IMMEASURABLE

Off the scale.

BY H.E. ROULO

Students streamed out of Yvonne's geology class, rolling up their flexible displays and shoving them into backpacks. Yvonne lingered outside, dreading what came next: she needed to press the button.

The funeral home had just sent her a microfluidic hot key that would take action with one nail press. The new button rose like a blister on the band of the flesh-coloured Metric that clung to her wrist. Her racing heartbeat and clammy skin revealed her anxiety, casting her Meta-score down with each moment she delayed, but her finger refused to tap — even if it meant losing points.

Peggy careered around the corner of the building, blonde hair brushing the wolf on her airbrushed T-shirt. She grinned at Yvonne. "How'd you do today?"

Yvonne glanced at her Metric as if she hadn't been staring at it. "I scored basic learning and self-actualization points. Just another weekday in class."

Peggy frowned. "No class participation bonus? That's not like you. Hey, let's walk the long way back to the dorms. I'm short on exercise."

Across campus, a student in a college sweatshirt threw a Frisbee to a girl in a tank top. Other students sat beneath a tree, listening to a guitar. They'd all be filling their socializing bars, and it looked like fun. On another day, in another mood, Yvonne might have joined them.

Peggy's touch startled her. "Hello? You're barely here."

"Brian —," Yvonne choked on her brother's name, and watched the Frisbee fly into the bushes. "His ashes are ready to be dispersed."

The girl in the tank top fished in the undergrowth for the Frisbee and stood up with a glad cry, a wrapper flapping in her hand. Her partner groaned, obviously wishing he'd found it. The girl dropped the litter into a bin, Metric ding.

Peggy pouted. "Damn, the college announced a green initiative, and bonus goals like *community improvement*. She probably got 500 points. I'm behind for the day. I didn't get up with my alarm and I skipped breakfast. I chose pizza Friday night as my reward — doesn't look like I'm going to get it."

"On the other hand, you don't have to deal with your dead brother's remains. Bonus, right?" Yvonne pinched her lips shut. Since

Brian's accident she'd learned she shouldn't resent how the world went on as if nothing had changed. For them, it hadn't. She scuffed the ground with her foot.

Peggy shrugged.

They'd circled round on the asphalt path and the dorms stood a block away. Yvonne wished she was already there, tucked under the blankets. She'd lose points, of course. Since arriving at school she'd focused her Metric on rewarding education and new experiences. Peggy used hers to avoid her freshman fifteen. But their concentration on scoring drew them together. Nothing felt as good as the chime for a new high score.

"Doesn't your Mum want to handle his ashes? That's a major emotional milestone. It's a level-up for sure!"

"Mum wouldn't use the points. She relies on a cell phone. I tried to set a Metric up for her, but she never got into it. She says her MMO is a better game."

"Old-fashioned! They're such a different generation, escaping into TV, video games and movies. Hanging out with friends online. Real-world accomplishments are so much more fulfilling, I mean, as long as you've set your incentives right."

"I've hit my exercise goal. Let's cross the street, it'll be shorter."

Cyclists rode by, their Metrics ticking up health and social responsibility points. "Mum's had a hard time dealing with Brian's death, so I said

I'd do it. I don't know why I'm making a fuss. It's just a button." Yvonne raised her wrist.

Why delay? There were no extra points for doing it in person. Stomach clenching, her index finger hovered but would not descend. Although she'd said goodbye at the memorial — held at a virtual church so friends from all over could mourn together — this would be final. Real.

Peggy halted. "I don't know what it's like to lose a family member, but I know it's tough. You've been strong, and you're helping your family by taking this on."

Tears blurred the bottom of Yvonne's vision. She embraced Peggy.

Peggy squeezed back. She sniffed and wiped a hand across her nose. Her Metric dinged and her eyes brightened.

"Social connection! I was totally there for a friend. Look, I'm ahead for the day." She gave Yvonne's unresisting shoulders another squeeze. "And usually I score low on empathy. See you later. Thanks for making it a great day!"

Peggy bounded towards her dorm, humming.

Yvonne's fingers stroked the bubbled key of her Metric. One press, and she'd complete a mega-life task. She'd level-up. Some people were born rich, and exotic trips set their experiences scores ahead. But with this, she'd be ahead of most of her peers. She could gain something nice from a painful life event. Brian would like that.

But she didn't want to score points for this. "Peggy!" she called.

The girl stopped on the steps.

Yvonne slipped the Metric from her wrist. The thin coil dangled between her fingers, innocent of the weight she'd given it. She tossed the Metric into the bushes and heard a sad chime — lost points.

"OMG, what are you doing?" Peggy yelled.

Vertigo flooded Yvonne and her knees threatened to buckle as she tried to orientate herself towards the mortuary without her Metric to guide her. Once familiar buildings hid the way, their configuration confusing to a sleepwalker who'd awakened. On the second step towards her goal, her stride strengthened. Over her shoulder she called: "There's litter in the bushes if you want it!"

Peggy squealed. A Metric chimed. ■

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