

LIFE EDIT

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Maureen Appleforth opened the door, saw that the little conference room was empty, walked in, and let the door close behind her. She pulled out a chair and sat down. One day away from her twenty-ninth birthday, Maureen Appleforth had reddish brown hair with a natural wave, and she was neither too plump nor too thin, but just right.

After a moment the door opened and a young man came in with a machine under his arm. He had sleek brown hair and looked like the kind of man who smoked a pipe. He saw Maureen and looked surprised. "Ms. Appleforth? I was just going to set up the life editor. I'm Brian Orr."

He offered his free hand and she took it for a moment with her cool fingers. "I'm a little early," she said.

"That's all right. Better early than never." He laughed briefly and set the machine down on the table. Then he uncoiled a thick cable and plugged it into an outlet. "Would you sit over here please, Ms. Appleforth? We won't start until you're ready, but I just want to do some calibrations first." He pulled two leads out of the machine and showed her the cuffs at the ends of them. "Okay to put these on you?"

She said, "Will it hurt?"

"No, not a bit. Take off your watch, please." He wrapped the cuffs around her wrists; the cuffs were soft but a little tight. He tapped keys on the pad in front of him and looked at the screen. "You're a bit nervous," he said. "Is this a voluntary decision on your part?"

"Not entirely. They told me I couldn't go any higher in the company unless..."

"But you don't want to do it?"

"No."

"But you want to stay in the company. Go higher."

"Yes."

"So it's a dilemma, isn't it?"

"Yes." She smiled. "That's the kind of thing I tell people."

"You're in conflict resolution upstairs? Or counseling?"

"Conflict."

"And you're good at it. Or they wouldn't care if you went higher or not." His voice was pleasant, and she was feeling a little more relaxed.

"So let's just talk," he said. "Is there anything I can tell you?"

She looked at him. He was projecting honest concern and impartiality. She said, "Why did you take the treatment? If you did, and if you remember."

"Oh, I remember, all right. It was something I said to a girlfriend of mine, years ago. I don't remember what it was, but it used to bother me about once a week. I'd sit and think, 'Jesus, I wish I hadn't said that to her.'"

"And now you don't remember."

"No, because it never happened."

"But you can remember remembering."

"That's the way it works."

"What if I don't have anything like that? Anything that bothers me when I remember it?"

"You may be surprised. Everybody has something. All the way from horrible crimes to egg on your face."

"I don't. I've had a very tranquil life."

"Happy childhood?"

"Oh, yes. My father—my biological father—"

"Yes?"

"He left us when I was a year old, but he looked me up when I was grown, and we have dinner every now and then. He's very nice, a very gentle man. He's very fond of me, in fact. So even that—it's just—"

He waited.

"Why do I have these headaches?" she said.

He looked down at his keypad. "Been to a doctor?"

"Many doctors. All the tests."

"Well, then that's another good reason, isn't it? Really, I don't see how you can lose. Either you'll find something to change, like everybody else, or you won't. And if you don't, that's even better, don't you think?"

She hesitated. "When you edit your life—"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't that make everything different? Not just for you, for other people?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Suppose, for instance, you had a lover, a woman, and it was a bad relationship. Now you go back and edit her out of your life, right?"

"Yes." He looked uncomfortable.

"So, after you do that, just suppose she finds somebody else and they have a child. That child wouldn't have existed before. Or suppose you kill somebody, and you wish you hadn't. So you edit that, make it come out differently. So now the dead person is alive, but is she real, or just—some kind of ghost?"

"As far as I'm concerned, she's real. You know, what they tell us in training is, you're not creating anything. You're just moving from one timeline to another. Where you didn't say anything dumb to your girlfriend, didn't get drunk and fall down the stairs, whatever. So, in this new timeline, naturally you meet people that weren't in the old one. They're just as real as you are. Whatever that means."

After a moment, looking at the machine, he remarked, "Your pulse rate has been holding pretty steady. This isn't an emotional thing with you, is it?"

"No. And I'm going to do it. Yes. I am. What do I do?"

"Just relax and remember. Start with things that happened today, then further back, further back. You'll know when you hit something you need to change, even if it's buried back there."

The machine began to hum and the room darkened gradually, as if transparent dark petals were closing around her. She closed her eyes, and it was like falling into a well of shadows. Bright images swam up and receded, but there was nothing to edit or change; it was all moonlight and shadows, right back to her first birthday. The day when her drunken father picked her up by the ankles. And swung her. Against the cold dark.

And there was nothing to edit there, either. Somebody else, her father probably, had already edited that moment, or she wouldn't be here wandering like a cool ghost through the life that was so important to other people.

Orr was bending over her. "Ms. Appleforth?" She opened her eyes. "Are you all right?"

"I have an awful headache," she said.

"That happens sometimes." He sat down again.

She took the cuffs off, rose and opened the door. "Aside from that, I'm fine," she said over her shoulder. "You're fine too, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's just fine. Isn't it?"

Orr looked up at her anxiously. "Ms. Appleforth, are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yes. Or if not—" As the door closed, her voice drifted back, "—does it matter?"