

The Elixir of Life

A garish blue dot blinked in the corner of Julian's eye. He jabbed his finger in its general direction.

"22060408-008: Jennifer Simmons," flashed past his vision. He furrowed his brow and chewed on his lip. "Sonja, can you pull up application seven from today for me?"

"I am sorry. I could not find a suitable match for 'application seven from today.' Did you mean application seven-zero-zero-seven?" the Nav suggested, its tone infuriatingly pleasant.

"No, I—" Julian swallowed the pointless retort, angled his face away from the webcam above his office door, and enjoyed a personal scowl. Composing himself, he swiveled his chair back around. "Sonja, pull up all applications from today."

Directories labeled with bold names and numbers zipped through Julian's display. 22060408-006: Blaine Olson. 22060408-008: Jennifer Simmons. There was no entry in between. He paused his feed and scrolled back, even though he knew he hadn't been mistaken. That the Nav had been mistaken was even less likely. Whatever this was stank of human error, or worse, malice. Julian's fingers curled, digging into his durable foam armrests.

Every flagged LXR application had to go through him. He was the only actuary in Firmament's Icarus Station branch and had been for over fifty years, ever since his two original coworkers had left—or rather, died, ironically because of the very thing that was supposed to have extended their lives. They'd ceded their employee LXR allotment to family members, back before people had realized exactly what that meant. Julian still felt a horrible twisting in his gut when he thought about the early days, and it only worsened as he discovered that he couldn't properly remember their faces anymore.

"Sonja, email John Parson. Subject: missing app. Body: hi John, do you know if there was supposed to be an app number seven today? I just got number eight and the one we did before lunch was six. Thanks."

Julian gave the auto-formatted email a cursory review before flicking his finger to send it. Then he turned his attention to application eight and opened the summary file. Skipping past the demographic details, he went straight for the written statement, eyes lingering briefly on the check mark next to "criminal record."

Sonja was already reading aloud for him: "I know it says it in the medical section but if a person is reading this, I'm suffering from late-stage lung cancer and the doctors say I have less than six months left to live. I'm only thirty, and I know my age group is usually last priority, but please, I swear I'll become a literal saint if you give me this. My Social will go through the roof. I can explain the criminal record thing: I was a teenager and I hacked a few games, that's all. I've been on the straight and narrow since then."

“That’s enough, stop,” Julian muttered, and the Nav’s conversational voice cut off. He dragged a hand down his face, massaging the corners of his eyes. Terminal illness was always the worst. It featured in far too many of the applications that ended up on his desk, as it was company policy that AI shouldn’t make decisions that would result directly in people’s deaths. Personally, Julian thought that humans like him were even less qualified for the task.

He extracted the social and personality data and fed it into his specialized model anyway. He wasn’t here to say what was right or wrong—that was the purview of Natasha, the ethicist, whose position he did not envy. Julian’s job was just to calculate the net present projected social value of an applicant’s potential immortal life, only with more finesse than afforded by Firmament’s automated process.

An alert blared in his peripheral vision. It was John’s reply:

Hi Julian,

File attached. Can you do your numbers magic real quick? We’re meeting in a few minutes. Sorry about the oversight.

Thanks,

John

Julian’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the header: 22060408-007. No name.

“Sonja, calendar,” he muttered, and the Nav shoved his schedule into the forefront of his vision. “What meeting? First I don’t get the application, now he doesn’t invite me to the meeting.”

“Call from Natasha Jones,” Sonja informed him in lieu of a response, as the green, person-shaped icon above the door began blinking.

Julian nodded, swallowing back a sigh. “Accept.” There was a bright ping as the call connected and Natasha materialized in his office, reclining in a retro armchair. She was dressed smartly in a starched navy blouse and crimson cravat, her voluminous hair pulled back into a severe ponytail that accentuated the sharp cast of her face. Whenever he hosted her, Julian instinctively regretted his own staid suit and unadorned office.

“Hi Natasha,” he mumbled. “How are you? Did you need something?”

“Julian, did John send you application seven?” Natasha always got straight to the point, with no pleasantries. Sometimes, Julian liked that about her.

“Yes, just a minute ago,” he told her, shifting forward in his seat as he tried to formulate his grievances politely.

“Don’t look at it,” Natasha said outright. “Isabelle said to tell you—”

“Why isn’t Isabelle here then?”

“I don’t know, why isn’t she?” Natasha parroted back, eyes narrowed to slits. Julian grunted in embarrassed acknowledgment. So maybe he was a bit unapproachable. “Anyway, you’re excluded from the decision due to a conflict of interest, and John really shouldn’t have forwarded it in the first place.”

“Conflict of interest?” Julian repeated, frantically searching the cobwebbed recesses of his memory for something resembling an interest. He was one of those people whose social value was comprised almost entirely of Skill Rank. In fact, the Nav helpfully reminded him in the corner of his eye, his Interest Rank was in the single digits, a relic from that one time he had written a funny blog post about the pitfalls of machine learning and received some pity engagement from his colleagues.

“The applicant is someone in your family,” Natasha clarified.

Julian continued to draw a blank. His eternally single status had been the default office joke for decades. “I haven’t got a family. There must be some mistake.”

An impatient crease marred Natasha’s dark brow. “Claudia Richardson.”

It took him a shameful moment to place the name. “Oh. Right. My sister,” he inferred. The surname was unfamiliar; she must have gotten married at some point. “I don’t think it would be a conflict of interest, really. I mean, I wasn’t even sure if she was still alive. Obviously, she is. But we don’t talk.”

Fifty years, had it been, since they’d last exchanged words? But her sallow face and accusatory sneer were still burned into his mind’s eye.

Natasha raised a penciled eyebrow. “That bad, huh? Well either way, best if you stay out of it.”

Julian’s head whipped up in protest. “But I can still run the models on her data. I wouldn’t falsify anything or make a bad recommendation. What are you going to do without the numbers?”

“No offense, but it’s not usually the numbers that make or break the final decision. If they were going to matter that much, the AI would’ve done the job. Look, just leave this one to us, okay? I’ll tell John.”

Natasha did not wait for his affirmative before she blinked out of existence, leaving Julian’s office bereft of color. He had to clench all the muscles in his face to avoid scowling at the blank wall. Anti-social brooding wasn’t going to do him any favors.

“Process complete. Runtime two minutes, twenty-three seconds,” said the Nav. Julian sighed and reached for the shimmering directory on his right side. A quick glance at the standard exhibits told him that things didn’t look too good for Jennifer Simmons. Her best estimate projected social value was several ranks short of the going rate for LXR on Icarus Station, and even the best-case scenario was barely over the line. Despite his confidence in his model, Julian’s mouth went dry, and he felt a twist of unease in his chest as he compiled the most relevant charts and prepared to dictate his recommendation.

Even after all this time, it still seemed agonizingly cruel to tell someone who was dying that their life wasn’t worth saving, no matter how clear the math was. Julian knew it was just his human bias. Though

he could imagine the devastation to Jennifer Simmons in crystal clarity, he had no conception of the multitudes of societal good that would be generated by the deserving recipients of LXR as a result of passing her by.

At this thought, Julian scratched guiltily at his arms, as if he could feel the nanomachines whirring in protest beneath his unworthy skin.

“You might want to take a relaxation walk,” Sonja suggested, directing his attention to his rising cortisol level. Julian closed his eyes and remained still for some long moments, considering whether he might just ignore the Nav. Then he dropped his elbows onto his armrests and levered himself to his feet, smoothing his hands over his suit to check for any obvious wrinkles. A window helpfully popped up, showing the feed from his door-cam. He grimaced at the sight of his own youthful visage superimposed over Firmament’s default stellar background, like an insect preserved in the resin of corporate banality.

He swiped his hand over the panel, and the door slid open with a sucking sound to reveal the uninspiring corridor beyond. It was all steel panels, sickly blue with refracted light from LED strips on the ceiling and floor, interrupted only by occasional tiny windows into rooms exhibiting more of the same. If he stretched out his arms, his hands could drag along both walls. Instead, he hugged himself closely and hurried down the curving hall, shivering in his polyester blazer. Firmament’s innovative plan for saving energy was to keep common areas inhospitably frigid.

The break room was empty. Julian could count on one hand the number of times he had actually encountered a coworker here, or in person at all. He only left his office when his Nav pressured him to, and he could only imagine that most of his colleagues did the same.

The Synth was pristine from disuse. Really, there was no reason to make the chilly trek to the break room when everybody had perfectly functioning Mini-Synths in their offices. Julian opened a cabinet, selected one of the dozens of identical mugs branded with Firmament’s planetary logo, and placed it under the drink valve. After a moment of dithering, he said, “Coffee, please. No color.” Then his embarrassed chuckle echoed through the room, joined by the pitter of hot liquid on ceramic. John always got onto him for saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to Navs. He said it showed his age, which was ridiculous, because Navs had been in use since before Julian had even been born.

Taking his transparent coffee in both hands, Julian meandered over to one of the hard plastic tables, grimacing as he settled into a designer chair. It felt like sitting in a salad bowl. He leaned back, sinking more deeply than he would have liked, and pulled up his team chat. The rest of the application review team all showed as busy. They must be meeting about Claudia without him.

Julian sighed. Natasha had been right about the importance, or lack thereof, of his calculations to the final decision. More often than not, he was relegated to the role of a robotic Cassandra, fated to forecast things that nobody wanted to hear. He took a generous gulp of coffee.

Soothing fountains and twittering birds suddenly filled his ears as Sonja played a relaxation track. The names of his colleagues winked away, to be replaced by a generic vista of an endless meadow under an unrealistically blue sky.

“Quit it, Sonja,” he mumbled. “Open my email.”

“You are currently taking a break,” the Nav informed him equitably, though it did close the virtual environment and plunge him back into slate gray reality. “Did you know: taking regular breaks during the workday can improve productivity by decreasing stress and increasing focus?”

“I know, I know,” Julian said, rolling his eyes. “Look, I’m not going to do work. I just want to look at my email.”

He punctuated his words with a manual gesture toward the email icon hovering in his task tray. The Nav relented and pushed the window into view. John’s last email was still at the top. Julian opened the attachment, his heart lurching with the thrill of clandestine action.

The application file looked exactly like the other thousands of application files he’d seen over the years. At the top was the summary, with a name, photo, basic demographic details, and a statement by the applicant about why they wanted to use LXR. Julian stared at the photograph for a long moment, paralyzed.

Claudia looked just like their mother had. Small, withered, but smiling, with prominent dimples in her sagging cheeks. A full head of snow-white curls, cut short, framed her thin face. Her eyes were how he remembered them—blue like the sky on Earth and piercing. Julian stared down at his own hand, its flesh supple and untouched by time, and felt a hot spike of self-loathing.

“I don’t believe in living forever, but as I’ve aged I have put substantial thought into the idea of being able to choose my time of death. The possibility of dying without having finished my projects, projects which potentially interest myriads of others, disturbs me. I believe that this attitude is in line with the mission of Firmament Inc. to ‘elevate human potential to the stars.’”

“Thank you, Sonja,” Julian mumbled, his voice strangely hoarse. His gaze flickered over the rest of the application.

Age: 86

Occupation: schoolteacher, novelist

Social: 67 (SR 24 | IR 43)

Julian did a double take. Was his sister some kind of celebrity? He had never personally met anybody with an Interest Rank over forty. It certainly hadn’t been nearly that high when they’d last spoken, and she had been struggling to find work as a substitute teacher. Of course, fifty years was a very long time. Agitated now, he muttered, “Sonja, search Claudia Richardson Icarus Station.”

Right there at the top of the search results stood: “Icarus Station Most-Upvoted Fantasy Author C. C. Richardson announces long-awaited sequel to *Daugherty’s Secret...*”

His sister, a popular writer. He didn’t need to run any models to know that her projected social value was well over the current LXR threshold. “Why was she flagged? Sonja, flag criteria.”

The document scrolled to the pertinent section. “Flag criteria: the applicant is a creator of public content advocating against life-extending robotics.”

Julian dropped his mug onto the table and struggled out of his seat. His display fogged up as he sprinted for the door, but he continued on blindly, one hand pressed up to the icy metal wall and the other fumbling to clean his lenses. Stumbling through his office door, he dove for his chair and connected to the team meeting room.

Three pairs of eyes swiveled toward him as the walls of his office blurred away to soft white. John, agile as always, was the first to react.

“Ah, Julian, right on time. We were just finishing up with number seven. Sorry about the mix-up.” He flashed a little smile, stroking his shamrock-patterned tie, and Julian’s protests died in his throat. Behind John, on the shared whiteboard, he could see plainly that they had come to a consensus—reject applicant. He was too late.

“Consider stepping out for a moment to collect yourself,” Sonja said in his ear, but it hardly registered over the sudden roaring in his skull. He held his breath and curled his clammy hands into fists, ignoring the flashing warning about his blood pressure.

“Right,” he heard himself say. “Did you get my analysis for number eight?”

John busied himself with pulling up the exhibit on Jennifer Simmons as Natasha shot Julian a concerned look. He dismissed her with a wave of his hand, focusing on his breathing and the details of the next application, even though all he could see in his mind’s eye was Claudia, old and young at the same time, fixing him with her accusing stare. He was being ridiculous.

“Lung cancer,” said Isabelle, the compliance officer, wincing. “That’s horrible.”

“It’ll probably have to be an accept. We can’t just let her die,” Natasha said.

Julian’s head shot up in protest. “She’s not even close to last month’s average net present social value projection for new LXR users. There’s a thirty percent chance that she’ll be an eternal burden to society.”

“Savage,” Isabelle whispered.

Julian pressed his lips together briefly, pointing to the chart on the whiteboard. “I’m just saying that she’s SR five and IR eleven. Sixteen Social, that’s it, and there’s no sign that it’ll get better. Even the best-case scenario is barely above the line.”

Natasha frowned openly at him. “Terminal illness changes people. Both before and after. You can’t just look at how she is now—she’s probably at the lowest point in her life. If she gets to live, there’s a good chance she’ll change her outlook and work hard to be a valuable member of society.”

Swallowing the entire lecture threatening to spill forth about how he was most certainly not only looking at the subject’s current state, as his models used all pertinent historical data, Julian dug his fingers into his armrest and focused instead on the second, more relevant assertion. “Actually, there’s not really a good chance of her turning things around. I’ve mentioned before that studies on the initial LXR population, all previously terminally ill, showed no significant difference in post-administration social value compared to the healthy control population.”

“And I’ve said before that you can’t use a general study like that to justify acting on a specific case. It’s unethical. That’s the whole point of case-by-case review, that people’s lives don’t just become numbers and statistics.” Natasha crossed her arms and glanced over to John as Julian shot her a long-suffering look. Discrimination based on select statistics might be unethical, but in what world was it inadmissible that there was no evidence of a difference between two groups? Of course, Julian knew from experience that disagreeing with the ethicist on moral grounds was an exercise in futility.

John steepled his fingers. “Julian is right, of course, that Miss Simmons is unlikely to be an ideal investment of resources,” he began, and Julian had heard this kind of statement more than enough times not to get his hopes up. Indeed, any brief vindication was promptly extinguished as John continued, “but in the end, our flagged application reviews comprise less than one percent of all LXR applications, and make little difference to the bottom line. I think we should show a little humanity and save a life where we have the power to do so. Isabelle, what do you think?”

“I agree. It’s like Natasha said. We can’t just let her die horribly,” she said, looking pointedly at Julian. Knowing when he was outvoted, he sighed and nodded. “Fine.”

“Great,” said John, clapping his hands together and labeling the application as accepted. “I think we’re finished here, then. Thanks, everyone.”

Julian didn’t wait for the chorus of thanks to finish before he dropped the meeting. He slammed his fist against his desk, heedless of his Nav’s protest. If the flagged applications didn’t matter, then what was even the point of them doing their jobs? Why should some deadbeat get to live forever at society’s expense just because they happened to be dying, while someone who actually contributed to other people’s well-being was denied for ideological differences? The Social Value System was supposed to have solved these sorts of iniquities, and yet, here they were. Julian slumped, cradling his head in his hands.

Why were people like him, people who spent their days playing god, deciding who lived or died, allowed to continue unchecked forever? It had only been chance that had brought him to Firmament at the right time. Before LXR, Firmament had just been one of many nanotechnology innovators looking for actuaries to help them navigate social value projections. There had been nothing outwardly special

about the company, nothing indicating that it would be the one to make the biggest technological breakthrough since affordable space travel.

Some people had called immediately for heavy government regulation of LXR, of course, or even for it to be banned, especially after the initial debacle. Firmament had almost been toppled by lawsuits when people had first found out, in the most horrible way, that you could not stop using LXR once you started. Julian didn't regret not dying. How could he? But he still wondered what would have happened, had he ceded his employee allotment of LXR to his aging mother, like Claudia had begged him to at the start—like his original coworkers, both bright-eyed, newly-minted Associates of the Interplanetary Actuarial Society just like him, only infinitely less selfish, had done.

Julian's spiraling thoughts were interrupted by the flash of the call sign above the door.

"Call from Natasha Jones," Sonja announced.

For a long moment, Julian was tempted to deny the call out of spite, but he remembered that his Interest Rank was in fact still non-negative and was at risk of dropping lower.

"Accept," he muttered, scrambling to make himself halfway presentable.

Natasha appeared across from him, her lips arranged in a perfect sympathetic moue. "Sorry about your sister, Julian."

"It's fine," Julian said. "It's not like she's going to drop dead immediately. And we really don't talk. It's been multiple decades."

"I believe you," Natasha said, her expression easing up. "Not surprised, after seeing the kind of stuff she writes about us. They really meant it when they said anti-LXR. It's not like she made one blog post one time or something. She actually runs this whole site about how LXR is destroying people, how humans aren't meant to live forever, and how Firmament is the most unethical company in history. And then she turns around and puts in an LXR application? No offense, but either she's the biggest hypocrite in the system, or she was just trolling, and she's just going to take the rejection and post it as proof of how horrible our business practices are."

"Oh." Julian blinked, taken aback. "I didn't know about any of that at all."

"It's a shame, because she's a great writer," Natasha added, shaking her head. "I didn't realize she was Claudia Richardson as in C. C. Richardson. I guess you didn't, either?"

"You've read her books?"

Natasha raised both eyebrows. "You haven't? *The Mortolla Chronicles*? *Daugherty's Secret*?"

"I don't really read fiction. I prefer nonfiction," Julian explained. It came out like an apology.

“Do you know how boring you sound right now?” Natasha asked, rolling her eyes. “Math guy. Doesn’t read fiction. Lives in his office and works all the time. If they put you on the advert for what being immortal is like, application volume would probably drop by half.”

“That’s why I don’t work in marketing,” Julian said, disguising his wince as a laugh. Natasha wasn’t wrong; he wasn’t like her or any of the later cohorts of LXR users. He hadn’t been carefully selected by Firmament’s AI. After all, it hadn’t existed until he had helped to build it.

Natasha sighed. “Anyway, Isabelle, John, and I were going to get some drinks at Galactic Surprise after work. You want to come?” she asked, in a resigned tone that said she already knew he would decline.

“Sorry, I’ve got some stuff to finish up,” he said. Natasha flashed him a final eye roll before leaving.

Julian sat up straight in his seat and pulled up a browser window. “Sonja, search Claudia Richardson, Firmament life-extending robotics.” He followed the first link to come up. Natasha hadn’t been kidding—a bold white headline superimposed over a menacing photograph of a crab-like nanomachine read:

LXR IS NOT IMMORTALITY—LXR IS DEATH

Julian couldn’t help tensing as he took this in. It was exactly the sort of material he would normally scoff at and scroll past in disgust. He was familiar enough with the vitriol that detractors of Firmament liked to spout: they would argue that the very concept of a product you could not stop using was coercive, or that LXR was a conspiracy to control the masses. These paranoid ideas were ridiculous, in Julian’s view. It wasn’t as if Firmament were forcing anybody to use LXR, or cutting off any existing users through negligence. In fact, there was very explicit regulation mandating that the company do its utmost to make sure nobody’s LXR was depleted, including that it keep a sufficient reserve to supply all LXR users through potential production disruptions with ninety-nine percent confidence.

Researchers and engineers were constantly working to extend the active life of the nanomachines, and these days they only needed to be replenished every five years rather than annually.

Despite the litany of such objections surging through his mind, Julian forced himself to read on.

“One in fifty LXR users takes their own life before they reach average life expectancy.”

Here, Julian bit his lip. That figure seemed suspiciously high. Still, he decided to take it at face value, not in the mood to go digging for verification. So what if some people chose to die after all? That was a better outcome than before when all those people who didn’t want to die still did. He glanced to the next line.

“This is over four times the interplanetary rate of attempted suicide. Note that almost all suicide attempts by LXR users are successful, as they simply stop replenishing their LXR. Firmament calls this act ‘voluntary cessation’ and has made little effort to combat it. Though LXR can keep a person physically healthy, it does little for their mental health and is likely to exacerbate existing issues. LXR users are ten times more likely than the general population to feel socially isolated, face difficulty

forming meaningful relationships, and suffer from depression. They often report feelings of intense guilt following the loss of loved ones.”

Julian swallowed as an icy hand squeezed his heart. A wave of rationalizations crashed through his mind—the fact that people’s loved ones still died wasn’t a problem with LXR in and of itself, only with current sustainable levels of production—

(but the allocation was inequitable)

—nobody could control whether their family members got LXR, because approval was almost all automated and took into consideration the population at large—

(but it’s your job to control it)

(you could have given yours away)

—even if people wanted to help their family, ceding LXR to someone else was a death sentence, and nobody should be required to give up their life for somebody else—

(but you didn’t know that at the time)

(you let her die)

The window minimized itself, and Julian found himself floating in the silent, inky embrace of a deep space simulation. He blew out an irritated stream of air and slapped at his display to bring the interface back.

“I’m fine, Sonja” he insisted, shaking the tension deliberately from his limbs. He really needed to turn off the default workplace anti-stress program. It was ridiculously intrusive. And anyway, it could do nothing to erase the accusatory glares of Claudia and their mother, present and past superimposed in his mind.

Pulling up the browser again, Julian exhaled at length and scrolled to the bottom of the page. As he had hoped, there was a contact link. He pulled it up, smiling grimly when the Nav connected him to Claudia’s personal social net. Despite everything, they were still family in the system.

“Hi Claudia,” he said, and the words skittered dutifully into the chat. “I saw that your LXR application was rejected. I can still help you get access if you want.”

Julian sat back, waving the chat window away. He felt suddenly sick with terror, his heart thundering in the cavernous silence. Why had he done that? He was a fool and a coward.

Seized by the primal understanding that he desperately wanted to keep living, he reached out to grasp the message, take it back. The chat window ballooned across his display, showing him his fatal error in grotesque detail: “Claudia is typing...”

Claudia was typing for a long time. Julian stared, paralyzed by anticipation, as the three dots of the ellipsis undulated up and down *ad infinitum*.

In the end, the message said, “Julian. How are you?”

Annoyance punctured the balloon of pressure in his chest, and Julian didn’t stop the Nav as it auto-filled small talk.

“I’m fine. I hope you are well. Long time no see.”

This time, the response came instantly: “Do you want to talk?”

He really didn’t, Julian thought, but when the call sign lit up he let it through.

Claudia, tiny, ancient, and perched on a distorted travesty of an ergonomic chair, appeared across from him. The lines on her face were soft, sad. Julian felt his shoulders seize up. His head threatened to retreat into his shirt collar.

“Still working for Firmament, I see,” Claudia said. “You look well.”

“You do too,” Julian blurted, flinching. He knew that he looked not a day over twenty-five. The same could hardly be said of her.

Claudia smiled at him. “Kind of you to say so.”

Unable to physically bear another second of small talk, Julian said, “About the LXR—”

“Oh Julian, please, I’m not here about the LXR. I certainly don’t want you to open some shady back door for me. I was rejected fair and square. It was actually only for a bet. My wife thought it would be funny if they let me slip through, but I knew it wouldn’t work.” Claudia laughed, and the familiarity of the sound was startling. She brushed a stray curl behind her ear and peered at him earnestly. “Is there really off-market LXR, though? I thought for sure that that was a myth.”

“There’s not,” Julian said, even though he should’ve just kept his mouth shut. Somehow, his lips continued to flap anyway. “I meant that you could have mine.”

Claudia’s smile instantly froze. “No. Please, no. Julian, don’t joke about that.”

“I’m not joking,” Julian insisted, and Claudia reached out with her hand, as if she could actually touch him. It settled on his desk, a hair’s breadth from his own fingertips. She stared into his eyes, and Julian’s neck cramped as he forced himself not to look away.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, “for how I acted when Mom was in the hospital, and after. We were both grieving and the things I said were inexcusable. I’ve wanted to tell you for years, decades now, but I was too much of a coward. And then I lost your contact info after the Nav wipe they did on Firmament employees. I should have tried harder to find you, but I figured you wouldn’t want to talk to me anyway.”

“You... I don’t understand,” Julian croaked. “I thought *you* wouldn’t want to talk to *me*, after what I did. I let Mom die.”

Claudia looked stricken. Her hand moved to overlap his. “No. You didn’t. Mom died because the doctors couldn’t save her.”

“Because they couldn’t get LXR—”

“Because LXR didn’t exist yet,” Claudia said firmly, her gaze boring into his. “What Firmament did to you was wrong. You were used as guinea pigs for an incomplete product. You still are.”

“It was RTA-approved,” Julian protested.

Claudia wrinkled her nose. “It was RTA-approved for trials on volunteers who gave fully-informed consent. You weren’t fully informed. For goodness’ sake, it was framed to you as an employee benefit!”

“Of course I was informed; I’m not an idiot. But nobody knew about cessation being deadly. That’s my point. I could have helped Mom, as far as I knew, and I chose not to,” Julian said. He had expected saying these words to hurt, but in fact, all he felt now, confessing his sin, was relief.

“No,” said Claudia, eyes shining. “You made the right choice. Obviously. If you feel otherwise, I really think you should get counseling.”

“I already do! I’m not a child,” Julian muttered.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Claudia said, eyeing his smooth hand next to her wrinkled one.

“I’m older than you,” Julian argued childishly.

Claudia nodded as if to humor him. “Sure. And I mean counseling with a real live human, not the Nav.”

“Studies show that—”

“Shut up, Julian.”

Julian remembered now why they had never gotten along as young adults. He had been enamored with statistics and the scientific method, while Claudia had been convinced that cognitive biases were insurmountable and peer review was corrupt. Claudia had probably been right. Something loosened in his chest at the thought, and he slumped more fully into his seat.

He smiled weakly. “Are you sure you don’t want my LXR?”

“I said, shut up.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments. Julian felt dizzy with some incomprehensible emotion. In the corner of his eye, his Interest Rank went up by two.

“What?” he demanded.

“What?” Claudia echoed, eyes narrowed to devious crescents.

“My IR just jumped—did you just give me engagement?”

“Yes, just for fun, but now I’m concerned that you saw your IR change because of forty engagement,” Claudia said.

Julian mumbled something that like, “I don’t get out much.”

Claudia didn’t look appeased. “You know that Social isn’t divided into Skill and Interest on accident, right? Humans need a combination of labor and leisure to stay healthy.”

“I have leisure,” Julian insisted, but Claudia’s eyes were darting back and forth, focused on something only she could see.

“Your social net is tiny. Do you have any friends who aren’t from work?” she asked.

Julian cringed as he remembered the dozens of times Natasha had jokingly asked him the same thing. He’d always thrown back a hot, “Of course I do!” The words were gathered on the tip of his tongue, but his teeth were clenched, trapping the lie.

Claudia sighed. “Well, for what it’s worth, you have me. Let’s stay in touch from now on, all right?”

Julian swallowed. “I won’t have you forever.” He didn’t know why the thought left him so cold. It was ridiculous. He’d gone fifty years (*wasted years*) without speaking to her, without properly speaking to anyone, really. What was an eternity more?

“And that’s all right,” Claudia said gently. “I’m not the only person in the world, Julian. I’ll introduce you to my wife and son, and our friends. And grandchildren, don’t forget the grandchildren. You look their age—I’m sure you’ll get along.”

“Grandchildren,” Julian repeated, as suggested connections blossomed all over his blighted social net.

“Three grandchildren, to be precise. Sorry to leave you on this note, but I have a dinner date now. But this was great, Julian, thank you. Let’s talk again soon.”

“Talk soon. Right,” Julian murmured. Claudia winked out of existence, leaving him to contemplate the thumbnails of the few friends he did have. Natasha grinned at him from a drifting constellation. Seized by a sudden mania, he said, “Sonja, message Natasha. Are you guys still at the bar?”

A moment later, a thumbs-up flashed in the chat window. “Natasha has upvoted your message.”

“Sonja, tell her I’m on my way.”