

Forward

by Doranna Durgin

I'm not dead!

Augie laughed. Right out loud, breaking the silence of the gleaming black walls and their deep nighttime shadows. Loud and long and just possibly tinged with both hysteria and relief. *I'm not dead! It was a lie!*

All those years of propaganda and rules, turned to lies in a single bold moment.

The sudden voice of caution startled him to silence. It wasn't safe to hang around, not here in the deep night of the future. Only a couple of hours, but still...

The forbidden Forward.

Boldness struck again. It didn't matter if anyone saw him here — they'd get no more than a glimpse before he hit his recall switch, and then they'd assume he'd come from their future, that he'd come Back.

For no one ever went Forward. To go Forward was supposedly fatal; to *try* to go Forward merited swift, severe punishment. The asswipe Historians were sworn and trained and — Augie suspected — brainwashed against it. So were those brown-nosing Techs. And of course the Supervisors. But...

Augie looked around the clean, dark lines of the pedestal-studded Ops room until his gaze landed on the battered suction mop against the wall, the autosweeper and its portable control panel. His mop. His sweeper.

The janitor who'd gone Forward.

He went Forward not just once, but repeatedly. *Still not dead*. First those few bold hours...then days. He even wandered away from the travel pedestal, creeping around the closed Historical Research Center Ops with impunity. He came to realize that the person most likely to spot him was...him.

By now, he looked forward to it, enough so that early evening found him smiling to himself, propped up in a corner with cold black marble at his shoulders as he prodded the simple interface of the autosweeper. The Techs had been messy of late; he needed to take two passes around the snugroom tonight. And there'd still be time for travel, because he'd come back only a moment after he left.

"Augie, will you come to my office?"

Shit. Supervisor Tolan. And she looked grim. Surely she didn't—

No. If she knew, he'd be snatched up by security and marched off to a sterile, isolated cell for rough questioning before they brain-wiped him. If they knew Forward travel wasn't fatal, they damn sure didn't want anyone doing it — that much was obvious. He had to stay hidden until he could go public in a big way.

But even if she just suspected...

Augie pasted a subservient smile on his face, made sure the autosweeper was tucked out everyone's way, and rued those two hours where Tolan's shift overlapped his. "Ma'am?" he said, following her to her office on the second floor, hesitating in the doorway there.

"Come in, Augie," she said, gesturing absently while she studied her hand pad, directing it through several pages of text. She didn't bother to tip the screen for privacy. When she looked up at him, he couldn't read her expression. Sadness? Resignation? From that scowling up-tight supervisor?

She knows. She knows—

"I'm disappointed," Tolan said. "I had hoped you would take advantage of our LitEd. Not many jobs offer that benefit."

LitEd? What the hell? Augie could only stare at her. She turned away from him, looking out the huge steel-plas window that gave her a view of the entire travel floor. Peds studded the circumference like the numbers on a clock, some of them manned, some empty. As Augie followed her gaze, one of the Historians flickered out of view and the ped drained of its sleek, glossy maroon color, turning matte grey while it waited for recall. *She doesn't know. She wouldn't believe it if I told—*

"So many people depend on easy interfaces these days," Tolan said, not yet turning back to look at him. Perfect view of her uptight knot of hair, her uptight little ass in a tailor-faux skirt. She nodded at the floor below. "They depend on machines that do the thinking for them. Even our Historians, although they'd deny it." She turned her head just enough so he could see an unexpected twist of her lips. Something rueful.

But by the time she turned all the way around, it was gone. Her familiar *I'm your superior* face had returned. "If you applied yourself to these classes, Augie, I know you could qualify for advancement. You're persistent in your problem-solving, and resourceful."

"But that doesn't count for anything without LitEd," Augie said, far more bitterly than he meant to.

It took her by surprise, but she smoothed it over. "Not as much, no," she said. "Completing a LitEd class demonstrates more than your ability with the written language, Augie. It shows us the level of your commitment."

He barely stopped himself from laughing out loud. *If only she knew!* "I understand," he said. "I'll think about it."

It was what she wanted to hear. She relaxed and dismissed him, but only after handing him a course reg card. "Next opportunity, then," she said, and expected him to close the door behind him without being told.

He did.

No coincidence that come the quiet hours, when Augie went Forward, he wandered over to the central raised platform where Supervisor Tolan oversaw Ops, staring down into that temporarily abandoned space. Historians — so full of themselves, full of their privileges and their schooling and their knowledge. Half the planet's population skipped basic Lit — who cared if he was among them? Didn't mean he deserved less respect than the self-important Historians.

When the day came — the day he brought back the future and turned it into the present — they'd understand. The day he changed baseline forever. He grinned into the darkness with lips that held a certain disdainful curl. "You just wait," he told the nighttime emptiness.

By day this solemn room held all the Historians and their support crew. People flickering in and out of existence, from the past to *now* and back again, barely registering as there at all. For years Augie had watched them, knowing he deserved their success, all the while coveting their work. He watched them

and plotted...he watched them and planned.

He'd realized long ago that the Historians never saw him at all.

He'd swiped a chip manual on trav ped maintenance. He'd paid someone to read him the future lock specs when he realized he couldn't sound them out himself. After that he'd snagged the tools, and he'd used a week of night shifts to get the damn F-lock disabled. All that, he'd managed. *Without* their fancy extra schooling.

And now, Augie the janitor who went Forward and didn't die had his rounds to finish.

The palm-sized recall unit fit so right in his hand, the contours inviting the curl of his fingers. *Like it was meant to be there.* He gave the silent room a sudden hard smile, and thumbed the recall switch. *I'll be back.*

Damn! And he'd thought the sidewalks were crowded in basetime! Augie shifted impatiently, stuck in a future pedestrian traffic jam — his fifth — no, sixth — trip Forward. Still alive, still outwitting them all. Stuck behind, of all things, a pedestrian traffic light. Traffic monitors watched the crowds from high-mounted platforms, as eager to ticket as the meter maids Augie's mother had once mentioned.

Dead now, she'd be. Dead for years.

Advertisements flickered around him, mid-air projections from he couldn't tell where. Most of them seemed to be hawking birth control products. No words, only sound and images. They'd finally gotten smart about that.

Bodies pressed in close around Augie; ahead, someone snarled at someone who jostled someone else who took offense and clobbered someone else...suddenly everything came to a standstill around a boiling froth of people. Augie slipped sideways, breaking line, leaving a ripple of oaths behind him — *why start playing by the rules now?* — as he found the side of a building and skimmed alongside the ancient brick. Then that, too, closed off to him, and he stood in frustrated and impotent impatience, unable to explore the world of the future, or to find that one special thing that would transform his own world — and his life along with it. The thing to bring Back.

That's when he heard the voice.

"Youth pills!"

He followed the sound to a doorway; a kid looked back at him. "Hey, mister — want youth pills?"

Augie looked at the teenager and his proffered bottle, at the bulge of more bottles in his black apron and at its indecipherable script of a logo. "Jack's Place," the kid said, startling Augie with the casual way in which he said it. As if he took it for granted that Augie couldn't read.

The kid held out the bottle again, an impatient gesture. "Jackie K, you know, he got it started," he said. "Heya, you know someone elder? Take 'em while they're still legal."

"Youth pills?" Augie looked out into the crowd, at the preponderance of older people there, and he jerked his chin at them. "Why aren't they taking 'em, you giving them out free?"

"Moralists," said the kid with a little sneer. His eyes looked old. *How old?* Augie suddenly wondered, as his hand closed slowly around the bottle. "Painless," the kid offered, trying to read Augie's hesitation.

Youth pills. What could be better than that? He only needed a couple of doses — one for himself, one to analyze. And then he'd have all he needed — first for his mother, and then...to sell. To make his fortune. To walk away from the Historians and their airs. He tried to swallow his excitement. "Enough in there for two?"

The kid grinned, too, as if Augie had passed some sort of initiation, become part of a secret. He nodded. "Three, even. We ought to have done this years ago, giving 'em out like this. Gotten people used to it, before the politics stepped in. It worked for the cloners. Just prepare yourself and take 'em, nothing fancy."

And Augie nodded as if he knew, but he didn't even wait for the kid to look away. He thumbed the recall switch and returned to the sterile implacability of the night-time travel room.

The janitor who went Forward and lived. The janitor who changed the world. He'd done something no one else could or would — because of who he was, and not what he'd bothered to cram into his brain. God-bloody-damned *youth pills*! The kid in the apron would get his wish, all right — people would be long accustomed to these pills by the time he was born. Youth pills for everyone!

But not before Augie. For once, Augie would be first.

At home, he transferred the pill for his mother into a small self-sealer, laboriously copying the simple directions — for his mother had been through LitEd. She even owned books. But her disappointment with a son who hadn't followed her example would evaporate once she realized the tremendous import of what he'd done — of what he'd given her.

But of course she was gone when he got there, out on errands. He let himself into her closet of an apartment — just two floors down — and left the sealer on her bed, recording a short explanation at her message center. *To make you young again.* He wished he had more words, a way to make it sound important. Until now, the everyday words he knew had always seemed enough.

He went back upstairs to stare at his own dose. There should be more fanfare, he thought. More recognition of the moment. If nothing else, he should be in Tolan's office, watching the look on her face as she realized—

It's better this way. Present the world with the deed accomplished — when it was too late to stop him, or to steal the credit. *Yeah. Much better this way.* Augie popped the pill into his mouth, swallowing it dry.

Almost immediately, the vidphone rang: his mother. Her voice was a mixture of affection and impatience as she squinted at his hand-copied directions and asked him where on earth they'd come from.

"From the future." Augie gave her a cocky grin. "I went Forward, Ma, and I got us a new start." Strong stuff, too. Drowsy? Was that right? What had the kid said? *Had* he said? Painless, that's what Augie remembered.

"Augie, dear...youth pills? From the future? Isn't that forbidden? What if the center finds out?"

He laughed. "That's the point. I *want* them to find out. I want *everyone* to find out. I'll prove to them that ingenuity makes the man, not schooling."

"You'd better work on your spelling anyway," she said, looking at the directions again. "Youth is *not* spelled E-U-T-H."