your room!”

Lia Trescari dropped her keys on the hall stand as her daughter shouldered past her, eager to get ... where ever it was she was going. Probably the fridge. There were two things you could count on with Neika - a perpetual state of hunger and a lack of shoes. The latter tended to get dropped where ever they were shed, and it had moved from a losing battle to a kind of ritual to remind her to stow them in the correct place. Lia smiled as she heard the sneakers thump against the wall of the bedroom. Well, it was a start.

“Don’t eat the nutloaf!” she yelled as she heard the fridge door slam and the pantry being rifled. “That’s for Auntie Miyo tomorrow.”

“Kay!”

Lia was still negotiating the delicate routine of family greetings - fending off Killa, the border collie cross, trying not to trip over the 3 cats as she stepped into the house and avoiding the sewer-strength breath of the cocker spaniel as it manoeuvred between the rest. “Neeks, you let Ratbag out again!” she hollered as a pink and grey galah swooped through the room and dived for the front door. The flyscreen caught it and it squawked indignantly.

“Did not! She can undo the cage!” came the yell back.

“Well ... fix it, will you?!” Lia ducked the return swoop, and Killa took that as an invitation to jump up and plant a slobbery doggy kiss. “Urgh, Killa, down!” She picked up a fat tortoiseshell cat and dumped it on a nearby chair, trying to progress further than the living room. “Put a lock on that cage when you catch her Neika, there’s one in the study.”

“Kay!”

Lia made it to the kitchen and switched on the kettle. Tea could fix just about anything. Not that it had been a bad day ... just a normal one, and that was exhausting enough in itself. Today it had been the usual round of Battle To Get Out the Door in the Morning, followed by Rush to School and then a more sedate Crawl Exhaustedly to Work. It didn’t take long usually - the local council offices were just around the corner from the school and Lia usually walked it if she had contracts on that day. It took half an hour or so to clarify the jobs on offer, down a second cup of tea and shrug into a pair of overalls if needed. Mostly, they were. Today she’d finished installing new fencing around the recreation hall, overseen some garden maintenance and tidying for the school (fending off demands for money for the canteen in the process), and chased after another stray dog. Fortunately, she’d resisted bringing this one home, she thought, regarding Killa’s open-jawed grin with affection.

“I fed you this morning,” she replied to his silent plea.

“So did I,” Neika said, passing through the kitchen on her second trip to the pantry.

Lia shook her head. “Hmm. That’s twice this week. Now beat it and I may consider dinner.”

Killa, who was almost preternaturally smart, collapsed on the floor in obvious defeat, but liquid brown eyes followed her every movement. The neurotic golden cocker spaniel who thought it was a cat, or possibly very-short-human, continued to whine and beg - for attention if not actual food. Killa gave it the glance of contempt it deserved.

Lia poured water into the mug and disarmed Neika as she tried to scoot behind her with a bag of chips. “Awwwwwwww! You promised!”

“Just because you didn’t get money for junk at the canteen today does NOT mean you get junk at home. Especially before dinner. And I did not promise. You postulated.”

Neika looked aghast. “I did not!”

“Look it up.”

Neika rolled her eyes and made a rude noise. “The dictionary is your friend,” Lia said placidly.

Neika stamped off to her room, muttering imprecations about life being ruined, the monstrous unfairness of it all and how she was obviously being starved to death before dinner. Lia finished tending to the row of plants lining the bay window of the kitchen, sniffed deeply at the fragrant basil, one of her favourite herbs, and exhaled with a sigh. “Ahhhhh. Home sweet home.”

It was sweet smelling at least - Lia’s natural green thumb saw to that. There was hardly a room which didn’t burst with green, living material in one form or another. And outside, the 5 acres of land was judiciously seeded with a variety of plant life designed to shade, shelter, eat, graze or simply please the eye, depending on your mood and species.

Lia moved through the old house, gently drawing the bedroom door closed on Neika’s bad temper, and headed for her own study with tea and the day’s mail in hand.

She plonked down in her chair, switched on the computer and started opening the mail. Most was junk or bills but an official looking one caught her eye and she opened it first. Oh good, a successful tender! She examined the wordy document, marvelling that some people still conducted business by snail mail in this electronic age. Most of her correspondence was done via email, including submissions for contracts and subsequent advice on the success of her tender or otherwise. But ... she paused to re check the logo at the top of the page .. yep, local government was always one of the last organisations to enter a new age. In this case, Latrobe Council. She scanned the component contract items - they hadn’t added any clauses or changed existing tender terms for once - and turned to the

computer. First email, and she sent off a quick confirmation of her preliminary order to Mersey Forestry Products. Another to Workskills in Devonport, requesting a tradesperson for general fabrication and welding for a 6 week contract. She wasn't at all sure how successful that would be. Most tradespeople wanted more regular work. A short term contract would only appeal to the likes of students and backpackers, and the chances of landing a really skilled person on a week's notice was ... well, you had to be an optimist.

Lia sighed, lamenting yet again the loss of her regular casuals. Her most reliable person had just gone into hospital to have a baby (she toyed briefly with the idea of putting back the contract a few months but couldn't quite imagine any line of argument which might persuade Jules to throw her brand new baby on her back to weld up some steel plate) and the other had moved his family to the mainland following a job offer too good to refuse. A few others she'd used over time had drifted away or into other lines of work. The last contract she'd employed a retired man from Deloraine for a week of contract mowing - seemed safe enough, given the ride-on mower she'd rented. But she hadn't bargained for him getting his walking stick caught in the mower blades, or losing a set of dentures to them as well. How on earth he'd done it, given the over-designed safety features of the machine, she had no idea. But, in the current atmosphere of it's-not-my-fault-no-matter-what-happens, he'd demanded she recompense him for his losses or he'd report her to Worksafe for poor safety standards. She'd suggested that perhaps it wasn't her safety standards at fault but a case of galloping stupidity, and the whole scenario had degenerated into something ... depressingly adversarial. She supposed she was lucky he didn't sue her; that seemed to be the fashion lately too. But it certainly put her off tendering for any contracts other than those she could do solo. She preferred it anyway to the stresses of having to deal with People.

“Muuuuuum!”

Lia grimaced. Yes, one Person at a time was definitely all she could manage. “Yes?” she hollered back, attempting to disengage the young white & grey cat suctioned to the back of her office chair from her delightful game of “attack the enemy hair”.

“What's for dinner?”

“Tripe & onions!”

“I am NOT eating that!”

It wasn't a serious threat, more another form of ritual, as they were both almost vegetarian in their food preferences. Which wasn't as healthy as it sounded in Neika's case, Lia thought wryly, thinking of her apparently limitless capacity for ice cream.

Lia stood up, detached the cat from her hair, and contemplated the kitchen. Scratch meal tonight of whatever-I-can-find-casserole. Tomorrow being Saturday, she decided on a quick trip to Latrobe before Miyoko's visit in the afternoon. That way she could iron out any wrinkles with the Forestry Products

people and make sure the supply of trees and shrubs was exactly what she needed for the new contract. Workskills was only a few more kilometres further on and it might be worth a quick in-person visit – you never knew who would sign up on a Saturday. It put a dent in her morning plans to clean the house... but what could you do.

She eyed Neika's door as she passed - it was quiet in there now - and resigned herself to having her daughter along with her on the trip.

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The next afternoon, Neika watched from the cab of the ute as her mother stomped down the steps of Workskills Devonport. Uh oh, obviously the interview for the welder had been a bust. There'd been a likely sounding phone call earlier in the morning and her mother had approached the offices half an hour earlier with a good humour Neika found a bit scary. Now she knew why. She leaned over to pound the unreliable lock open before her mother's wrath could find any excuse to land on her. Lia wrenched the door open, got in then slammed it shut. She spent a few seconds stewing before starting the vehicle and pulling out of the car park.

"Does this mean you won't have a job on Monday?" Neika asked a few minutes later, greatly daring. They were heading south, making for the turnoff for Sheffield. Lia sighed.

"No, I'll start it. Just looks like I'm up for some remedial welding courses."

Neika frowned. "I didn't know you could get that out of a book."

"You'd be surprised what you can Google," Lia told her, then grinned at her alarmed expression. "That, and I know a guy in Launceston who teaches it at TAFE. He should be good for a few pointers."

"Mum... you do know which end is up don't you?"

"Yes, number one daughter, I have done welding before. Just ... not in such detail. Plus, y'know, Jules - Ms Harmidan - was pretty handy with a stick welder... no reason I have to go TIG or anything fancy..."

"You think she'll come back to work?"

"Ahh.. no. Not with a new baby. But she might give me some hints and tips."

"Yeah," Neika muttered, thinking of the tips she was likely to get from that source. None of them particularly relevant to welding and most of them anatomically uncomfortable. One thing you could say about Julie Harmidan - she called a spade a spade. She and her mother would have periodic shouting matches which somehow always ended in the old battleaxe storming off that day and returning the next as if nothing had happened. And she'd never been shy of pulling Neika into line over the years. Neika felt a definite sympathy for her new offspring.

There was a meditative silence in the cab for a few moments before Lia's phone began ringing. She cast Neika a look. "Did you change the ring tone again?"

"This one's cool! Who has just 'ringring' any more?" Neika dug for the phone. Lia shook her head. No wonder she never recognised her own phone ringing. It made her look like an idiot on more than one occasion, when clients or a passersby had to point out that her back pocket was ringing, or murmured "isn't that *your* phone?" with a smirk for the embarrassing ditty that was coming out of the handset. Neika studied the display intently and thumbed the 'talk' button before Lia could tell her not to.

"Hi Auntie Miyo!"

Lia pulled the ute over to the side of the road and commandeered the phone. Neika listened to her mother's side of the conversation, crossing her fingers against the possibility that her favourite grownup might be cancelling her visit. It happened all too regularly. Neika had long ago decided that she was never going into the medical profession. You could never get to see a doctor on time, and the doctors themselves seemed to be in a perpetual state of exhaustion and overwork. When did that get fun?

Lia hung up and looked over at Neika. "Auntie Miyo's had to pull an emergency shift at the hospital." Neika groaned. "Yeah, I know, but she's going to make up for it by staying overnight. How about that?"

"Cool! She can bunk with me!"

"Not likely. She reckons Killa gives her fleas because you let him sleep on your bed."

"Killa doesn't have fleas! Mugwump has fleas," she said, thinking of the long haired tabby cat with the highly strung and nasty disposition. She scratched her neck absently, her thoughts back at home with the ongoing nightly struggle to avoid death by feline suffocation. "Boy, does he."

"Really?" Lia asked, arrested. "That would explain where they're coming from. He never lets me near him. Anyway..." She shoved the ute into first gear and made a U turn back onto the highway. "Miyo needs to feed PingPong and Suki and get a few things from her place. Should only be an hour or so. We'll wait for her back in Devonport."

"At McDonald's?"

"What, twice in one day?" her mother drawled, and Neika grinned, remembering the successful lobbying earlier in the day when she'd had to put up with several stops at plant nurseries and other related work-stuff she could guiltify her mother over. "Not a chance kid," Lia was saying. "There's a café up the road a bit. And I could do with a decent coffee."

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You could see the entire ship from here.

David gazed out the window at the *Spirit of Tasmania*, currently berthed by the ferry terminal on the opposite side of the Mersey River. It seemed huge and daunting, and he resolutely turned his eyes down to the coffee shop's menu before he could pursue that line of thinking any further.

Ah, counter service. Meaning you went up and ordered from ... well, a counter. That might explain the half hour wait at the table with no attention. Successfully distracted, he wandered up to the till and ordered a long black coffee, then asked for cream and sugar. The girl at the counter shrugged away the cream, but pushed a grubby looking sugar bowl his way and disappeared into a kitchen behind her with an expression which said "why didn't you just ask for a cappuccino like everyone else?". David vented a small "huh" and wondered if this quaint ritual was unique to the time period or if it was just something Tasmanians did generally. Had to be a thesis in there, surely.

The girl returned with a small jug of milk and slapped it down on the counter, depositing his coffee beside it soon after. There was a lengthy pause, during which acceptable money was produced and change given, with David narrating the entire procedure.

"Charmed, I'm sure," he finished and, bestowing a smile of thanks completely at odds with the quelling service, scooped up his coffee and moved off. He chose a different position in the small café, pointedly not in sight of the ship, and settled down to brood. His mind skated over his well thought out plan to slip aboard (no more fruit trucks for him). He'd buy a private stateroom ticket, two bottles of red wine - no, three - and drink his way through the entire ten hour crossing. If he had to be hosed out of the room at the other end he'd count it a victory, having achieved his objective and not *shifted* during the process.

This was also, as it happened, David's approach to sex.

The door to the café opened on this rather disturbing thought, and a familiar couple entered: Lia and Neika Trescari. Ahh. The two headed for the counter, and he was about to slide into a booth when Neika's eyes locked with his. David hesitated long enough for Neika to drag her mother's attention from the counter. David's smile found an instantly answering one in Lia, who actually seemed pleased to see him. He blinked. What a delightful smile. His previous encounter had been rather stressed on her part and pain-hazed on his, and he'd spent much more time being chatted to or decorated by Neika, so perhaps he just hadn't had time to notice.

She gave a quick wave before turning back to the young serving girl in front of her. Nice eyes, he thought, and that smile reached all the way there. Lia's were dark, set quite widely apart in her face, slightly almond shaped - and bright.

Smart. He guessed she didn't miss much, and made a mental note to appear extra ... agreeable.

His gaze took in Lia's dark hair, thick and probably shoulder length if it wasn't pulled back artlessly in that practical knot. Bits were escaping, which she tucked irritably behind her ear, but whether that was the hair or the conversation with the serving girl was an even bet.

An interesting face, he decided, strong and not at all worried about being beautiful. Thank goodness. He couldn't abide beautiful women; they made him nervous, and that was never a good thing for a person with his .. special challenges.

He sat up straighter as Neika descended upon him, Lia trailing in her wake.

"Mr Bradshaw, hi!" she piped happily. "How's the shoulder?"

"Much better, thank you Neika." He grinned as she plumped down in the chair beside him as if they were friends of old. "Did I adequately express my gratitude for your excellent medical care?" he continued. "Dr Ettinger said people took photos."

Neika tried to look huffy, but somehow the twinkle in David's eyes contrasted so engagingly with the solemn tone, she had to grin.

"Right. I'll enrol for medical school tomorrow."

"Neika!" Lia muttered, coming up behind her.

"Well he started it."

"Hello Mr Bradshaw." She stuck her hand out and they shook, David rising to his feet. He indicated a spare chair.

"Please, it's David. Would you care to join .. uhm... us?"

Lia shoved a hand through her hair, obviously trying to find a polite explanation for her offspring's behaviour, but then helplessly shrugged. Too complicated. "Yes. Yes, thank you." She sat, giving Neika a meaningful look, which was returned with wide eyed innocence. Lia transferred her attention to the grownup at the table. "You look ... well. Better than the last time we met."

"Indeed. It's not the first bump I've had, and not the worst."

Lia nodded, studying him curiously. "I can imagine."

Hm, different approach, he decided recognising that particular look. Lia was about 2 seconds from a whole lot of questions he didn't want to answer. And the conversation would go in a direction he definitely didn't want.

"Did you order something?" he asked mildly, glancing at counter behind them.

“Not yet. They don’t actually have anything, as far as I could tell.”

“You just ask for a cappuccino,” Neika explained. Lia stared down at her daughter.

“You don’t drink coffee, kiddo. You’re hyper enough as it is.”

“Not me, you. It’s all she can make.”

“How do you know these things, Neeks? We’ve never even been in here before.”

“She’s Georgina’s friend’s big sister, she told me all about her. Can I have a milkshake?”

“Calcium is good for growing bones,” David observed into a short silence where Lia was obviously trying to muster a polite way of saying “bugger that!” to her daughter in front of a stranger. She shot him a look.

“I’m being ganged up on.”

“Yay! I’ll get some menus!” She pushed the chair back and dashed up to the counter.

“Keeps you busy I expect,” David murmured to Lia, who returned a heartfelt “Oh yes!”.

They watched Neika return moments later, the serving girl in startled tow. Apparently they’d been out of menus and Neika’s initiative had caught the girl by surprise. Still, she took out pen and paper and stood there, if not expectantly, then at least with an air of resignation.

David obediently ordered a cappuccino, resisting an urge to ask for a double shot of coffee, while Lia asked for a cup of tea.

“English breakfast?” she asked, despite herself. The waitress mumbled something which could have been agreement and turned to Neika.

“Cherry-ripe milkshake please,” she said brightly. After a beat and blank look, she expanded, “You take a chocolate milkshake and add some cherry flavour. Or strawberry in a pinch, but cherry’s better.”

“Dunno if we got that,” the girl mumbled, confounding David’s theory that she was genetically incapable of speech.

Neika wasn’t easily diverted from her objective. “C’mon, I’ll show you. I help out at the café at home. It’s easy to make.”

Before Lia could object, Neika slid out of the booth and took the waitress by the hand again. This almost won a smile from the young woman, and made her thick

black eyeliner and heavy eye shadow seem positively ghoulish. Whether or not she was keen for Neika to show her the delights of cherry-ripe milkshakes, she seemed unable to successfully resist her. Neika's animated, if rather one-way conversation could be heard as she towed the waitress to the kitchen,

"...and you need to squirt chocolate sauce around the *inside* of the glass, not just stick in it. That's important. What kind of ice cream do you have...? Vanilla works best, but Lillie uses chocchip at home and that's awesome too..."

"It's Neika's special gift," Lia sighed, watching them push through the swing doors to the kitchen. "She could talk the hind leg off a donkey and convince it to trot."

David laughed. Lia smiled in return, warmed by the lack of self consciousness in the laugh.

"Sounds rather wearing on the parents though."

"Oh yes. Well, on this one." She hesitated. "Neika's father died before she was born."

"Oh, I am sorry. That must make things ... more intensive."

Lia reached out to fiddle with a packet of sugar from the container between them on the table.

"Yes. I've often wondered if she'd be ... less intense shared around. But I suspect not. The greater the audience, the greater the performance, is my experience. And of course she's precocious, being an only child and spending so much time around adults. But I daresay you noticed that."

"Almost instantly," he agreed, winning another unplanned smile from Lia. *That doesn't happen enough*, he thought, and the slight lull allowed Lia to get in a question of her own,

"So... what is it you do, Mr ... uhm, David?"

He threw her a quirky grin, which she returned, settling her chin into a hand, obviously happy to wait as long as necessary for the reply. He surrendered with a good natured shrug.

"Mostly, I travel around. I do odd jobs, here and there. And I have an interest in .. hmm... different time periods. I do a lot of trade in antiquities or just items of some historical interest. Do you know only the other day I sold a handbill to a 1912 Hobart performance of Verdi's *La Traviata* for over \$500?"

He neglected to mention it was to a city pawn shop with dubious connections.

"Really? How did you find such an unusual item?"

“Well, I like *La Traviata*. And it was a great performance.” He caught Lia’s escalating eyebrow and added, “By all accounts.” A beat. “I think I should have asked for more.”

“That’s hardly an explanation.”

He grinned. “Not a really good one, is it.”

Fortunately, the drinks arrived then, and somehow Neika had become waitress-in-charge, directing where everything should go and more than making up for her new friend’s lack of articulation.

“Neika, sit down, please. Sit. Now!” Lia growled, trying to avoid the same tone which worked so well with wayward cocker spaniels at the pound. “Sit!”

Neika sat, and slurped happily on her cherry-ripe milkshake, eyeing the two adults with interest. David eyed the freckled 9 year old in return and tried his own diversion.

“So.” He turned dark eyes completely lacking in seriousness back to Lia. “Do you come here for the ambiance?”

Lia stifled a snort. “Only on special occasions.” Then added, “Actually, we’re waiting for Miyo - Miyoko. You remember, the doctor who fixed you up?”

David brightened further. “Dr Ettinger? Of course. I would like to thank her once more. I think I ... annoyed her a little. Will she be joining you?”

“No, I’m picking her up from her place. She’s just finishing a long shift at the hospital.”

“Ahh.”

The pause lengthened. David became aware that he was staring, and broke off at Neika’s tug on his jacket. She was examining his forehead intently.

“Mr Bradshaw, why do you still have that bandage on? It was months ago.”

David’s hand went to the last remaining sticking plaster on his forehead, well hidden by the overly long hair. He glanced at Lia, who just raised an eyebrow. Obviously, not much got by either Trescari. He cleared his throat.

“Cut myself shaving,” he said gravely. Neika giggled.

“Then why do you always wear that big heavy jacket? I’ve never seen so many pockets.”

“Neika!”

“No, it’s all right.” He turned to her. “You see, I travel around a lot, Neika. I have to carry most of the things I need with me.”

“Such as?”

David scratched his cheek - it was starting to bristle - and made a decision. He reached into a front pocket and drew out a handful of chocolate bars and wrappers. Neika’s eyes bulged.

“Oh. No, that wasn’t ... hold on.” He dug around further and extracted a roll of soft leather tied with thonging in an elegant knot. “Ah. Shaving kit. Going to need that later.”

He caught Lia’s eye, enjoying the gleam of amusement there which was having trouble not finding its way to her lips. Searching a smaller pocket, he withdrew what looked like a cross between a Swiss army knife and a small slab of steel.

“Now this... this is a ... well.. ”

“Leatherman tool. Mum’s got one.” Lia pulled the all-purpose pliers and tool set off her belt and held it up as proof. They did look similar in shape, but David rather suspected the two wouldn’t stand close inspection. He returned it smoothly to his pocket.

“Ahh... yes. Leatherman. Really? Leather...*man*?” He shook his head. “Well, my point is, I need to carry a great many things with me, and Tasmania is very cold, so it’s an efficient solution.”

“Why don’t you have a backpack like other tourists?”

“Doesn’t work for me, unfortunately. And I like to travel light.”

“What do you do for money? Are you rich?”

“Neika, that’s quite enough. Mr Bradshaw is not on trial, and you are not the prosecuting attorney.”

Neika pulled a face at this well-repeated rebuke but David waved it away.

“No I’m not rich. But I get by.”

“Amen,” Lia muttered.

“How?”

“Odd jobs, mostly. Here and there.” He sank his voice conspiratorially. “You’d be surprised what you can do with a Leatherman.”

Lia sighed. “Bet you can’t weld with one.”

“Well, there’s a good portawelder which is almost the same size at a t.. er, Leatherman.” He paused, considering. “But I don’t think it’s been invented yet.”

Lia didn’t seem to notice the strange qualification, setting her cup down a little harder than necessary. “You ... uhm... you’ve done welding?”

“Oh yes. It’s some of my favourite work.” *In these few centuries.* He thought fondly of a job which had lasted almost six months in the 1950s. Later on, up past the 2500s, welding became something even his flexible perceptions couldn’t handle, and he usually reverted to gardening or dog grooming. That never got old, fortunately. Or too new.

“Awesome!” Neika was hollering, to her mother’s embarrassment and shushing motions.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon Neika?”

“Mum, tell him, tell him!”

Lia waved her down. “What Neika is bursting to explain is that I happen to be in dire need of a welder and ...” she smiled, “general handyman for a new contract I’m starting next week.”

“She can’t find anyone who wants to live in Sheffield,” Neika put in. Clearly a sentiment she shared with any prospective employee.

David had opened his mouth to reply until the door to the café opened and he caught a glimpse of the all-dominating ferry on the other side of the Mersey River. He hesitated - gods, where had that cliff come from? But Lia had already turned to answer her daughter’s criticisms.

“The work is in Latrobe, Neeks. And anyway, Sheffield is a lovely place. Just ... close knit.”

David read “inbred” in her wry expression, and seized the distraction gratefully. “I did pass through at one time,” he said. “Pretty little place. That was before the murals though.” *Way* before.

“Boring,” muttered Neika.

“Oh, I’ll take boring over exciting *any* day, thanks. It’s got better survival value.”

Lia smiled, remembering again their first meeting. “Well, yes, I can see that, but you do seem to *attract* the exciting... or it to you...?”

He spread his hands. “Not by choice, I can assure you.”

“It’s not dangerous in Sheffield, Mr Bradshaw,” Neika said avidly, “Why don’t you come and live there?”

“Well... I’d rather planned to get a berth on the ferry for Melbourne.” To his surprise, it came out sounding apologetic.

Lia nodded. “I understand. It’s short term work anyway, doesn’t suit everyone.”

It sounded perfect, he thought, his gaze lingering on Lia’s dark, angular features. The ferry ... what was drawing him back to the mainland anyway? By now it must be habit, or at least sheer bloody mindedness. And warmer climates, probably. A larger population and time base? Surely nothing pressing. He regarded his hand, around which Neika had wrapped her own and was radiating wide-eyed silent pleading. His stomach gave another uncomfortable lurch, accompanied by a small frisson of energy at the human touch, and reminded him of precisely why he should go rather than stay. No amount of feeling for a woman, a child or even a toasted sandwich would keep him fixed in time. He knew. He’d tried. Spent years trying. It was a one way ticket to some serious anguish for all concerned, and he chose as he always did - without too much complicating thought.

“I am sorry, Neika. I can’t stay.”

“But...” Much to his consternation, Neika’s expressive face crumpled and she buried her incipient sobs in her hands. He looked to Lia with a helpless gesture, but she shook her head, taking a stern tone.

“Neika, stop that. Mr Bradshaw has to do his own things. You need to concentrate on Miyo’s visit this weekend. OK?”

“Sorry,” Neika gulped into her hands. “Sorry, sorry.”

“I ... should go.” David stood, pushing back his chair. He wondered, actually, why he hadn’t gone already - temporally speaking.

“It’s OK,” Lia was saying, “Neika just feels things deeply. Don’t you munchkin.”

“I wish things could be different.”

Lia looked at him then, sharply, and David beat a hasty retreat, wondering who had possessed his tongue today, if not his body.

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*"There are two means of refuge
from the miseries of life: music and cats."
- Albert Schweitzer*

CHAPTER THREE

2012

It was Thursday morning, and Neika was lying stretched out in front of the TV, watching her way through the early morning news program. A segment introduced itself with the heading of "Industrial strike looms" and after some internal debate she scratched a mark in the "bad news" column of her notepad. She decided she really needed a column for "couldn't-care-less news". Elbowing the border collie away from her side she looked up the TV again, where a large long haired cat lay stretched out on top, its tail flicking lazily in front of the screen like a bushy windscreen wiper.

"Beat it, Mugwump," she said, aiming a ball of paper at him. "This is supposed to be educational."

Mugwump properly ignored her. But the program was coming to a close anyway, and she prepared to pack up her homework. About to thumb the TV's remote control, her attention was caught by the last comment of the announcer.

"... and the unfortunate - or perhaps extremely lucky - man was fished from Bass Strait at least 10 kilometres from the Tasmanian coastline."

The amused face of the morning news show host was replaced by a very wet and bedraggled looking David Bradshaw, blanket pulled around his shoulders, dark hair plastered to his head, eyes hollow and lips compressed in what Neika couldn't know was a rather nasty combination of sea sickness, exhaustion and hangover. Neika's mouth dropped open.

"Muuuuuuuum!"

Lia was used to being yelled at and ignored her at first so Neika missed the next part of the report in a mad dash down the corridor. The reporter on the scene went on to gleefully recount how the clumsy passenger had managed to fall overboard yet again, and was rescued a second time a day later by the same fishing trawler, on its way to the same fishing grounds. By the time Neika had dragged her mother into the lounge room, the report had, of course, finished.

"It was him," Neika insisted, almost jumping up and down on the spot. "Mr Bradshaw. He fell into the ocean, and he's back here in Tasmania!"

Lia regarded her daughter with concern. It worried her that Neika had no strong male figure in her life, only the idealised fantasies of a dead father. She thought of the fraught relationship with Devin and decided perhaps the fantasy was not altogether a bad thing. No, unfair, unfair. Who knew how children would have changed Dev... it had certainly expanded her own horizons in ways she never

expected. And who knew where that relationship would have gone if only... well, there were enough 'if only's in her life. *Move on.*

The phone rang then, and she avoided the conversation by going to answer it. "Get ready for school!" she tossed over her shoulder as she picked up the handset.

"Trescari speaking."

"Lia?"

The voice was male, accented and warmly timbred. Lia's heart did a flip, even as she shook off the feeling, irritated. "Ms Trescari?" the voice went on, "this is David Bradshaw."

"David! Hello, sorry, just a bit distracted. Are you ... " she glanced back at the lounge room, with a sense of the other shoe going 'clunk'. "uhm.. are you calling from Melbourne?"

"No, in fact, I ..er .. wondered if that welding job might still be available? It seems I've reconsidered my decision to leave Tasmania."

Tired as the voice sounded, she detected a note of gentle irony, and wondered at it. She couldn't quite find a way to phrase her next question, easing further down the hall, away from the kitchen where Neika was now slamming doors and plates in her usual breakfast routine.

"You didn't happen to I mean... that wasn't ..." She shook her head. "Where are you staying at the moment?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, Dr Ettinger has offered to let me to stay at her place."

"She has? You've been elevated to a whole new level in outpatient care!"

David's spontaneous laugh made her smile in return, remembering the way his teeth flashed white against weather-tanned skin and a cheek which always looked in need of a shave.

"Indeed," David was saying, "I think she's worried about me stubbing my toe next. I am very grateful. But of course I will find somewhere to stay on a more ... regular basis in a day or two. Perhaps... Latrobe itself...?"

She'd never answered his question about the job. "Oh. Yes, of course! The job is yours. David, I would be extremely and deeply grateful if you could come and weld for me."

"Splendid."

Splendid?! "Can you start tomorrow? I know it's short notice..."

They agreed on a time and place, and Lia rang off, tossing the phone onto the nearby sofa and regarding it sourly. She was not at all enjoying the mixed feelings assailing her. Relief, certainly, to have found a skilled employee, concern about her daughter's reaction, and irritation with the whole situation. Damn it. Damn him for going. Damn him especially for coming back. And being able to weld. And damn him for being so ... so bloody *personable*. She sighed. With any luck, he'd be a useless welder and a drunk, and she could fire him the next day with no one being the wiser.

Then, of course, she'd need a welder...

"Muuuum! We're out of milk! And Mugwump's just thrown up on the carpet! Eewwww, Killa's eating it!!!"

Lia snorted, and rubbed at her forehead. It wasn't even 8am. "Reality check, aisle nine," she muttered.

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Miyo Ettinger was kissing her husband goodbye when Lia drove up the next day. The battered utility veered onto the grass to avoid blocking the professor in, and Lia's arm stuck out of the perpetually open window in a cheery wave. There was an answering honk of the horn - too high and tinny to become the Mercedes he drove - and Professor Ettinger backed out of the driveway and accelerated away.

Miyo tugged her dressing gown closer and approached the car.

"Geez, Trescari, don't you ever get cold?"

Lia shrugged, dragging her backpack across the seat and jumping down from the ute. "It's only May. You know I don't put a jacket on till July."

Miyo rolled her eyes. "Come inside. I need another cup of tea, and your new worker is still asleep."

"What? It's almost 9 o'clock!"

Miyo sniffed, unfazed. "He's still dehydrated, and I'm betting he's a good deal more run down than he lets on. You can tell, you know, they get a certain look. A bit of good, solid sleep will do him the world of good."

Lia snorted. "About time you got another cat, Miyo. Your mothering instinct is kicking in again."

Miyo did her best to look down her nose at her friend, and led the way indoors. "That's pure medical fact, I'll have you know. Well, except the bit about the "look", that's just 15 years of medical experience and intuition." She ignored the rude noise behind her, and sailed into the kitchen, crashing cups and kettles

together in a style every bit as good as Neika's. Lia plunked herself down on a kitchen stool and stuck her chin in her hand, eyeing the mini cyclone.

"You aren't worried about waking Sleeping Beauty?" she asked dryly.

Miyo grinned. "Well, like you said, about time he was up and at 'em."

At that moment there was an unmistakable crash followed by a yelp and muffled curse from down the hall, and the two women exchanged alarmed glances.

"Medical opinion, doctor?" Lia inquired.

"Uhhh... investigation required."

Scooping up the newly-made cup of tea, Miyo marched down the hall and knocked smartly on the door. "David? Are you OK?"

There was no immediate answer, so Miyo opened the door. David Bradshaw was there, somewhere, in a tangle of bed sheets on the floor beside the bed. PingPong and Suki, Miyo's two Siamese cats, dozed on the pillows, seemingly unbothered by their sleeping companion's activities. David glanced up as the door opened, and gathered a few more sheets around his middle, which left his upper chest and legs impressively bare.

"Uhh... sorry. Must've..."

"Stubbed your toe?" Lia offered, peering over Miyo's shoulder. She tried not to notice his advanced state of undress, but it did cross her mind that he could certainly lift some serious steel plate if necessary.

"Well, I was going to say bad dream..." Far from being offended, the brown eyes crinkled in amusement. "But actually, that first step in the morning... bit of a risk."

Lia clamped down on a rising laugh, and stepped back as Miyo deposited the cup of tea on a dresser with instructions to Drink While Hot. Even Lia heard the capitals. His thanks were sincere and effusive, and they both withdrew to the kitchen to allow him to reach it with some decency.

Lia resumed her position on the kitchen stool, and deliberately didn't look at Miyo. She was having a hard enough time subduing some very inappropriate giggles without her carefully nurtured reserve being shattered by one look at her friend. "Miyo..."

"Yes?" An octave higher than her normal register. Lia snorted and they both dissolved into suppressed laughter. Lia shook her head, frantically trying to stop, and Miyo, who was usually much more uninhibited, looked equally as appalled even as she spluttered. It wouldn't do to cackle about a guest in your house, no matter how amusing he was. She gathered up both cups and Lia and hustled them outside to the backyard.

It was a large yard, and well populated with garden beds and interesting paths and features thanks to the Professor's interest and Lia's able assistance. They retreated to a far corner, where a small cottage garden enclosure was artfully bordered by heavy stone bench seats, nicely patinaed by moss around the legs. Lia sank down on one gratefully and wiped her eyes.

"Oh Miyo, that was terrible. What were we thinking?"

"We were thinking he's a natural actor!"

"But... it's the **things** that happen to him! Isn't it?"

Miyo shook her head. She tried to take a sip of tea, but had to wipe at her own eyes first. It steadied her a bit and she set the cup down. "Have you noticed the way he deflects every situation away from himself? You want to ask some serious questions and you end up laughing so hard at some joke that you forget what it was you wanted to say. Or you walk into a situation like that ... what the hell was going on? He was naked on the floor! Do you really think he just fell out of bed?"

Lia shrugged. "He could have."

"Hmm. Maybe."

"So ... you're having second thoughts? It's not like you to take someone in and then regret it."

"No, I'm not. And I don't. I just think ... " Miyo pulled an expressive face. "Eh, I don't know what to think. He's OK ... but there's something else going on, for sure."

Lia sipped her own tea, considering this assessment, and nodded slowly. "I know what you mean. But damnit, I need a welder. I'm only employing him, not marrying him."

They were silent for a while, each contemplating their mugs of tea.

"Nice chest tho," Miyo murmured.

Lia laughed, and swatted her. "Really? I hadn't noticed," she lied.

If there was one hobby Miyoko indulged in constantly it was her ongoing quest to Successfully Marry Lia Off. If Lia had her way, it would never happen. She'd had more than enough marriage in her ten years with Devin, and the almost ten years since his death had not softened this perspective, no matter how many males bulged their biceps at her. Besides, she had other interests and goals which did not require a male companion. Work always consumed a fair portion of her attention, her passion for horticulture, the animals... and of course Neika. She did admit to some degree of guilt over Neika's fatherless state, but this was hardly a good reason to rush into a marriage, as she repeatedly and exasperatedly told Miyoko.

To which Miyo would serenely reply that she just hadn't met "the right one". Lia would give up at this point, knowing she was beaten by a fundamentalist romantic.

Lia set her mug aside with a sigh. "Oh well... I suppose we'd better go and face the music."

Miyo rolled her eyes. "Too much of a catholic upbringing, you. Guilt is a wasted emotion."

"You're right," Lia agreed humbly, allowing herself to be swept up, Miyo-style, and propelled indoors.

David was dressed and sitting at the breakfast bar, sipping what looked like a second cup of tea. He raised the cup in salute to them, and Lia couldn't help thinking he seemed as comfortable in the new blue overalls and work boots he now wore as he did in nothing at all. Her eyes narrowed. Not a line of thinking she wanted to pursue.

"Good morning ladies," he was saying. "Do I have time for ... toast, perhaps, before we go boss?"

He injected just enough wistfulness to cause Miyo to roll her eyes again, even as she headed for the kitchen. "Don't let his waif-like demeanour fool you, Lia. This man is solely responsible for the depleted state of my pantry this morning." She turned from the breadbox which was looking rather dejected with its 3 bits of crust, and stuck a hand on her hip. "How did you physically fit in *three* helpings of Mexican bean stew? Even Carl can only manage one of those."

David shrugged. "Fast metabolism, I expect. And .. well, you never know when a meal will present itself again."

"You *are* kidding," Lia drawled, heading off Miyo's less tactful rejoinder.

"Not at all. I can say quite truthfully I never know when I will encounter a meal as seriously good as that stew. When I do, I'm afraid I take advantage of it."

"Right," Miyo huffed, dropping four pieces of toast on a plate in front on him. She threw Lia a look - "*see!*" - but was obviously pleased with the compliment to her cooking. It was not a skill many people remarked upon, at least not in any positive sense. The Professor had been known to hide food in strategic pot plants, much to Lia's amusement, and he often volunteered for the cooking duties out of sheer self defence. Lia appraised her new employee over a last mouthful of tea, and had to agree with her friend's assessment of him. Very smooth.

"Don't hurry," she said, watching him take over-large bites out of the toast. "Plenty of time."

“He always eats like a half starved dog,” Miyo observed. “As if someone’s going to take it away at any moment.”

David hunched. “It’s happened, believe me.” But he slowed his eating to more acceptable speeds, and even paused to load more jam onto the toast. “Thank you, Miyo, I do appreciate you putting me up and ... uhm... putting up with me. I think I’ve found a nice place in Latrobe though.”

“Already?”

“The Y had a vacancy.”

“You can’t stay at the YMCA!” Miyo said, aghast. “Anyway, Carl will want to finish discussing the finer points of dystopian utilitarianism, if I know that gleam in his eye from your last conversation.”

“Well...” He looked to Lia, who shrugged her lack of claim on the subject. He turned back to Miyo with a smile. “Well, thank you. I do promise to recompense you from my first pay check.”

“Speaking of which... do you have some banking details? Account number, BSB, that kind of thing?” Lia fished out a pen from her own overalls, and looked at him expectantly.

“Well ... as a matter of fact ... “ He rubbed at his temple, distracted. Lia traded glances with Miyo, who was now perched on a stool in the kitchen and munching her own toast.

“You do have a bank account? I can do overseas transfers if I have to, but it costs more.”

“No, that’s fine. Just ... uhm... trying to remember the details.” He quoted the numbers.

Lia nodded and wrote them down in a well-worn notebook. “Good memory.”

David smiled wanly, still massaging his temple. “It’s something I work at. Not good to carry that kind of information written down.”

“Headache?” Miyo inquired. David sighed.

“Only when I think.”

Lia set her mug down firmly, determined to not even smile this time. “I have just the solution for that.” She gathered up backpack and new employee and headed for the door. “It’s called welding.”

“Oh, excellent! Lead on, fair ... er... boss.”

Miyo waved them off, grinning broadly, and headed back inside to get ready for her own shift at the hospital.

It wasn't until he'd actually put the seat belt on that he remembered. David paused with his hand on the clip, hesitated, then shoved it home anyway. It bothered him more that he'd forgotten than the very real possibility of some hideous time shift at 80kph. He sat back, trying to resign himself to that idea... perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, might not happen at all this time. Apart from that brief jolt this morning, and the ones he'd rather forget about on that damned ferry, he hadn't shifted too much in the last week. And the snap-back to the same time period this morning was unusual - not that it would help in the event of shifting out then snapping back to find your vehicle 50m or so down the road... In fact, it didn't bear thinking about. But he did, and the memories of previous experiences - most of them revolving around hospitals and emergency wards - insisted on reminding him just what a seriously bad idea that was. His stomach started to protest against the recent and copious breakfast.

"Hey. OK?"

He looked up to see Lia frowning at him. He nodded. "Yes. I... uhh... I don't suppose walking is an option?"

"Well... no. Not if I want to start the job before lunch time."

"Can we just ... go slowly?"

"Oh. You're serious. About cars? Sorry, thought that was a joke."

"I never joke. Well... I never lie."

It was true. A long time ago he'd found it much easier to always stick to the truth, at least in so far as it didn't make you sound like a crazy person. That varied from century to century. He reflected that his comfortable fit with the 20th and most of the 21st centuries probably owed less to his birth year of 2012 and more to the fact you could say virtually anything and be either believed or laughed off. Other centuries would have you committed, lashed, ritually slaughtered or some other less pleasant consequence.

Although the mid 23rd century was comforting for their brief dalliance with personal transport technology. What was one temporally incontinent traveller when you had people flicking in and out all around you? Damned shame they discovered it messed with your neurons after fifty years or so.

Lia regarded him for a few moments, before shifting into first gear and easing out of the driveway. She let the ute trundle down the suburban street at a gentle 20kph.

"So what do you reckon.... OK to do about forty on the highway?"

“I’ve found that up to thirty will only break bones. Anything else is problematic.”

Lia took a deep breath. David held his, waiting for the expected comment. But Lia just exhaled and shifted into 3rd gear. “30kph it is,” she said.

“You must really need a welder,” David murmured. He would like to have added ‘I won’t let you down’, but after a moment, settled for a milder, “I’ll do my best.”

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The ‘streetscape beautification programme’ – in real language, simply a planting of assorted trees and shrubs with protective metal bollards and latticework - was going well. Almost too well. Lia paused over the reticulation pipe she was wrestling into place, watching as David pushed up the welding helmet to check a weld and, satisfied, tossed it back down again with an expert flick of the head. She glanced away as the welder hummed into action again. Even Jules hadn’t been able to get through the amount of work David devoured in a day, and it wasn’t just the speed. Her new employee seemed to grasp the requirements instantly, carry through any work with a smile and good humour and worse, she suspected he was way ahead of her in most areas, though he politely never let on. Intelligence *and* application. Lia found it downright unnerving.

She was about to reapply herself to the recalcitrant reticulation system, when she caught sight of Miyo’s stylish new Volvo pulling into a parking bay further down the street. She glanced at her watch – 5pm already? - remembering the promise she’d made to finish early today ahead of some serious quality time with her best friend and only child. Sure enough, Neika bounced out of the passenger side door, even as Miyo levered herself more sedately from the driver’s side. Before she could even open her mouth, Neika had dashed up the footpath and landed squarely on David’s back. Fortunately, he wasn’t welding at that precise moment, but Neika’s momentum pitched them both forward into a jumble of dirt, pipes and welding gear. Even as he let out a strangled yelp, Lia saw David roll to take the brunt of the fall, protecting the little harridan who was currently shrieking with delight at the unexpected ride.

“Neika!!” Lia strode over just as David tore off the welding helmet. Her upbraiding died on her lips as she caught the look of naked fear on David’s face. It was quickly erased, his mobile face falling into a sheepish grin. She frowned, wondering at such an odd reaction, but then Neika struggled upright. Lia shed the gloves and stood, arms akimbo, transferring the frown to her wayward child.

“Uhh... uhm, sorry Mr Bradshaw,” Neika offered humbly, correctly interpreting her mother’s stony expression.

David shook his head. “Neika, I could have ... a heart attack.” His hand went dramatically to his chest and the tiniest giggle escaped Neika, quickly smothered under her mother’s withering gaze. David glanced at Lia and wisely didn’t add anything further. But he did look as if he was struggling not to grin.

Miyo hurried up behind them.

“Sorry. Sorry... she got away. David, hi, are you OK? That was a nasty fall.”

“Fine, Miyo, not even a scratch.”

“Humph.” Miyo moved in to dislodge dirt from his cheek, uncovering a promising bruise, if not any actual blood.

“I was in the circus!” he protested, trying to fend her off. “Clown division. Rolling and falling was in the job description.”

“Explains why he fits in so well around here,” Lia muttered.

“Hey, what about me?” Neika demanded.

“You’re lucky your mother doesn’t do some damage of her own,” Miyo told her, unusually stern. It quelled her effectively, but by then David had slid out of Miyo’s clutches and was packing up the welding equipment. It was Miyo’s “I’ve been maternally thwarted” expression which finally got to Lia. She vented a not-quite-laugh, and rubbed at her forehead as she contemplated her daughter.

“OK. We’ll discuss this later. Right now, you’re on packup. See that retic piping? In the truck.”

“Sure!”

Relieved to have escaped so lightly, she scampered off on legs which were growing far too long, equally long black hair flying.

Miyo reached into her jacket and pulled out a wad of tickets. “Relaxation and de-stressing, that’s what you need.”

Lia grinned. “Oh yes. But ...” She bit down on the inevitable corollary, that relaxation and Neika were mutually exclusive concepts, but Miyo hardly needed words to decipher that expression. She snagged her friend’s still accessible elbow, steering her further away from the maelstrom of packing gear.

“I booked this with Neika in mind. It’s not just the music, there’s a performance along side, and a narrator. It’s called ‘Carnival of the Animals’, for Pete’s sake - she’ll be rapt!”

Lia hugged her friend impulsively. “You’re a lifesaver, Miyo.”

On cue, Miyo’s pager beeped. Lia stared at it in dismay. “Oh, damnit, no way!”

Miyo nodded, reading off the message. “Fraid so. Engle’s called in sick. And they have an accident en route.” Her expression brightened. “Oooh, mid thoracic laceration! That’s gotta be a farm accident.”

She tucked the tickets in Lia's hand, already turning for the car. "Look, just go and have a good time."

"What about the professor? Or..?"

"Never in a million would he sit through it. Or he'd snore. It'd be embarrassing."

"You're not the only doctor in greater Devonport you know!" Lia yelled after her retreating form. Miyo half-waved, half-shrugged in acknowledgement, and the motion included David and Neika.

"Ask David... it's paid for, you know how you hate waste!"

The man in question crossed her gaze then, lengths of large poly pipe on one shoulder and a giggling Neika over the other. "Why not," she sighed, "might as well take 2 kids as one."

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It turned out that the music *was* beautiful, and the live performance clever and diverting for the large number of children in the audience. Lia watched entranced as the ensemble plucked out the melody for The Swan, by far the most gentle and moving of the pieces so far. Soothing, she thought, or melancholy, if your mood tended that way.

She glanced over Neika's head at David, who sat with hands folded over his stomach, eyes closed and a small smile on his face. She wondered if he was asleep or just seriously enjoying the music.

A moment later an astonishingly loud gurgle punctuated a quiet piece of the music. He sat up straighter and looked around pointedly, while throwing Lia a not-very-dismayed grin. It wasn't that funny, she told herself as she rummaged quietly in her bag, so why did he always seem to make her laugh? She thought about Miyo's assessment of him, but decided it wasn't calculated to amuse. It was much more his reaction to everyday incidents; things which would embarrass or distress others seemed to not so much slide off his back but amuse him equally. She'd never met a man who truly didn't take himself seriously on some level. And the ability to laugh at oneself? Well, she wished she had that one in spades.

She finally found what she was after and passed him the bag of mixed nuts. He mouthed a delighted 'thank you!' and proceeded to open the bag and negotiate with Neika for at least a half share. Neika was not nearly so circumspect and after a moment an irritated face leaned over David's should from the row behind them.

"Can you please keep your daughter quiet?" the woman hissed, "This bit's my favourite."

“Sorry,” he whispered back.

Lia glanced at her daughter – Neika was a joy to read, an open book of emotions. There was a mix of surprise (*‘Who me?’*), indignation (*‘I was **not** being loud!’*) guilt (*‘Oops, maybe I was, how bad am I going to cop it?’*) and ... pleasure. Lia shied away from interpreting that one, but it followed on just as easily. *‘Father. Someone thinks he’s my father’*. Her world tilted a little, watching them, David making exaggerated ‘shushing’ antics and Neika trying to stifle giggles. She flashed on Devin Bethany and there was no comparison to the warm, animated, open person interacting so easily and naturally with her daughter. Dev had had it in him to be charming... romantic even, but always distant. Cool. Academic. An earlier version of herself had found that terribly attractive. Apart from the dark hair, there wasn’t even a physical resemblance. No, even the hair was different. Devin’s had been black, while David’s was a dark brown which complemented his mid brown eyes. And David might be fairly tall, perhaps reaching almost 6 feet, but Devin’s 6’4” always made it seem as if he towered over others. And Dev’d had arrestingly light blue eyes – exactly Neika’s shade in fact. She often wondered what he would have thought of his wild, emotional daughter, so unlike his own contained personality. There would have been fireworks, conflict for sure. But there might have been a connection, some happiness of opposites. It could have been ... interesting.

She came back to the present as David’s hand touched her shoulder. One look at his face told her that her own must have been an open book also. For a second, her heart lurched in recognition and she opened her mouth to ... say ... what? She suddenly didn’t want to acknowledge the depth of that understanding, and certainly didn’t want to examine any similarity in experience. But she found her own hand reaching up to cover his momentarily before firmly reattaching her attention to the performance. She sensed him sitting back, doing likewise, gently encouraging Neika to focus on the performance.

The concert was drawing to a close, with the glorious finale of the Carnival of Animals. Neika actually clapped, recalling the music from one of her favourite DVDs, Fantasia 2000. It was easy enough – necessary even - to be caught up in it with her, enjoying both choreography and the music. When she glanced over later, David’s focus was on the performance but she noticed he rubbed absently at his hand. Perhaps it tingled, as hers did.

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Dinner in Devonport was generally a rather hit or miss affair. However when pushed to it, a Friday night could produce a fair mix of restaurants doing a brisk trade in either dine in or take away. Neika had voted for MacDonald’s, a suggestion immediately squashed by both adults. However it was a challenge to discover a place with exactly the right mix of basic (ie not in any way intimate or romantic) but not bacterial nightmare. It took at least an hour of strolling along the main streets, with conversation ranging from a discussion of Saint Saen’s music and the choreography accompanying the music, to the state of the streetscape project and the value of learning the times tables by rote (Neika was again comprehensively outvoted). Eventually, they fetched up against a generic Italian place with the seemingly right requirements.

“Pasta primavera,” Lia mused, studying the menu sticky taped to the window. “Any chance of you eating that, kid?”

“Does it have vegetables?”

“Chock full of ‘em.”

“Not a hope.”

“Want ice cream after?”

A beat. Sigh. “Ohhhhhhhkaaaaaay.”

Score one for bribery & coercion, a parent’s trusted friend. Lia glanced at David for his opinion. He was examining the menu over Neika’s shoulder, and nodded “Oh yes, it all sounds good to me.”

“I reckon a barnacle’d sound good to you right now.”

“Particularly with a nice sauce,” he agreed. His stomach growled on cue and he gave a crooked smile.

“Hm.” She pulled out her treacherous mobile, and pressed the speed dial to Miyo’s number. “Hey, you shouldn’t have your mobile on in a hospital you know,” she said when it answered, then held the phone away from her ear, laughing. “God, you are so easy to wind up, Ettinger.” Pause. “Yeah, we’re done. Great show, we’ll have to definitely have to catch the next one. Listen...” Her glance flicked to David. “We’re standing here outside Gino’s. Neika’s agreed to eat vegetables. It’s a Kodak moment. Can they do without you for an hour or so?” She listened to a what was obviously a long and heartfelt speech. “Well, you’ve got to eat at some time! Look, if you can’t get time off we’re going to get take away and camp in the ER. Uh huh. Oh yeah I mean it. Don’t we guys?”

She roped in both David and Neika with a look. They exchanged glances and shrugged in unison. Lia grinned. “There, David and Neika say it’ll be like having dinner *and* a show.”

She had to hold the phone away from her ear again for a while, but when she could speak again, the victory seemed established. She negotiated a couple of finer points and hung up, looking smug. “That was ... impressive,” David said mildly. “A little scary, but impressive.”

“You should see her if you forget to do your maths homework,” Neika muttered.

Lia shrugged it off. “Miyo gives as good as she gets, believe me. And anyway, it was for her own good. Sometimes she doesn’t eat for 36 hours at a stretch. Do you know what caffeine does to an empty stomach for that long a period?”

“Oh yes,” he said, with such conviction that it derailed whatever Lia had been about to add. Rhetorical questions, she decided, simply weren’t around David.

They repaired to a nice table for four by the window in Gino’s. David ordered 3 rounds of crusty Italian bread (wisely avoiding the garlic bread) and proceeded to demolish at least 2 serves in under 5 minutes. This impressed Neika greatly.

“How do you stay so skinny Mr Bradshaw?”

David quirked an eyebrow at her, then glanced to Lia. “If it’s OK with your mother, you may call me David.”

“OK with me,” Lia shrugged. “Providing manners are minded.”

“Good. Anyone who rugby tackles me should most certainly be on a first name basis.” He polished off half of the third serving of bread, after offering the basket to both Trescaris. “So you think I’m skinny?”

Neika frowned. “Well no, you’re pretty normal I guess. But the amount you eat, you should be like a house.”

“An acute observation,” David intoned, making a show of contemplating the remaining slice of bread. Lia sighed.

“I am totally jealous.” She picked a crumb of bread off her plate and regarded it ruefully. “I only have to look at a carb and it makes a beeline for my hips.”

David laughed. “I envy you! If only I could build up some reserves, I’d feel a lot better about it, believe me. But I expect it’s just ... genetic. Some people have fast metabolisms.”

“Can’t they fix that now?”

Rather than laugh, David sighed and turned serious brown eyes in the young girl’s direction. “Neika, I really, *really* wish they could.”

Any further examination of this strangely emphasised comment was effectively spiked by Miyo’s arrival just then. Lia narrowed her gaze, watching David get to his feet and elaborately rearrange the seating to accommodate the four of them.

“Well I’m here,” Miyo huffed, finally plumping her generous maternal figure into the chair David offered, and throwing her friend a mock glower. Lia grinned, unrepentant.

“We saved you some crusty Italian bread... just.” The single slice of bread wobbled sadly in its basket as Lia thrust it at her. Miyo accepted and reached for the butter.

“I only have an hour...”

“That’s OK, we pre ordered. I know linguini carbonara’s your favourite.”

“Trescari, you’re impossible.”

“Pot.”

“Kettle,” Neika chimed in. David twigged.

“Ahh, ‘black’! Got it, yes.”

Miyo cocked her head in David’s direction. “He’s quick you know. And you haven’t scared him off yet.”

“Miyo...”

“The only thing which truly scares me is slow table service.” David peered hopefully in the direction of the kitchen. On cue, the doors swung open and several loaded plates appeared, closely followed by the waiter bearing them. David beamed. “Crisis averted.”

“There was something weird in the ER tonight,” Miyo said as the plates were deposited in front of them.

“Auntie Miyo, please, I have to eat this stuff!” Neika was glumly surveying her plate of steaming, colourful vegetables, and obviously didn’t relish the idea of detailed anatomical discussion destroying her appetite further.

“It’s nothing gross,” Miyo grinned at her. “Just weird.”

No one looked particularly reassured. Miyo’s definition of ‘weird’ could encompass things which blistered paint. Lia tucked into a mountain of gourmet Italian salad as Miyo toyed with her linguini, not sure of where to start. Then she laughed, and shrugged. “It’s probably just too many hours of overtime. I was sure I saw Neika there tonight.”

Neika sat up straighter, always pleased to be the centre of the universe. “Really?”

“Really really. And... someone who looked a bit like you David. But not quite.”

“The hours really are getting to you Miyo,” Lia agreed.

David merely looked interested. “What was I wearing?” he asked.

Miyo looked somewhat embarrassed, as if she was only now realising how absurd the whole thing sounded. “Well I don’t think it *was* David. He was taller and thinner. And wearing a hospital gown.”

Neika snorted. “Definitely not then.”

“But he gave me the strangest look and then smiled... and that’s what made me think of you. The ... the girl I mistook for Neika was with him. She was wearing a gown too. Weirdest thing. They headed up the corridor and I was about to follow, then Hawley called for me and when I looked back they were gone. Never did find them again.”

She took an extra large forkful of linguini and chewed industriously, plugging any further embarrassing anecdotes. There was a silence at the table for a second, before Neika pronounced,

“That is **so** cool Auntie Miyo. Did I look... you know, all grossified and stuff?”

Lia reached over to pat her friend on the shoulder. “I did warn you about that hospital coffee.”

David settled for a non committal “Mmmm.” But Lia thought his expression as he wiped his lips with a napkin an unsettling mixture of enlightenment and speculation.

“This hasn’t got anything to do with that time I ... uhm... you know, ran you over?”

“Hmm? Oh no, I wouldn’t think. That was... what, years ago.”

“About 4 months.”

“Oh.” He smiled his vaguest. “You know how time has a way of getting away from a person. Feels like I’ve been here forever.”

Lia shook her head, refusing to be drawn by that statement. “Yes. Well, it wasn’t exactly a leap of logic.” She reapplied herself to the salad.

“Mr. Br... uh, David...” Neika began, with a self conscious grin.

David arched an eyebrow at her over a mouth full of fettuccine alfredo. “Mmm?”

“Can you come to our house tomorrow? It’s educational,” added, as Lia opened her mouth to protest. “I want to interview him for my project.”

Thwarted by educational imperatives, Lia changed tack. “It would take too long for David to get there, button.” Neika frowned at the babyish endearment, but looked hopefully to her target.

David shrugged. “Well it’s a Saturday. Don’t have anything planned. A nice walk in the sun... and rain...and sun might be nice. However,” he added gravely, “please don’t take it personally if I don’t show up Neika.”

“Why wouldn’t you show up?”

“Well, I could get hit by a car,” he grinned. Lia swatted him. “But as a matter of fact, I have been planning on looking for more... regular accommodation than the Y can offer. If I’m staying for a while, there’s a... certain appeal in the area.”

“Excellent idea,” Miyo seconded before Lia could pour water on David’s gentle advance. “I have a friend who’s looking for a flatmate in town. I can put you in touch.” She neglected to mention she’d been hunting for just such opportunities ever since he’d declared his intention of taking up the vacancy at the Y next week. And that the ‘friend’ was actually found in the ‘flatmates wanted’ section of the local paper. Lia knew her friend well enough to suspect just that, but Miyo’s bland look conceded nothing. She turned to David.

“It’d take hours on foot to Latrobe or Devonport though. You sure you want to be in a ... less accessible location?”

“The Latrobe job’s almost finished,” he reasoned. “I’m sure there must be some work I can find in the area. If not...” He shrugged, an action Lia was coming to associate with her strange employee. “I’m sure something will turn up. It usually does.”

Lia scowled. She felt like she’d just been Mugwumped, a verb Neika had invented to get out of most domestic duties around the place. It consisted of having a large, placid, purring cat on your lap, thereby excusing you from every chore known to parenthood because you just couldn’t, you know, *move* him! Lia fancied it also described the feeling of not *wanting* a cat on your lap just then but being somehow powerless to prevent it. She threw Neika a look. The girl was fairly bouncing in her seat.

“I have tomorrow off,” Miyo said. “I’ll come down and help you clean Lia. I know that’s what you live for on a Saturday.”

Lia opened her mouth but hesitated, clearly unable to find any purchase in this conversation. Miyo added, “I’ll bake a cake.”

She held up her hands. “OK, OK, no need for threats. I’ll make lunch. And nutloaf.”

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