

## Protons and Electrons

“Um, when we first floated around this idea, I was thinking of a leisurely raft ride, not a full-on kayaking...adventure.”

“Don’t worry, this is an easy section.”

I glanced over at the bone-white, frolicking rapids, just visible past the riverside tree line. The murmuring mass of people we had joined closely resembled the bronco they prepared to ride: loud, colorful, and a little wild. My glance returned to my brother, with his dark, flotation-device tan and his bright red helmet. On his shoulder he casually carried his fancy paddle, the purpose, use, and manufacturer of which I was *definitely* told, but did not retain. These were his people, his world; the world he had dove into after his old one eroded away. Me? I was just a visitor.

Between college and work, I rarely have time for outings like this. Since he became a truck driver, neither has my brother. So we planned this summer trip months in advance. However, it was becomingly increasingly apparent that we each had very different expectation of hazard level.

I hoped my squinted, meaningful glare would convey that my worry had very much *not* been assuaged, however his continued youthful exuberance indicated the message had failed to connect. I sighed, and timidly followed as he introduced me to the members of his crew who had come for this particular outing.

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It’s lunchtime. Everybody is out of the pool and getting food. Too many people. Too many new people. My friends Tim and Abe aren’t here, and I don’t know anyone. My brother

Josh is over there, but he just learned how to swim. He's smiling and splashing. He's having fun; I shouldn't bug him. I'm only five, but he's ten. He and his friends are a lot bigger than me. He wouldn't want me to bug them. He'll start teasing me like he always does, and I'll start crying.

It's too loud here. I'm not hungry, so I'll sit by the pool. Mom always says not to go close to the pool without my floaties. But I'm just sitting. I'm not swimming.

\* \* \*

I'm not sure which waves are faster: the ones in the river or the ones in my stomach. We've stood around for at least an hour, waiting for the river to get to the proper level. I think if we had gone straight in, my nerves would have been fine. I think if all his friends hadn't given me a weird look when I said I had never been kayaking before, I would've been fine. But here we are.

My brother told me how I should hold the paddle, what the proper movements are, some other technical stuff. I wondered if Data ever noticed when he goes into techno-babble mode and everyone around him says, "Huh?" But this isn't Star Trek; I can't just zip around a black hole to hear his tutorial again. He teaches people how to do this all the time; he knows what he's doing. Wish I did.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

It's fine. What's the worst that can happen?

Could be worse, I suppose. I could be home at work doing inventory.

\* \* \*

Rain is starting to pelt down, but I don't care. A frog is stuck in my throat, and I don't want anyone at work to see it. So I'll hide out here in the open parking lot, and push carts up the

hill. As I stand here slowly soaking to the skin, standing in that void between fury and despair, I wonder what to do with her number, still in my phone. I know the woman that had become my sister was completely gone from my life, that who my brother was left with her.

I should delete it.

Part of me wants to call her, to yell and scream that she ruined everything.

Part of me wants to text I'm sorry; I understand; I'll miss you.

But I don't get to decide who keeps me in the divorce; if I hurt this bad, he hurts ten times worse.

Funny how reality has way of crashing back in. You come home from your first spring-break trip, bursting with stories, fresh from one of the greatest adventures of your life. I had barely shaken the sand from my suitcase when my brother came home too, with a suitcase of his own.

He was crying.

I could probably count on one hand how many times I had seen that.

I saw his ring was gone. It was the secret I accidentally let slip to one of her brothers; the only time he ever almost hit me for real. The one I handed to him in front of all our friends and family, attached to vows you hope are never broken. I thought hey did everything right; he did everything right. And now it was just a hunk of metal.

It was one of those moments where all the puzzle pieces that have been building in the back of your mind for the last year finally fall together, and leave you completely shattered.

\* \* \*

Launch in 3...2...1. Off we go!

Oh no.

This isn't like that canoe trip on a placid lake. Or even the ride on the big rubber raft on a river not far from here. At least with the raft there was something substantial between me and the water, plus five other people to fight for control against the rapids.

Here, it's just me, and the rapids are winning the battle.

I tried to remember what he told me, as the current lazily pulled me into its grasp. My efforts only succeed in doing an unintentional 180 degrees, just to see his disappointed face. And now all of his buddies, the ones that have been doing this for twenty years, are looking at me too. Great.

I may be above the water still, but it's getting hard to breathe.

\* \* \*

The water is nice, but the sun is getting hot. I guess I'm hungry now. I hope the food isn't yucky. I stand up and start running towards the house. The tile around the pool is wet and slippery.

Oh no.

I'm falling.

My head is under the water.

The water's in me and I can't breathe.

I kick but I can't feel anything.

I reach for above, and I can't feel anything.

I try to escape, but I fall deeper.

The water's all around me, and I can't breathe.

\* \* \*

"Stop panicking. You're fine."

"I'm not panicking. I just don't know what I'm doing."

“I’m right here. Just hold the paddle like this and stroke like this.”

I tried to do as he instructed, and skillfully managed to almost flip the kayak.

My brother sees my frustration and tries to right the ship. “You’re ok. You’re not going to drown. We’ve got all day.”

As my kayak slowly turned to face him, completely by its own will, I take a breath and look him straight in the eye, “I know I’m ok. But I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. If we keep going for the next four hours we’re both going to be completely miserable. Please help me get to shore.”

My earnestness finally broke through. “Alright, let’s get to shore.”

As we loaded the kayak I was using into his truck, he gave me the keys, some instructions on how to get to the parking lot at the end of the section, and launched back into the river, all as I stammer to wait. Because driving a vehicle that I’m not insured to drive, to somewhere I’ve never been, in the middle of frickin’ nowhere, definitely isn’t my other main anxiety trigger.

As I sat in the driver’s seat, it dawned on me that even though I’m his annoying little brother that just embarrassed the heck out of him, he’s always the one who has the least amount of doubt in me, who trusts me to handle what’s thrown at me, even when I don’t. Especially when I don’t. So, I took a deep breath and cranked the engine.

\* \* \*

It’s certainly smaller than the last one, I think as I stand behind my brother. Twenty people instead of two hundred; benefits of a pandemic wedding. My heart swells as he pulls out the paper he wrote his new vows on, and begins to say them to his beautiful bride in front of him. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but something feels different this time. It just feels...right.

I'm so distracted, I fumble with the rings and almost drop them as I hand them to him. Leading up to the wedding, I had been afraid to ask if I was his best man...again. The first time, I had been a stupid teenager that had kinda pressured him into it. Because obviously he wasn't getting married again and I'd never have a chance again. Because everything always goes according to plan. But a couple weeks ago, he called and said to send his fiancé my shirt and shoe size. I suppose it made sense that he chose me. Everything in his old life, the life that had been at that other wedding, had fallen away. That's why he took up kayaking; it was an adventure that he had never done with her.

He and she were both electrons, bouncing from one adventure to the next. But the negative energy built to the point that they completely repelled each other, and thus, mushroom clouds. I suppose I'm one of his protons, a stable constant that's always there for his return. And so is Sarah; I've never seen him so happy.

As we clink champagne glasses and say a couple toasts, I wish I could completely share his happiness. Even before...last time...I built a lot of walls inside. I don't open up the gate to many people and when she left, the walls got upgraded with searchlights and machine guns. I feel horrible that I can't open up to Sarah like I did with...last time.

But I see the joy she brings to his eyes, as does the little tyke that's the happy package deal with her. It took ten years, and a lot of gentle training (plus a couple less-than-gentle kicks off diving boards) from Josh. I learned to put my head underwater again. I can start to take a pickaxe to those walls.

\* \* \*

Despite my expectations, I safely reached the parking lot and pull into a space. As I begin the long wait for his return, I pull out my phone. My brother is the type to keep an emergency kit

in the bed of his truck; I'm the type to keep an emergency kindle book in my phone. I sip on the warm soda from my packed lunch and see what misadventures Geralt is up to on the Continent.

When he finally pulled in and loaded up, we headed to local burger place. I admit, I was still a *tad* grumpy from sitting in the truck for three hours. He called his new girlfriend, Sarah, and after he recounted our day of misadventures, she asked what he had been thinking, throwing me into the deep end?

I knew I liked her.

As we began to dig into our burgers, which, I have to admit, were pretty darn good, I asked in a teasing way, "So remind me how many hours you spent training on a *still* lake?"

He looked at me rather sheepishly, and we both started laughing.

\* \* \*

Something wraps around me, and I stop falling.

I'm above the water again; I'm pulled to the edge and lifted out.

I cough water out; I can breathe again.

I look at who pulled me out.

It's Josh.

He was watching me the whole time.