

SIMU

I step off the street into the refreshingly cool atmosphere of my apartment. My Intelli-bot, Chessie, greets me. “Good evening, Maggie. How was your day?”

“Okay, I guess. Clovey was there today. Paler broke down, *again*.” Paler is my usual Tutor-bot, but he’s been having technical difficulties lately.

“What did you learn?” Chessie replies smoothly.

“Nothing. He was taking us on a tour of the French Revolution – as if we haven’t seen *that* before.”

“Be nice Maggie. He was programmed a while ago so he doesn’t have the advanced software you’re used to.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I say distractedly, playing with my e-Hologram.

I activate my Simu-chip and immerse myself in developing a new Simu-person for graphic design class. I am just putting the finishing touches on it when a robotic voice interrupts my concentration, informing me I have a voice message. I save my Simu-person and open the message. Mum’s voice rings out.

“Honey, you’ve been in Simu for hours. We’re having dinner now, so come up when you’re ready. It’s your favourite, tuna pasta salad.”

I sigh and shut down the Simu-chip, walking over to the Traveller – the latest type of teleporter. The pre-recorded voice greets me.

“Hello Maggie. Where to today?” It says cheerfully.

“Just upstairs.” I step onto the teleporter and close my eyes to lessen the disconcerting feeling of teleporting. A large collection of boxes are stacked in random order around Mum’s apartment, bright labels flashing as they go through slideshows of photos advertising their Simu-products – Mum is the head of the marketing department at Simu-corp. The smell of

chocolate chip cookies wafts around me.

“Hello? Mum?” I say into the empty apartment

An automated voice speaks into my head.

“Your mother has left you one pre-recorded message. Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes.” I state.

“Hi honey, sorry, I had to go visit your brother. I’ll be right back. Dinner’s on the bench if you’re hungry. Have some chocolate chip cookies – they’re fresh.”

I walk over to the hover-bench. A bowl of tuna pasta salad sits on the Robo-cleaned bench top.

As I begin to eat, a whirring sound starts behind me, signalling the use of the Traveller. “Hi Mum.” I say without turning around.

“Hi sweetie.” She replies. “How was your day?”

I shrug. “Boring. How was yours?”

“Fine thanks, Mags.” Mum seems disinterested, far away.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s working late today, honey. He should be home soon though.”

“Okay...” Dad didn’t usually work late, if he could avoid it. I turn back to my bowl of tuna pasta salad and resume eating.

I am just about to activate my Simu-chip when Mum speaks;

“I don’t think you should use your Simu-chip right now sweetheart.”

“Why not?” I reply, shocked. Mum has never had any problems with me using Simu before.

“It’s just that the company have been having a few difficulties with the Simu-chips lately. Bigger than before.” There had been protests last year against the use of Simu-chips, people worried about Simu-users becoming confused between reality and Simu. It was completely irrational though. No-one sane would blur the distinct lines that marked out reality “How do you mean,

bigger?" I ask. It couldn't be bad. Simu was perfectly ethical and safe.

Mum shook her head, looking overworked and stressed. "The new Simu-chip. We now publicly offer the operation for it. The newly enhanced features-smell and taste..."

"I know Mum, I saw the ads."

"They work well. Too well, it seems. Millions of people have already undergone the operation, and there's a huge waiting list."

"What do you mean, they work too well?"

"It seemed, when we tested it, that we didn't need to put a time block on it. It turns out we did. At first it was just one person. Then there were more. Now, it seems most of the people who underwent the operation over a month ago – the Simu-chip has had an addictive effect on them. They crossed the line. They don't know what reality is."

Mum is almost crying.

"They don't eat enough, don't sleep enough. Fifty-seven have already died. Most of them are being attended to by Medi-bots – they're in varying stages of critical condition. We've set up a news broadcast about the error for tonight. We don't know what to do, Mags, we just don't know. You can't get something out of their brain when it's in that deep."

I nod calmly, trying to control my breathing

"But... Sam? He was one of the first to have the operation. He's okay, though, right? He has to be okay. He can't be sick. He can't." I was frantic, on the verge of tears. Sam was my big brother, the one who was always there for me, who I could talk to about anything.

"Oh, sweetheart..."

Tears start to fall down my face. "How long?"

"Two days ago."

"Can I go see him?" I say through my sobs.

Mum nods. "Your father is with him now." She is crying too

"Why didn't you tell me?" I don't have it in me to be angry at Mum. She loves Sam every bit as much as I do.

"We didn't want you to be sad. We were going to tell you together, but it's a bit late for that."

We walk over to the Traveller. The cheerful robotic voice greets us. "Good evening Christine and Maggie. The date is November 9 2055. The time is 09:34 pm. Where would you like to go?" I feel like punching all the cheeriness out of it. Instead I settle for just glaring at it. "The private hospital." Mum states.

I shut my eyes and open them again to our private hospital.

"Welcome to the Stanet Family Hospital, Maggie. Would you like to visit your brother?" The Medi-bot greets me.

I nod, and the Medi-bot shows me to my brothers' room. Sam lies on the bed, surrounded by a tangle of wires. He sits up when he sees me, but he looks weak. So, so weak. How can this be you Sam? Where did you go wrong? He reaches a frail arm towards me. "Maggie," He says, smiling meekly. "Come over here."

I walk towards him, wary of the beeping machines I've never seen before in my life.

Without warning, Sam collapses. His head rolls back onto a pillow, and his neck looks like it might break. An alarm begins to wail.

"What happened?" I say, looking on blankly as a team of Medi-bots whiz in. No- one answers, frantic over Sam.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" I yell.

Dad looks at me.

"He's gone into Simu."

"What? How can he have gone into Simu? He was just talking to me!"

“This is part of the condition. The people affected slip in and out of Simu constantly. To them, everything in the real world is dull compared to Simu. They don’t want to stay here.”

I don’t reply. I sit down in a hover-chair and activate my Simu chip, letting the artificial perfection wash over me.

The sun shines brightly over the perfect beach. White sand stretches to my right for miles, and rock pools are scattered every few metres to my left. I dip my toes in the clear water, revelling in the calming sensation. No rubbish, no pollution. Just Simu, stimulating my every sense.

Where are you Sam? Where do you go in Simu?

“Simu search: Samuel Stanet.” I say.

A perfect voice breaks the peaceful noise of the waves. “Samuel Stanet is currently online. Would you like to locate him?”

“Yes.” I state.

“Samuel Stanet is currently at: Candle Forest. Would you like to go there?”

“Yes.”

My surroundings change abruptly to a dark forest. Sam’s Simu-person stands beside a large tree, silent and brooding. The air is hung with a foreboding atmosphere, solemn and dark. I watch as Sam paces back and forth.

“Sam,” I say hesitantly. “Why are you here?”

He looks at me. “Because they are trying to take me out of this - I don’t know why. Can’t you see? Can’t they see? It’s paradise!” He smiles. “You should stay here with me, Maggie.”

I gaze at him blankly, scared. “No, Sam, you need to get out.” This is not the Sam I know. He glares at me, his piercing blue eyes glinting icily in the dim sunlight filtering through the trees.

“Why not, little sister? It’ll be fun. Just like it used to be.”

I look at him with disgust. “Yeah. Like it used to be. *Before* Simu.”

Sam’s Simu-person flickers, the graphics going into negative, and then disappears. Gone.

Probably jumped to some other, obscure Simu-location.

I shut down my Simu chip. The familiar sight of the hospital is welcoming after the cold, hard, perfection of Simu.

But the room is silent. Eerily silent. No whirring, no beeping.

A continuous beep begins, high pitched and mournful.

I stare at the cardio monitor. A flat line.

He's gone.

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