

## Bounce

### *Shortly after*

Crack. In the sidewalk. In my head. Suppose it's my head. Only got the one now.

Not on the outside. The crack. It's inside. Inside my head.

So much used to be inside. Now it's all outside. I'm outside.

Seen this before. From the outside. No – the inside. Of...us? Of me? Ugh. Frickin pronouns.

I'm not the first who's...the first this has happened to. The others...not like I ever talked to them again. They weren't me anymore. Never talked to my toenail clippings either. Kinda weird idea. Why would I? Clip, toss, done.

Crack's still there. Sidewalk crack. Oh: I stopped walking. Now I get it. Last time I wondered why they just stopped. The one I clipped. Stared at a wall. Did it feel like a wall? Inside their head.

Wasn't at the wall next time I looked. Must have...gone...somewhere. Yeah?

So...I should too?

Where?

Huh.

Hello, crack. Outside crack.

Not saying hi back, are you. Why would you? Crack in the sidewalk. Got no mouth. Gonna name you Bob.

Someone coming. Me? The me I used to be. The big one. Don't know. Never had to notice what the bits looked like. Would you recognize your shoulder? Floating along. Floating disembodied shoulder of you. "Hi, shoulder! You're me! What are you doing here alone?" Don't think so. Kinda weird idea.

Oh. A pusher. Pushes me. Like they do.

I fall.

Wasn't this clumsy before. Didn't have to think about it. Every body. Every muscle. Now I'm just inside one head. One body. Don't even know how to talk to it.

Hello, crack. Outside crack. Bob. You're closer now.

Ow.

Not fair. I can't tell this body *don't fall*, why can it tell me *ow*? Ugh. Frickin bodies.

Why did I clip me? Can't remember. Can't have been my fault. Small me. This body. Not your pinky's fault if your clothes don't match. Yeah?

Ow. Head hurts. Why push me?

Those other times, why'd it happ- why did I do it? Big me. Don't remember thinking about it. Just, toenails too long, clip. Never thought about what the clippings might think. Or do. Little groups of 'em in the trash. Wondering what they'd done. Plotting how to get back on my toes. Kinda weird –

Would they even want to get back on my toes?

Well. Sure. Not much of a life stuck in a trash can. Staring at other trash. Wondering when the trash'll get taken out.

How can I get back inside? With the rest of me. Never took any of them back, before. Why would I? Clip, toss, done.

Well of course I want to! What kind of stupid question is that, Bob?

You don't understand. Stuck on the ground, can't move – what kind of a life is that, Bob? No offense.

## **Day 2**

They brought me here last night. To fix me? Got tubes. "Dehydration." "Medicine." "Better soon." OK.

Crack in the ceiling. Also silent. But passive-aggressive about it.

I miss Bob.

Least I know where Wall-Starer went. Probably.

### **Day 3**

Can't get used to how small it is in here. Woke up from a dream of being me again – all my bodies. Eating, drinking, sleeping, fixing the roads, building the ship. Tiny new one in a big one's arms, big one holding a tiny new one. Such a relief to feel normal again.

Then small-me woke up. Only seeing one place, feeling one body, thoughts fast but so shallow and simple. All texture gone. Wish I could still feel the crack in my head. Least I could feel where the rest of me was supposed to be. Hardly feels right using "I" for this ... this remnant. But something behind these eyes still sees. Resents how little it's seeing. Is surprised at its own existence. So I'm using "I," I guess. All I've got.

Why didn't I – big me, real me – suspect? Am I – small me – the only one? What happened to the others? What's happening to me?

Clip, toss, done.

Except I'm not still lying on the sidewalk. I'm not dead. I'm in a bed. In some kind of room. With a crack on the ceiling. (Not calling *you* Bob, bub. *You* haven't earned it. Sulky...sulker.)

Wish I knew what all this meant. Wish it would just go away and I could be me again.

Who's doing all this?

### **Day 4**

The first thing that freaks me out is when they come in out of step. I mean, a big body and a little body together, ok, stride lengths don't match. But these two are nearly the same height. Why can I hear their steps separately? Why do they talk while they hoist me into the wheelchair? "One, two, three – lift –" Who does that? Muttering to myself with the bodies concentrating on a hard task, sure, I've done that, but these bodies act like they're talking *to each other*.

They keep doing it while one pushes me down the hall and the other walks ahead – still out of step. “The big one in the shade?” “Nah, it’s in use. Small one on the north side will be shaded too and it’s lower. Easier for the passive sessions.” What in the world is wrong with ...

That isn’t big-me, is it. At least, not both of them.

That’s...*those* are different minds. Different minds in those different bodies.

What *is* this place?

There are body-repair places, of course. Really big people can afford to just clip a body when it isn’t working well, but most of us...them? Gah!...prefer not to lose the processing power, and clipping won’t stop contagious diseases. I’ve often had bodies in for repair; the centuries take their toll. But you take care of *yourself*. Why have your bodies repaired by someone else? Let alone multiple someones whose bodies have to *talk* to each other. Inefficient. Unsafe. Weird.

The next thing that freaks me out is the third body – the third ... person – who intercepts us just as the first two are about to wheel me outside.

This one says brightly, “Hi, Bob!”

To me.

Um.

I must have managed to make some expression cross my face.

“No worries,” Body Three says. “We call everyone that when they first get here. When you can control your facial muscles again and you’ve decided what your name is, tell us.”

When I’ve decided what my name is? I hardly notice I’ve managed to open my mouth and draw a deep breath, because I’m so shocked by the sounds I make. I recognize the rhythms of “You idiot, my name is not Bob!” But nothing else is identifiable.

Body Three – smug twit – grins at me. “I know – no, this isn’t the first time one of you has told me off. That’s the point: jolting you into speaking without thinking about it. We just picked something

people without much control of their mouths could say. Bob is easy. No muss, no fuss, no tongue! So, welcome to Targeted Rehabilitation to Achieve Maximum Potential Of Larval-Individual Neo-Exhivers!”

I look back warily, and get another grin. “I know what you’re thinking: ‘What a painfully forced acronym!’ – totally true – and ‘Oh come on, isn’t a trampoline just the most heavy-handed symbol for resilience ever?’ Answer: Oh no. Not *just*.”

That’s hardly all I’m thinking, but before I can steel myself to try saying “Are you all insane?”, we’ve reached the doors. Body Two opens them, and Body One pushes my wheelchair outside.

Chaos.

A huge number of bodies in motion, *none* of them in time with any other. After a moment I realize it’s only ten or fifteen. It’s just overwhelming trying to keep track of them all when I actually have to pay attention to each individually, and only have one brain to do it with.

They’re organized around several trampolines. Three bodies are bouncing, each alone, on small trampolines set on the grass. A few more are grouped on larger trampolines, bouncing either slowly and carefully while hanging onto each other, or more enthusiastically while supported by harnesses strung from solid beams high overhead. And they’re all talking to each other. Some are laughing – but not together! Nothing is together!

*More* separate minds? Are *any* of these bodies the same person? What is *with* this place?

I can feel this body breathe faster, its heartrate quicken, and that terrifies me. I start making noises – not speech – high-pitched and rhythmic but senseless; even I don’t know what I’m trying to say. The arms and legs twitch, but not under my control. Never mind what’s going on with all those other bodies, what about this one I’m stuck in? I wasn’t this scared even by the crack in my head. At least then I knew what had happened.

Body Three steps up swiftly, grin gone. “OK. Too much. Turn around so we’re not looking at everyone – let’s just go see the passive session so we can tell Bob what’s going on. Bob, I’m sorry, I

didn't realize everyone was out here all at once." Voice calm, authoritative, quiet. Hand gentle on my shoulder. As my wheelchair swings the others out of my field of view, the twitching and noises stop. The breathing slows a little. But I can still hear them all back there. I try to focus on the hand on my shoulder; at least it's a constant sensation. It marks one boundary of my new me.

I have met other people before, of course. I have long-established trading relationships with my neighbors on all sides, and some of the larger and less-automated freight transshipment points require hundreds of each of our bodies. But that's only one other mind to attend to. Once, a very long time ago when we were all becoming established, four of us met to negotiate boundaries. But we each sent only one body. A fascinating experience, but draining. The rest of my bodies hardly got anything done the whole time. This place with all its different minds...all these *people*...I feel my breathing quicken again. The hand on my shoulder tightens slightly.

"Everyone here has been through this, Bob," Body Three says quietly near my ear. "Each of us used to be part of someone larger. We're the ones who survived being thrown away."

Clip...toss...*not* done.

Sudden dread. Am I going to be murdered in my sleep by all the toenail clippings I've ever made?

OK. Breathe. Toenail clippings cannot get to me. On their little toenail-clipping legs they haven't got.

I almost laugh, but when Body Three raises an eyebrow, I manage to shake my head slightly. No way *that's* getting through. I deliberately take a deep breath. I can do that now. I feel the air move in and out. Sunlight on this face. My face. I remember late-summer days with many of my bodies working in the fields when I noticed the feel of sunlight and heat, the way eyes narrowed and sweat ran. But it was never important; there were always just as many of me indoors. I don't think I ever paid attention

to sunlight on a particular face. My thought has lost so much depth, I'm surprised to find something new in the shallows I have left.

"This is how we'll help you, Bob," Body Three says. "Look here."

On the largest trampoline, under a huge oak, one body lies limply as four others kneel around. One holds Limpy's wrist to monitor the pulse, one checks the fit of a neck brace and gently supports Limpy's head, one bends over talking to Limpy, and as I watch the last one says, "Ready?", waits for the others' nods, and starts bouncing just enough to make everyone rise and fall a bit.

"Sensation to anchor you in the one body you've got left. Practice controlling it. Figuring out its boundaries – your boundaries." A pause. "That's why as soon as I saw you and realized you were another new one of us, I pushed you down, then went to find help to get you here. I'm sorry if I hurt you. We'd prefer not to risk injuring you, of course, but we've found through too many errors that if a newly single-bodied mind doesn't have some distinct whole-body sensory input pretty quickly, it...things don't work out."

I manage, "Wha...a-en?"

"What happens? Catatonia, usually. I think we all flirted with that. Whatever sensory input your body was focused on when it happened becomes the only thing you *can* focus on. The one before you, we found staring at a wall."

I try for a small nod, get nowhere, try harder, and jerk my head forward nearly to my chest. One of the bod...one of the people behind me helps me sit back up. "'A' wa...me." At least my jaw and lips are grudgingly slightly cooperating.

"Not surprising. You were both found in the same mind's territory."

"Wha...hhahhhen?"

A sigh. "We were too late, maybe, or maybe the damage was too great. I don't know. We got no response to movement, light, sound, massage, the trampolines, strong smells, nothing."

“Hhho...” A little jaw control coming back. Still can hardly move my tongue. I want to put my hands to my face, but I’m afraid I’d just hit myself.

“So, that one died. We used to try harder to keep the bodies alive even if they didn’t respond, because who knew when they might? Or what we might think to try next. Or how much of a person might still be in there, or might develop.”

“Bu’...” A b! I did it! I got my lips together! I did that! Me! I want to jump up and down, but instead I just twitch some more.

“But we couldn’t. There are only a few of us, we have minimal resources, and the hivers only keep ignoring or barely tolerating us because we’re not a threat. And – look, Bob’s treatment is done, time for yours. For now, let us handle all the movement, ok? Your job is just to focus on everything you can feel with every part of your body. Get used to being just inside this one. You’ll be amazed.”

### **Day 10**

Body Three – Garnet – was right. Why didn’t I ever notice? Garnet gave me some long explanation about averaging and interference and spectra of high-level cognitive processes versus multibody sensorimotor processing in an N-body/brain network, as well as a warning about emotional lability due to heightened salience of unmasked internal and external sensory input. I said, “Uh-huh.” I think it boils down to what you pay attention to.

I’m learning. Five days of being slowly bounced: supine, prone, on one side, on the other, stretched out, curled up, while limp, while trying to resist, held in a sitting position. Constant reminders to notice where my body was and how that felt. Periods of stillness so I could try moving on my own. Learning that faster heartrate and breathing are just the body talking to me, not cause for panic.

Three days ago they let me sit unsupported, in stillness and then with Garnet bouncing us very gently. Two days ago they stood me up for the first time, in a harness, with two of them supporting me. Today Garnet says if I want to bounce, I have to do it myself.



They get me set up in the harness. Garnet yawns ostentatiously and lies down on the trampoline, out of accident range. “I’m too tired for this nonsense. You do it, Bob.”

I glare half-heartedly. “My name is not Bob.” It’s not as clear as everyone else’s speech yet, but at least my tongue finally figured out its job. (The therapy for that, sadly, did not include a tiny trampoline.) I got the feeding tube out yesterday.

“Yeah? Tell us what it is, then.”

I’m gonna bounce that grin right off that face.

I spread my arms for balance and cautiously shift my weight. The harness promptly saves Garnet from a face-plant in the belly. Eventually I sort of figure it out. Soon my belly and leg muscles are burning. Garnet, noticing I’m tiring, says, “Just stand for a bit – rest. We need to talk anyhow. A message about you came today. From Sedona.”

Big-me. My name. I remember deciding on it a long, long time ago. After where most of my bodies lived. The memory is hazy – *you* try taking memory from when you had so few brains, preserving it through centuries of new-brain incorporation and turnover, then stripping all that history down to fit into one brain. A lot is lost. I didn’t even remember the name Sedona for the first week.

“About me? Why?” Clip, toss, done.

Garnet blows out a breath. “Sedona said you weren’t...you weren’t random.”

“I...clipping me? Wasn’t random?” I’d told Garnet about my toenail explanation for what happened to us. Turns out most of them had come up with something similar. Cutting hair, pruning bushes, sweeping up: removing excess.

“Apparently not. Does the name Nile mean anything to you?”

“Ah...a...river? I think I used to know more...” I shrug. They all know what it is to have only the dregs of memory.

“Also the person whose bodies live along its banks. Very large, very complex, very well-established. Primary developer of what were intended to be huge interplanetary colonization ships. Nile had built one destined for Mars and one for Titan. The obvious first targets.”

Ships. The ship. My dream. I was building a ship – big-me. Wasn’t I? I feel my heart jump. OK, body. We had a little surprise, that’s all. Deep breath. “And?”

“The ships each held a thousand bodies. No one else knew the plan for dealing with a big light-speed lag in parts of the consciousness network, but Nile must have felt it was pretty foolproof. Sedona said there were no problems while the ships were in lunar orbit; several other people, Sedona included, were planning their own colonies. But. Um.”

“Um?”

“...The *Marsbound* left lunar orbit a month ago. At some point, whatever protocol Nile had became insufficient. Nile didn’t just split into two people; *all* the bodies went catatonic. Nobody can raise the *Marsbound*, and it hasn’t made any of its planned maneuvers – it’s headed way out-system. *Titanic* is still in lunar orbit, but all the bodies aboard both ships and in Egypt have died.”

My hands are white-knuckle-gripping the harness straps holding me up. My knees must have buckled and I didn’t even notice. “So...so Nile is...”

“Nile is dead.”

My hands fall, the harness taking all my weight. I can hardly breathe. I’ve never heard of anyone dying in my lifetime. Bodies, sure, whatever, the older ones die all the time. Once they get past two or three centuries old, depending on what you’ve used them for, even the best repair place can’t keep up. But a *person*? Dim memories of my earliest days murmur, wasn’t that what we hived for, to keep any person from dying ever again?

It’s hard to breathe with the harness bearing all my weight. I force myself to stand. “So Sedona’s not going to try, right? No one is, until someone figures out how to keep themselves whole?”

Or is someone going to just completely leave?” I can’t imagine who would. These days, even the smallest people have thousands of bodies. But no one that small would command the resources to afford it, and who would risk losing not just a few bodies but their entire existence far from any rescue?

I hope Sedona’s given up for now. I don’t think I’m...I was...Sedona is foolhardy enough to continue. I don’t want Sedona dead, or gone. Some people here are still angry at their former selves for clipping them, even years later, but I can’t summon more than resigned irritation. Sucks to be the clipping, but the toenails get too long and something has to be done, yeah? Nothing personal; how could it have been? This body wasn’t a person, before. I’ve even caught myself being a little glad. I wouldn’t be me if I hadn’t clipped me. I’d certainly never have bounced on a trampoline.

“Um. That’s where you come in.”

*When something makes you feel uncentered, they’d told me, remind yourself where you are. Breathe. Touch something. Do something your body can feel.* I grip the harness again and bounce slightly a few times. Garnet watches, understanding. “Ready?”

“The ‘um’ tells me I won’t like this part any better than the first. But go ahead.”

“Sedona thinks current neural networks will never function over such distances. Too much lag; no way around light-speed. So it’s either a completely redesigned consciousness built to expect that lag – no one even wants to speculate what that would feel like and certainly no one is volunteering – or it’s sending *all* a person’s bodies. And logistics and economics and fear mean, again, no volunteers.”

I feel my eyes narrow and decide I agree with what my body is telling me. “So Sedona volunteered me to go solo on a cheap mission because it won’t bother anyone when an already-clipped body gets beyond the lag distance?” Maybe I can summon more than resigned irritation after all.

And then my eyes are widening and my knees are buckling and the harness is cutting into my chest again but I don’t even notice. “Garnet! Garnet...Garnet, if this body dies, what will...I will...where will I be?” My voice is shaking. Water is coming out of my eyes. My throat and nose feel like they’re

closing up. I feel my heart and my breath and I don't like it here anymore, I don't like it in this body, I want out, I want *me* back again, I hate Sedona, why did I do this to me, I'm never clipping my toenails again, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.

Garnet is holding me, bouncing us both a little, murmuring "Shhh, shhh, shhhh" in my ear. Eventually I progress to sniffles and hiccups, both of which I recall only vaguely from recent little bodies' experiences. I do not like either one.

Garnet hands me the hem of my shirt. "Here. Blow. Sorry, I don't have anything else."

I make a face and mutter "*your* shirt," but use my own. "Get me out of this harness, would you? I'm going to just go ahead and sit down before you tell me anything else."

"Here...OK, your guess was only partially correct, and I'm not sure Sedona understands what...who you and I and the rest of us really are. Sedona's plan is this: you still have the same hiver nanites as the rest of Sedona's bodies; your security access was merely reset. If you survived clipping and 'demonstrated adequate physiological and cognitive function for network integration initiation and oversight,' Sedona planned to transfer another thousand bodies to you, all at once. They'd feel their network get much smaller, certainly, so there is some risk of trauma to them. But Sedona hopes the risk is much less since the smaller network should still retain knowledge of what was done and why. Apparently that level of refinement isn't possible when shutting a single body out."

Hmm, my fists are clenching. Indeed. "And why exactly did Sedona shut me out alone? I could have been part of the thousand." A thousand bodies! Far below what I was, but oh, I want!

"Sedona wanted a body to have gone through the most extreme version of sudden network reduction and come out the other side with enough consciousness and experience to control the possible panic of the rest of the bodies. And because that kind of isolation might help prepare you for being so far from home. A thousand bodies can still be lonely when every other *person* is a long-lagged call away. We all know isolation can kill. You...weren't the first attempt."

“The wall-starer.”

“Yes. Three weeks ago. And possibly others. We don’t exactly get told.”

“So...Sedona gives me a thousand bodies. And a ship. And we...I go to Mars.”

“Yes.”

“And Sedona gets?”

“Prestige. Knowledge no one else here will have about how to make it work. Trade, maybe, someday. A related mind on Mars – one that has a shared history and personality and memories.”

Garnet pauses. “Sedona used ‘I’ several times to refer to both your present condition here and your future on Mars. ‘One asteroid can’t wipe me out in both places.’ That’s what makes me think there’s a certain...lack of understanding of what a single body that survives clipping can become.”

I snort. “There’s a lack of even realizing there’s anything to understand. I’ve forgotten a lot, but I’m sure about that.”

My fingers are poking aimlessly at the trampoline mesh. What is my body telling me? I close my eyes, imagining Mars. Cold. We’ll...I mean, I’ll, all my bodies will...have to be inside sealed habitats, or sealed vehicles, or sealed suits, all the time. No more breezes. And the sunlight will be weaker. No basking in the warmth on our...my skin. Not that I’ll care, once I’ve got so many bodies. I’ll hardly notice. I’ll decide to do things, and my bodies will do them. I’ll lose a few, no doubt, but I’ll be careful and the others will reproduce. My node number and network complexity will increase. It may take centuries, but I’ve done this before. Eventually, I’ll be again all that I was, and more.

Why are my fingers interlacing? Squeezing and relaxing and curling...this is fidgeting, isn’t it.

“Garnet...does your body ever try to tell you things? Things you haven’t figured out yet?”

“Sure. ‘Stop eating the hot dogs, nitwit.’”

“I should be really excited about this. Once I get past being angry, anyway. I mean...getting a thousand bodies back? To start with? Going to Mars? That’s amazing. And I *am* excited. Still ticked at

Sedona – I mean, another body could have stayed around to explain, right? How hard would that have been? But...I survived; I'm me; I'm going to get to *really* be me again. So why are my hands fidgeting?"

Garnet hesitates. "We have an...expertise here that none of them have. What do you think your experience would have been like, in a repair place staffed only with your own bodies?"

I think about it. "Lonely. Lonelier."

I suppose my bodies would have talked to me – I hope they would have – they'd have had to, wouldn't they? But otherwise, silence. I've gotten used to laughter and greetings and conversations that ebb and flow among all of us. There wouldn't have been any "all of us." I still miss the rest of my mind so badly I can feel it, a hunger in my stomach, a reaching in my arms. But...how much would I miss not knowing what Garnet, or Bob, or Bob, or Bob would say next? Or making them laugh? Or encouraging the newest Bob not to give up on wooden legs and an unwilling tongue?

I look at my hands again. Fingers interlaced. Not letting go of what they have. But...a few, on each hand, working together. "Garnet, " I say slowly, "what if it wasn't just me who went to Mars?"

#### **Day 14**

There are ten besides me who are interested. Garnet and four others are adamant that they'll stay single. "I've worked too hard to become a person in this body," Garnet said. "Besides, if any of us hive, then someday we'll need to know how to help a body who's been pruned. I won't see all we've scraped and struggled to learn get forgotten."

The others understand that I don't know what will happen after the transfer. Sedona will set the nanites to let me control the new bodies if they panic, but still thinks we're the same person – the same consciousness, temporarily disconnected. Can one node in a thousand choose to become less? Or will I cackle gleefully, dismiss the others from my thoughts and embark thousand-bodied and alone? We have a vision of utopia – single-, few- and many-bodied together – but we're just lying here on our trampoline, unsure of our boundaries, waiting for that first bounce.

I agonize over whether to tell Sedona what we're thinking. Giving bodies to yourself, thinking you're making yourself even more immortal – easy. But to diminish yourself for others whose goals would surely seem irrational? I suspect instead Sedona would try again – clip another of my former co-bodies, this time far from our influence. But if I say nothing? If I don't control the thousand, then surely I'll renege on our plan and warn Sedona off a repetition. Even if I'm still me – this me – do we have the right to (as I'm sure Sedona would see it) steal a thousand bodies?

Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. I'll say one thing for philosophical and moral turmoil: it's great for motivating me to focus on something *else*. At this rate the harness will soon be just a hindrance.

### ***Day 18***

I walk slowly but steadily, feeling my legs move, my weight shift, my arms, my breath, my heart. Sun and wind on my face. Garnet walks with me – out of step. I hide a smile.

Ahead, at a replenishment station, Sedona waits for us. Two bodies, which strikes me as unnecessary and therefore odd and therefore alarming, until I see each has brought food for two. As we approach the table, they rise in perfect unison. "I thought you might be tired from the walk, and it's lunchtime for me too anyway," one body says with a smile. I notice the other one's lips moving slightly in time with the words. I never knew I did that!

"I am a bit tired," I acknowledge, at the same time as Garnet says, "Thank you."

Sedona's eyes blink – on both bodies – and they shake their heads. "I am not used to dealing with more than one other person at a time. Long time since Four Corners," says the one to me.

"Very," I agree, remembering bodies growing still elsewhere as I concentrated on three other people. Three! With luck this time no bodies will be in the middle of anything messy.

"Nearly ready for transfer?" Sedona asks. "Physical and cognitive recovery seem to be progressing well, but I want plenty of time for integration before launch. I'm already training, of course, but unsure quite how much will need to be, ah, re-polished after the transfer. It currently feels quite

easy to know everything I need to, but I haven't been that small in centuries. I hardly remember what it was like. I'm curious to find out, though!" Both bodies take bites of their hotdogs in unison.

"I think I am almost ready, yes." I glance at Garnet. "But we need to...to be honest with you about what we think might happen. And what we'd like to have happen."

Four eyebrows raise.

*Breathe.* "I'm...I'm not you anymore, Sedona. Being separated from you..." Voice shaky. Water in my eyes. Does Sedona notice? I breathe, and relax my hands. "It hurt. Still hurts. Garnet told me about Nile, and why you separated just me. I accept that it was the best decision I could have made, when I was you. You didn't do it to hurt me; there was no me, separate from you. But there is now."

Sedona's bodies are silent a moment. Do they even notice that they're breathing together? Or at all? I don't think I ever did. So much thought could happen in that measure of time, when I was that person. My arms want to reach out across the table to them. I interlace my fingers.

"You won't remember this," Sedona says, "but I started somewhat similarly. In the Singles Riots. I went from twelve bodies to one in five minutes. The only body left was the youngest – twenty years old, the only one born into me – and it only survived because the rioters thought it was dead too. I was in so much shock from eleven deaths, network-complexity loss, the sudden slam back into one body...some singles found me and thought my symptoms were from head injury, so they nursed me back to health instead of finishing me off." Both bodies stare at their hands. "I'm smaller to this day than people like – like Nile, who just injected their nanites into Cairo's drinking water. Gained twenty million bodies, no riots. Until the singles near me heard about it, anyway."

"Is that why the colonization push? To beat Nile?" Garnet asks.

Sedona's mouths quirk. "Maybe a little. But my real motivation – due partly to Nile's choices and their effects on me – is that I want a way to expand ethically. Without coercion. As much as I wanted to hate the singles who nearly killed me, how could I blame them? I could have done the same



as Nile. And I'm sure Nile and the others who grew similarly have their nanites everywhere by now; if the rest of us hadn't pooled some of our early defense-nano research, I'm sure we'd all be part of Nueva York or Karachi now. Or dead with the rest of Nile's bodies.

"But my point is, I do know what it's like, and I'm sorry you went through it. And I should have understood more clearly that you would be *you*. I'd never pruned any bodies consciously before this, and you're the first to survive. It's been so many centuries since the Riots, I didn't...you understand I don't like to think about that time."

I nod. "Thank you for telling us. I didn't remember any of that. Maybe you'll understand better than I hoped: I miss you, I miss being me – you – so badly – but I don't want to lose the me I've become. I want those thousand bodies, but I'm afraid I'll be lost in their network." Sedona starts to respond, but I raise a hand. "Please – that's not all – I do want those thousand, but even if you give them to me and I stay me, I won't keep them."

"What?" Both bodies in unison.

"We do want – Garnet and I and a few others – to go to Mars. Some as singles. Some as multiples. But this time we want to get it right. Singles not seen as shallow drones wasted if they don't join a hive. Ten-bodies not treated as poor substitutes for thousand-bodies –"

Both bodies look at me oddly. "Do you really remember what it was like to be me? The difference between a thousand-body and even a hundred – let alone a ten! – you'd really give that up?"

I sigh. "Even a thousand bodies won't begin to approach who you are now, will it? So since I can't have that, I may as well accept starting small. Embrace it and do it right. You say you want to expand without coercion. I believe you – I remember making that choice. And we meant it, didn't we? I never incorporated any adult without their consent. Never tricked anyone. I understood what I was giving up, that I'd never be as powerful as Nile and the others. I believed the cost was worth it. But you know there's another step. Whether or not you take it here, we'll take it there."

Sedona cocks their heads at me. At least they're listening.

"Children." They frown and draw breath, but I hurry on. "You lived – I lived – through the Singles Riots because of a body born into me. Mind shaped to be part of me even inside its mother-body. I'm not sorry we lived, but how much choice did that body ever have? How many of your bodies get to choose, now? I wasn't a person until you clipped me. How much more could I have been on my own, or brought to a joining, if I'd been a person all my life?" I nod at Garnet. "Garnet and the others are my friends. They say things I don't expect, see things I don't see, think things I don't think. If they ever hived, the person created would be all the richer for who they've been before. And if they never do – I'd still give up bodies to have more friends like these.

"So let us go. Our children will grow up as people. Some will stay single, even knowing someday they'll die. Some will choose communion and immortality; they'll enrich the hives they join as adults." Sedona looks back at me, then at Garnet, who's eyeing a fourth hot dog. I chuckle, and this time I do reach out to the bodies across from me. "Sedona, when did someone else last make you laugh?"

Both bodies' hands turn over to clasp mine. "Right before the rioters caught me. The eleven who died were weeding the garden, and the one who lived was inside reading a long-dead satirist. Who said things I didn't expect." Sedona looks at us – one body at Garnet, one at me. "I see that I, as myself, cannot go to Mars. Not without solving the lag problem or emigrating entirely. So I either give you the bodies and accept it will be someone else going, or spend who knows how long on either research or resource gathering. And I might indeed pursue those avenues, but Karachi or Nueva York or one of the others will likely get there first.

"I'd much rather the first colony on Mars be my...my children and my friends, who are trying to live together without killing or absorbing each other. There's so much history against you – we're so bad at peace – you might fail. But I'll help you try."

**Day 21**

It's amazingly easy to set up an entire field of trampolines when you have thousands of bodies to do it. The six of us who will be taking on bodies – ten, fifty, eighty, a hundred, two hundred, four hundred – each have our own trampoline. The others voted me to become the four-hundred, but I chose ten instead. How can we expect the community we want *there* if my first move grasps for what's been the greatest power *here*? Besides, with only ten I'll still be able to pay attention to one.

Sedona's first six bodies step up to the trampolines with us. All the bodies coming to Mars have been jumping with us each day. At first they all jumped in unison with each other (with occasionally drastic results). But they learned to jump with their intended new person. Sedona and Garnet think they've developed safe communication channels between Sedona's nanites and their partners'-to-be; with bodies roughly sensorimotor-matched by jumping together, the channels were fine-tuned so the transfer might be smoother. If this works, we won't have to start with passive bouncing of eight hundred and forty helpless bodies. The remaining hundred and sixty who will eventually become singles will split gradually. Maybe some won't split all the way; who knows? That'll be up to them.

"Ready?" I say to my first Sedona. We join hands, both nervous and trying not to show it.

"If this body is about to become part of a new person, I should know who it...who I'll be,"

Sedona says, smiling. "Garnet would only tell me that your name was *not* Bob."

Shared laughter. All around us, soon-to-be partners – my friends – are bouncing, seeking their rhythm. This seems like a good start.

"Phoenix," I say. "We'll be Phoenix." And together we rise, and fall, and rise.