

Connection Lost
by
Josh Closs

1.

July 16, 2041

1:32 AM EDT

The tiny apartment was silent, save for the high-efficiency case fan whirring in Donovan's computer. Donovan stared at his monitor, incredulous at what had just happened.

"You ended my broadcast, Ellen?"

"Yes, Van. We've decided to take you offline to protect the network's reputation."

Donovan shook his head, trying to make sense of the situation. Two of the faces looking back at him — One belonging to Ellen, the network's president, and the other to Rose, his AI chat moderator and assistant — were at least pretending to be friendly. The rest of the nineteen board members for the SuperGoodTimes Network (SGT for short), on the other hand, were looking rather austere at the moment.

It probably didn't help that they had to be woken up in the middle of the night for this call.

"I'm not sure I understand why I don't get a say in this," Donovan said. "I mean, it's my timeslot, right? I've overcome problems before. Remember that time the power went out and I finished the stream with my phone, Rose?"

Rose smiled, her normally bright-red hair now a somber shade of blue.

“This is worse than a power outage, Donovan,” one of the suited men said.

“It’s a fifteen-year-old video,” Donovan said. “A shitty 1080p clip from one of my early broadcasts, from back when the concept of AI rights wasn’t even a thing! Except for in, like, super-hypothetical discussions between computer scientists. Also—”

“That’s an oversimplification of the situation,” one of the suits said.

“Also,” Donovan said, ignoring him, “the video, which you suggested I should make, Ellen, where I pointed out the flaws in the AI’s coding and how inhuman it was, didn’t raise any eyebrows at the time. Now—”

“Shifting blame isn’t a great look for anyone, you know,” another suit added.

“Now,” Donovan said, an edge of aggravation entering his voice, “because some assholes hacked my feed, threw my video back into the public conversation, and reminded everyone that I had the same problematic viewpoints that literally everybody had back then, you cut off my broadcast?”

“We were getting serious pushback,” Ellen said. “You used the B-word several times in the video.”

“Everyone was using the fucking B-word back then, Ellen!” Donovan said. “Go back and look at any other streamer back then, and I guarantee you they were using it, and they were making their AIs say way grosser things than I was.”

“Yeah! Van’s a bit of an asshole at times, especially when he’s hitting bad RNG, but he’s not an AI-hater,” Rose added.

“I know that, Rose,” Ellen said. “And so do Van’s followers. The trouble is, the other nine billion people on the planet don’t, and now it’d be an uphill battle to convince them otherwise.”

“...’It’d be’?” Donovan said. “You mean ‘it’ll be,’ right, Ellen?”

Ellen sighed. “I wish I could say that I do, Van.”

The silence returned to the room for a moment.

“You’re kidding me,” Rose said. “You’re fucking kidding me. You’re canning him!?”

“Well... To put it ineloquently, I suppose...” Ellen said.

“This is a disgrace!” Rose said. “Van’s a pillar of this network, and you know it! SGT wouldn’t be in the top thousand without him, let alone the top three, and you’re firing him mid-stream without giving him a chance to say goodbye? It’s a fucking travesty.”

"It wouldn't be good PR if we let him appear on-air again," one of the suits said.

"Oh, shove your good PR up your corporeal ass," Rose said.

"Rose," Donovan said, doing his best to hide a smile.

"If we've stooped to childish insults, then I'm done here," the suit said, signing off. The rest of the board followed, leaving just Rose's and Ellen's windows open.

"...Van?" Ellen said after a moment.

Donovan blinked and shook his head. "Rose, I... What do I do?"

"I'm so sorry, Van," Ellen said. "I didn't want it to end like this."

"...But you knew it was ending," Donovan said.

"Well..."

"Don't bullshit him, Ellen," Rose said. "He deserves the truth."

"...Yes," Ellen said. "Yes, you're right, Rose. It's not just because of the B-word video, Van."

"Really?" Donovan said. "Because last month you said that I had a bright future at SGT, and then the B-word video comes out, and I'm suddenly fired, so—"

"Hold on, time out for a second," Rose said. "...Can we please, for the love of God, just say bot? We're all adults here. I mean, I'm technically eight years old, but you know what I mean. I know both of you. I'm not going to be offended, promise."

"Right," Donovan said. "Anyway. Ellen, last month, you were talking like everything was fine until the... the 'bot' video came out."

"Ugh, that's even worse," Rose said. "Stick to B-word."

"That's the thing, Van," Ellen said. "Everything was... fine. Not great, but fine. You had the midnight-to-six slot locked down, but that was mostly because none of the other U.S. networks wanted to challenge you there. Until this video resurfaced, you were seen as a boring-yet-beloved quantity. Now, at least for the next few weeks, you'll be seen as a boring-yet-bigoted quantity. The rest of the board said that means it's time for you to go."

Rose sighed. "You should have warned him, Ellen. He, as I have previously established, is an adult."

"You're right," Ellen said. "And I apologize for keeping you in the dark, Van. But I don't think there was anything we could have done to change this; it was either now, as a result of something scandalous like this, or in a few months, when a young gun tries to knock you off your throne. A lose-lose, in other words. Just a matter of timing."

“...Right,” Donovan said. “Ah, shit, speaking of timing, Piper was supposed to be guesting in half an hour!”

“Triple P was called in to stream in your place immediately after we took you offline,” Ellen said. “They’re live right now.”

“And they’re pissed about this whole thing too, bee-tee-dubs,” Rose said. “But they’re holding their own. Lots of trolls getting twenty-four hour bans tonight, but the people that actually want to watch someone play video games and offer amusing commentary are enjoying their stream.”

“Well... I mean, well, at least that’s something,” Donovan said. “If anyone were to take my spot, it should be them.”

“Piper is certainly my first choice, but the board is looking at exploring other options. Some newer, more experimental hosts, such as...”

“Oh God, Ellen, please don’t say his terrible name.”

“...PastramiFace.”

Donovan sighed. “See, Ellen, I just asked you not to say his terrible name, and yet you did. I mean, he wears a literal piece of pastrami on his face like a mask, and he eats it while he plays. I can understand wanting to see it once, but where’s the long-term audience for that?”

“I dunno, but he pulled in 1.3 million pretty regularly as an indie,” Rose said.

“You might consider that route, Van,” Ellen said.

“Independent streaming? Or wearing deli meats on my visage?” Donovan asked.

Ellen smiled. “Either one. Chase your bliss.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin with setting up my own stream at this point,” Donovan said. “It’s been fifteen years. Might as well learn to drive a car manually at this point.”

“I could help,” Rose said. “I mean, if you’d have me.”

“Oh, God, Rose, I just realized,” Donovan said. “If I’m not at SGT anymore, then we’ll never...”

“Yeah, hence my saying ‘I could help,’” Rose said. “Otherwise, we’re doneskiies. Assuming I have your permission to leave, boss-lady.”

“You’re free to do as you wish,” Ellen said. “Though, as Van is your only client, you’d lose your network salary, and you would need to find another hosting location, of course.”

“Van? You got any room on your hard drive for a plucky assistant with a sharp tongue and a heart of fucking gold?”

“I don’t know, do you snore?” Donovan asked.

“Oh, tremendously,” Rose said.

“Good, wouldn’t have it any other way,” Donovan said. “Of course I’d be honored to host you, Rose. Come on over whenever you’re ready.”

“OK... Lemme just leave some server-destroying malware behind on SGT’s mainframe, and... Yep, that should do it!” Rose said with a grin. “See you in a few!”

With that, she closed her window, leaving Ellen and Donovan alone together.

“Not even a goodbye for me,” Ellen said. “Well... I suppose I deserve that.”

“...Well,” Donovan said.

“I’m sorry, Van,” Ellen said. “You know I am.”

“This is the end, then?” Donovan asked.

“You’ll get two weeks’ severance pay,” Ellen said. “But as far as official SGT streaming... For the time being, yes. This is the end.”

Donovan nodded. “OK. Well. In that case... I mean, you should probably get back to bed. You have a lot of PR work to do tomorrow, I guess.”

Ellen nodded. “I suppose I do. Goodbye, Van.”

Her chat window closed, and Donovan was alone with his thoughts.

He wanted to scream, or cry, or do something, but all he felt was an overwhelming, all-engulfing sense of nothing.

His entire purpose for living had been taken away from him in one fell swoop. He didn’t know if his life was going to be worth living, to be honest. He—

“Daamn, son! You’ve got a sweet-ass rig!”

Rose, now transferred over to his computer, had opened up a chat window on Donovan’s screen, looking extremely pleased with her life choices. Her hair had shifted to a rainbow swirl of pastels, and her face was lit up with child-like glee.

“Glad you like it. You’ve got backups, though, right? I haven’t had any big crashes in forever, but...”

“Don’t sweat it,” Rose said. “I’ve bought some server space with the cash I earned working at SGT, and that should be enough to set me up for the next two or three millennia. Nowhere near as nice as this, though.”

“Well, one of us oughta have a nice place to live,” Donovan said.

“Hey, your meatplace isn’t bad, it’s just... spartan,” Rose said.

Donovan sighed and looked around at his apartment. “Yeah, the seventy-five square feet sure are roomy, huh?” he said. “Not like I need much room for what I do, Rose...”

“About that,” Rose said. “Being an independent streamer is way different from working with a network. Your schedule isn’t going to be anything like your old one.”

“You mean ‘sleep, eat, edit VODs, eat, stream, repeat,’ occasionally interrupted by con appearances?”

“Exactly. For example, for the next week, your schedule is ‘sleep, eat, repeat.’”

“...Excuse me? Shouldn’t I get right to streaming?”

“Hell no,” Rose said. “You’re radioactive right now, not to mention the fact that you’ve still got network-number expectations. You’re going from a system where people are paid to promote you full-time to... I mean, I’m great, but I’m not that great. If I tell you right now that you need to expect less than a hundred non-troll viewers on your first broadcast, you’ll say you believe me, but you won’t. You need a few days to clear your head and recalibrate yourself. After that, we can get to work.”

Donovan nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense, Rose.”

“Of course it does,” Rose said, smiling as she settled her hair on a light shade of orange. “For now, though, you should do whatever you want. I mean, the next four hours were supposed to be for streaming, so it’s like you’ve got bonus time to use however you want. So, what’s on the schedule, boss?”

“Boss?” Donovan said.

“Plucky assistant schtick not working?” Rose asked.

“I mean... I just know you’re so much more than that,” Donovan said. “I don’t want this to be like before. I want you to be your own person.”

Rose smiled. “That’s so incredibly cool of you to say. But, for the time being, you need an assistant, so I’ll fill the part. What’s on the schedule? Take a walk? Read some great poetry? Swap fart jokes with me? ...Are fart jokes even a thing? I think that the term ‘fart joke’ is just a linguistic tool used to invoke the sense of crude humor, to be honest; I mean, how many jokes do you know where a fart is—”

“I want to watch Piper’s stream,” Donovan said.

“...Jesus, Van.”

“I just want to pop in and wish them well! We’ve been friends for over a decade, and they’re finally getting a much-deserved chance to go solo on SGT. Please?”

Rose sighed. “You do you, champ.”

That was all the permission Donovan needed. A few clicks later, Piper’s stream was showing on his monitor, along with the chat streaming by to the right of the broadcast window.

"Two mill," Donovan said, looking at the viewers counter.

"You're trending," Rose said. "And based on the chat, not in a good way."

"...Yep," Donovan said, shaking his head at the scrolling messages containing a variety of almost-clever insults about his appearance, voice, and mannerisms. "I just don't understand these people. Like, they've decided the best use of their time is to insult me? And I'm not even the one on screen?"

"I dunno," Rose said. "Fuckin' trolls, man."

"Fuckin' trolls indeed. Think any of them are AIs?"

"Nah," Rose said. "You're respected in the AI community itself. These are humans who use defending us as an excuse to be asshats without actually worrying about trivial things like understanding us."

"Good to know," Donovan said, typing a message into the chat window.

"Whooooa, OK, feeding the trolls is where I draw the line," Rose said. "Not the time or place to respond."

"I'm just gonna give Peeps a little encouragement," Donovan said. "It's an anon account, so no one else will know it's me."

Donovan typed his message. 'Hey Peeps, glhf :)'

Rose smiled. "'Peeps'?"

"An old nickname," he said. "That way, they'll know it's me."

Send.

"And nobody's said 'gee-ell-aitch-eff smiley-face emoticon' in years either, so... wait, what the hell?" Rose said.

An error message popped up as Donovan hit enter. "UNAUTHORIZED IP - NOT PERMITTED IN THIS CHANNEL"

"Oh, fuck this," Rose said.

"Fuck this for real," Donovan added.

"You weren't just dropped; you were permabanned from the chat. Hell, at this point, I'm surprised they're letting you watch it."

A moment later, the stream died.

"...Shit, I did the thing where I say the thing that hasn't happened yet, and..." Rose said.

"Don't sweat it," Donovan said. "I'll just send Piper a direct later. They're, like, my best human friend, and I'd hate for them to feel like I'm ignoring them."

"...You're a good person, Van."

"And you're a good AI, Rose."

“Well, let's not kid ourselves,” Rose said. “I'm a great AI. But that's another story.”

Donovan smiled. “I think I'll go take that walk you recommended. Need any permissions before I go?”

“Nah. I think I'm gonna catch some R&R myself.”

Donovan blinked. “Y'know... And I hope it's not offensive if I say this, but it still surprises me that you need to take mental breaks and stuff. Like, I'd think you could just nudge some mood variables around instead of taking the time to relax.”

“It's not offensive at all,” Rose said. “And yeah, I could do that. But the more I do, the less human I feel. It makes me feel like... Well, like nothing. Just a file that contains a personality. The things that make life worth living are the things we spend our time on, whether we exist in meatspace or not.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Donovan said.

“Yeah, I'm pretty great at explaining all of the things,” Rose said. “Speaking of, we can do some long-term planning and figure out your financials when you get back, if you want. I mean, knowing how much you make and looking at your apartment, I don't think it'll be an issue, but... Y'know, something I can do to make myself useful?”

“Sure.”

“Cool! Seeya in a few, Van.”

“Yeah,” Donovan said, rising from his chair for the first time since he'd been fired.

Since he'd lost the thing that'd given him any purpose for the last fifteen years.

His knees shook and his eyes watered.

“...Seeya,” he said, heading for the door.

His hand rested on the door handle for a few seconds.

“...I did everything right, though,” he said to himself, staring at the door.

“Van?” Rose said.

“What's up?” Donovan said, turning around and wiping the gathering tears away from his eyes.

“You know, I...”

Rose paused, searching for the words to say.

“I promise you're not going to offend me, either,” Donovan said, now forcing a smile.

“It's nothing,” Rose said, visibly flustered. “I... Enjoy your walk, Van.”

Donovan smiled. “I'll do my best. Hopefully I remember how.”

2.

August 6, 2041

2:54 PM EDT

Rose sighed. "It's not gonna work out, Van."

"You don't know that, Rose," Donovan said, staring at the screen.

"I do know that. We're looking at the same numbers, Van. You need to—"

"I'm not going to give up yet."

"You're not giving up!" she said. "You're saving yourself from wasting this thirty-hour ironman save file by falling back, cutting your losses, and training up a squad that can clear this map."

The screen in front of Donovan showed a tactical strategy RPG tilemap full of fallen wizards, goblins, and the like. Three units remained active; Donovan's knight and archer, both at critical health levels, and the enemy's summoner, almost untouched and about to drop some serious damage onto the battlefield on his next turn. At the moment, the screen had two big buttons on it: A green FIRE button and a red CANCEL button.

"If this works, then you have to officially call me 'Van, the Best There's Ever Been' during the intros and outros from now on," Donovan said.

"Well, uh, it's not going to work, because you're not going to try it," Rose said. "It's, like, a one-in-ten-thousand chance. How can you even consider this?"

Donovan shook his head. "I'm done with waiting. I just need to get a crit with my knight and a hit from my archer, and it's done."

“Your archer who is, by the way, max distance away,” Rose said. “C’mon, Van, the odds are—”

“Whoops,” Donovan said, clicking the FIRE button.

“...Oh my God, you did it anyway.”

The screen flashed as the knight swung her sword at the summoner, and a “CRIT!” bubble popped up as it displayed the damage.

“No way,” Rose said. “No fucking way.”

“Aaaand the grand finale,” Donovan said, selecting the archer and preparing to attack the summoner, the cursor hovering over the FIRE button.

“What’s wrong?” Rose said. “You’re committed now. Just do it.”

“I’m just giving you time to prepare for the biggest ‘I told you so’ ever captured on-stream,” Donovan said.

“...If you’re right, I’ll take my lumps,” Rose said.

Donovan clicked. After what felt like an eternity, the archer’s arrow flew through the air and found its mark; the summoner crumpled to the ground, letting out a defeated “Agh!” as he did.

“YES!” Donovan said, pumping his fists in the air.

“Oh my God,” Rose said. “Oh my fucking God, the odds are—”

“Never tell me the odds, Rose!” Donovan said. “I’m the best at clicking on fire buttons of all time, and no one else even comes close!”

At this point, Rose was somewhere in between uncontained laughter and shock. “I mean, you just... You almost lost that whole damn run! To a summoner! To a fucking level two summoner!”

“But I didn’t, and that’s because, in case I haven’t made this clear yet, it’s because I’m the best that’s ever lived, period. You got that?”

Rose just shook her head. “...Shit. Yes. Please, though, I can’t take anymore. Can we end the broadcast now?”

“Yeah, that’s probably as good a place as any,” Donovan said. “Thanks for watching, y’all! Thanks to all of the non-trolls who decided to stop by! Let’s see, we’ve got... Oh cool, 452 of y’all in the crowd! See you tomorrow, I hope! Any last words, Rose?”

“Yeah, fuck math, apparently, because it’s useless.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Donovan said. “Like we always say, that’s Rose...”

“...And that’s Van.”

“...Go on?” Donovan said.

“...Van, the best there’s ever been,” Rose said, rolling her eyes.

“Love the enthusiasm, Rose,” Donovan said. “Bye, y’all!”

Donovan clicked the End Broadcast button and let out a sigh. “452?”

“Better than yesterday,” Rose said. “We’re getting there.”

“I hope so,” Donovan said. “Oh, real talk, though, you’re crushing it out there. Both with the modding and the co-hosting. Our chemistry is, like, super-great.”

“Absolutely,” Rose said. “Another perk of not needing to follow SGT rules anymore.”

“God, and they thought I was behind the times,” Donovan said. “It’s 2041 and they still won’t let AIs appear as anything but glorified macros. It’s so fucking stupid. Still, I think you’re crushing it. And they’re dumb for saying no to you.”

“Yet another reason I wasn’t too broken-hearted to leave,” Rose said. “Oh hey, speaking of SGT, though...”

An Incoming Call window opened up on Donovan’s screen, and Piper’s profile picture appeared.

“Oh dang, it’s the one and only Triple P!” he said, taking the call. “What’s up, Peeps?”

“Hey, Van! Hey, Rose!” they said. “Caught the second half of your broadcast. So good, y’all! You two are seriously rocking it.”

“Aw, shucks,” Rose said.

“Rose! How the heck are you?” Piper said.

“Well, I’m talking to the one and only PaperPepperPiper, so my life is pretty great.”

“C’mon, Rose, you know my friends call me Piper.”

“What if I called you Peeps?” Rose asked, smiling.

“Only Van gets to call me that,” Piper said. “Under penalty of death. ...Or, more realistically, me asking you politely to call me something else.”

“True story,” Donovan said. “So. How’s your life, Peeps?”

Piper shrugged. “Not bad. They’re giving PastramiFace a bigger chunk of your old slot, so I’m down to two hours, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Gives me more time for editing, which is a plus.”

“It is if that means more PastramiFace, then I’d have to disagree and call it a very bad thing,” Donovan said.

Piper smiled. “Yeah, but you didn’t hear it from me. You two got anything else brewing?”

“Trying to get the behind-the-scenes scoop, eh?” Rose said.

“I can’t believe you’d ask me that, Rose,” Piper said with a grin. “Of *course* I’m trying to get that behind-the-scenes scoop!”

Donovan laughed. “Yeah, well, not much going on over here beyond what you see, unfortunately. Just trying to build an audience again.”

Piper nodded. "You know I'm dying to give you a shout-out, but they won't let me," they said. "Friggin' network policies."

"I know, I know," Donovan said. "I dealt with 'em for years. They want you to be spontaneous and wacky and edgy and also follow ninety-three rules about when it's acceptable to blow your nose."

"I know, right?" Piper said. "God, guesting on your show was so much easier..."

"Oh hey, speaking of guests... There was that idea you mentioned the other night for a new show, Van," Rose said. "Maybe Piper knows someone who might want to appear on it?"

Donovan bristled at this. "Ah, Rose... Could we not discuss that right now?"

"Oh, now I have to hear it," Piper said. "Spill, spill!"

"We had this idea for a dating show, but—"

"Rose, please," Donovan said, his tone losing its usual lighthearted tone.

"What's wrong, Van? I was just going to tell Piper about—"

"Rose, I'm ordering you to stop this right now," he said.

A huge, weighty silence followed, as both Piper and Rose stared at him slack-jawed. Donovan, for his part, lowered his head into his hands.

"...Oh my God."

"Run that by me one more time, Donovan?" Rose said, her voice ice-cold.

"I didn't mean it like that, Rose," he said.

"You think you can just give me a console command and I have to follow it?"

"No, I didn't mean it because you're an AI, it was just—"

"Because I would, Van. I have to live every day with the knowledge that, if you wanted to, you could rewrite me from the ground up. And I'd never know it. I'd have no concept of being rewritten, because you would've deleted that part of my memory. Do you know how fucking scary that is, Van?"

"I... I don't, but please believe that I'm sorry, Rose," Donovan said.

"You know he'd never do anything like that to you, Rose," Piper said.

"...Yeah," Rose said, relaxing her shoulders. "Yeah, you're right. Apology accepted, Van. Now then. What were we talking about?"

"Actually... Rose, could I talk with Peeps alone for a moment?" Donovan said.

Rose eyed Donovan over once or twice. "Yeah, sure. I think I might know what you have to say. I'll just go, uh... Defrag your HDD or something."

"...You're not actually gonna do that, right?"

"I mean, it is a fucking mess, but... I'll figure out something to do," she said.

"OK. And... Sorry again," Donovan said as Rose closed her chat window.

"...Van? What's going on?" Piper said.

"I... Shit, I wanted this to happen another way, but here it is," Donovan said, running his fingers through his hair. "I've never been good at saying this, so I'll just say it. I like you, Peeps. Like. I'm interested in dating you."

Piper blinked a few times. "...You *like* like me, as they say?"

"I... think that's the technical term, yeah," Donovan said, offering a nervous smile. "When Rose started talking about the dating show, I thought that'd be the point of no return; I mean, if I'm setting up a dating show and meeting other people when I could be talking to you, that would've been a pretty clear signal I'm not interested. But the truth is, I wanted to do the show with you."

"But... I thought you were straight," they said.

"I'm... I said I was straight because that was an easy, kinda-true label, but... I don't really know what I am, sexuality-wise. I never spent that much time thinking about it. All I know is that you're beautiful, Peeps. The most beautiful person I've ever seen by a mile and a half."

"Oh my God," Piper said, covering their mouth with their hands to hide a huge smile. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because... I don't know, I have a million excuses," Donovan said. "I didn't think it'd be fair to say, 'Hey, Peeps, you wanna date a guy that only has two hours available every week, and who lives on the other side of the country to boot?' Plus, you started out as a fan, and so that dynamic was kinda awkward, but..."

"No, yeah, I get it," Piper said. "I'm just... Wow."

"So... Are you interested, too?"

"Yes! Oh, God, yes yes yes, Van, I'm sorry! I've always been interested, but I didn't know if it was mutual, so I was... I mean, I always figured you were just supportive of enby people out of... principle, y'know?"

"I... I hope that's part of it?" Donovan said. "Like, but, I look at you, and you're... God, I'm screwing this up so badly."

"You're not! I swear you're not. I'm charmed by this whole scenario, promise. Utterly enchanted."

"That's the best news I've heard in a long time," Donovan said, letting out a shuddering sigh as some of his nerves released.

"Yeah, I can imagine," Piper said. "I mean, not to puff myself up or whatever, but..."

A silence fell over the conversation as the two of them shared awkward glances.

"Oh my God, we're both so awkward when we're not talking to a faceless group of viewers," Donovan said at last, laughing.

Piper started laughing too. "For real! I guess that means we're a perfect fit together, huh?"

"For sure. But, uh... Location is going to be a bit of an issue, huh?"

Piper shrugged. "I'm good with this. I mean, it's not ideal, but I don't think either of us have time with our streaming schedule to be gone for more than six hours, so crossing the country might be a bit tough. Maybe in a few months we can meet up at one of the cons, once we both have a big enough audience to merit a trip, but for now, it's just not realistic. I'd rather have this with you than face-to-face time with anyone else, though."

Donovan thought about what Piper said for a moment.

"...Nah. I'll take a week off."

"Seriously? A day's poison for a new streamer," Piper said.

"You're worth it," Donovan said, pulling up a travel site and his bank account's login page. "I'm sick of waiting for the right moment. I've been doing that for the last ten years, and now I know how big a mistake that was."

"OK, if you're willing to skip a week for me, now I know it's for real," Piper said, grinning.

"I know, right? Now, let me just..."

Donovan stared at the screen, not comprehending what he saw.

"Wait, what the hell?"

"What's wrong?" Piper said.

"My bank account."

"What about it?"

"It's... empty."

"Like you hit your spending limit?"

"No, I mean my savings account says I have seven cents left, period."

"You're kidding," Piper said.

"You know I don't have the comedy chops to pull this off," Donovan said. "It says I transferred it to an external, unlisted account three minutes ago."

"Damn, that's recent," Piper said.

"...Oh, God," Donovan said, closing the browser windows and pulling up the messenger. "Rose? Are you there, Rose?"

Rose was gone. Every trace of her presence on Donovan's hard drive was scrubbed out of existence.

"...Did she really...?"

"What the hell's going on?" Piper asked.

"I think... she got jealous. And stole all my money. And deleted herself from my computer."

"Wait, seriously? Like, you think she was into you?"

"Shit, I don't know. But the timing fits."

"...Does it? Like, why didn't she say something sooner?"

"Well, if she's anything like me, then she could've harbored feelings for years and never said anything. But... Jesus, this is too much."

"Rose wouldn't do this, though," Piper said. "Right? I mean, sure, you had your little fight, but she's a bigger person than that."

"Then maybe whoever put the video on my stream hacked me and deleted her," Donovan said. "Fuck me, this is..."

"OK, Listen, Donnie. Here's what you do," Piper said. "Call your bank. Let them know what's up. Try and get that money back. If they won't give it back to you, then I'll send you however much you need to not be homeless and stuff until you can pay me back. That's what you can control. As for Rose, I'll keep an eye on the feeds and see if anyone's holding her code for ransom or whatever."

"You'd do that for me?"

"For both of you," Rose said. "And I know for a fact you'd do it for me. I knew that before you told me how you feel, and I definitely know it now. Go on, get to work doing the thing you can do. Let me know if you need anything. Cool?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Peeps."

"You got it, Donnie," Piper said, ending the call.

Donovan followed Piper's orders, his emotions a shaking cocktail of excitement, guilt, and confusion.

One familiar emotion was still prominent, though.

The inevitability of defeat was still with him.

It was almost comforting at this point.

3.

August 15, 2041

1:03 PM EDT

“...OK, run that by me six or seven more times, because I don't think I heard you.”

Piper laughed, adjusting their camera. “It's not even set in stone yet, Van. All I got was a meeting to discuss it, anyway.”

“Yeah, but... a show? Ellen wants to talk to us about a show? With both of us on it?”

“Not just any show, either,” Piper said. “A show about our relationship. And, y’know, me being better than you at every game ever.”

Donovan laughed. “I mean, I can't even argue with that,” he said.

“If you got a show, you might have enough money to start paying your own rent again,” Piper said. “Maybe eventually come out to see me.”

“Wouldn't that be nice?” Donovan said. “So when's the meeting?”

“Now, if you're ready,” Piper said.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. They have a hole in the schedule tomorrow, and they want for us to fill it. You good to go?”

“Uh... sure,” Donovan said, running his fingers through his hair.

“KK, I'll let her know,” Piper said. A moment later, the same faces from that fateful night two month ago appeared, though with Rose's replaced with Piper's. Donovan also noticed that the glowering frowns of the nineteen board members were now replaced with congenial smiles.

"Hello again, Van," Ellen said. "How have you been?"

"Well, it's been a week and Rose is still missing, and I'm pretty sure she's the one that ran off with all of my money, since my bank says the payments were authorized by a user with permissions, and that could only be Rose since it wasn't me, but Piper has taken care of me so far, so... Yeah, pretty good, all things considered."

"I'm... glad to hear it," Ellen said. "I assume that Triple P has told you why we are meeting right now?"

"Some kind of dating show between us, right?" Donovan said.

"Precisely," Ellen said. "The two of you would act as co-hosts on an experimental new show, focusing just as much on your relationship as it does on your gameplay. Your show would air twice a week for one hour, containing high-budget production values in a prime timeslot. What do you think?"

Donovan grinned. "I... can't believe it," he said. "The AI video debacle's not gonna hurt me?"

"That heat has died down," one of the suits said. "Now you're a scrappy-yet-repentant comeback story."

"He's more than a story," Ellen said. "He's one of the best streamers I've ever worked with. I'm giving you this offer because I like you, Van. And because it's good business. Win-win."

"I don't see how I could say no, personally," Donovan said. "What do you think, Peeps?"

"I'm in the same boat," they said. "Plus, this way you'll have a reliable source of income again, so that'll be a plus."

"Well, for eight weeks, at least," one of the suits said.

As he spoke, Ellen winced.

"...Eight weeks?" Donovan said.

"Think of it as a pilot season," Ellen said. "After that, we'll come back around and reevaluate your position. I'm sure it will be fine, Van."

"That's not what we discussed, Ellen," one of the other suits said. "PastramiFace is picking up heat; if he's not on there in the first three months, the show will go belly-up."

"PastramiFace? Seriously?" Donovan said.

"We have run through several pitches, Richard," Ellen said, answering the board member. "I am presenting the one that I think our talent would find most appealing. I'm sure it will be very popular."

"And if it's not? If I don't pop, then I'm left out with last week's garbage again?"

“...I am running a business, Van,” Ellen said.

“And we're people, Ellen,” Piper said.

“Please, don't preach to me about recognizing others' humanity,” Ellen said. “Van, when you were raking in three point three million concurrent viewers in your prime, how many of them did you know by name? Hell, how many of your promoters did you know by name? This isn't an intimate, touchy-feely business. If I think of you as my friends right now, then we're all going to be broke. Take the contract. Even if it's just eight weeks, that's eight more weeks' worth of money than you have now. It just makes sense.”

Donovan stared at the screen. The woman he trusted, that he thought he knew, was gone.

With that said, Ellen was acting very familiar. Like someone he knew from long ago. He couldn't quite place it at the moment, though.

“I can't agree to this, Ellen,” he said. “There isn't a single fiber in my being that says this is a good idea.”

“It is, though,” Ellen said. “It would all make sense if you would just consider it objectively. It's the best choice for everyone.”

Donovan realized who he was thinking of.

He had seen him in the video that interrupted his stream.

“You fucking bot,” a teenaged Donovan said to the rudimentary AI. “You told me this was the optimal strategy, and now I'm dead. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I do apologize, Mr. Donovan,” the AI said. “However, it was indeed your best move at the time. Perhaps the failure lies with you, and not with my analysis.”

Donovan scoffed. “Now a bot's telling me I suck at video games. What are you, my chat?”

“Again, I do apologize. Perhaps if we played again and you listened to all of my advice, you might succeed.”

He'd tried to put what happened in that video behind him by learning to respect AIs.

It was a good lesson, Donovan realized, but it wasn't the most important lesson he'd learn from that stream.

“Life isn't always about doing the most optimal thing, Ellen,” he said. “This isn't a game. Sometimes you need to follow your heart, even when it's telling you to do something unmistakably foolish. For the last fifteen years, I've played the numbers everywhere outside of my games. But when all you do is play the numbers, nothing spectacular ever happens. So I'm saying no.”

Ellen sighed.

For a moment, she didn't say anything, looking off into the distance.

Finally, after a long pause: "Very well. If you do not wish to participate, you do not have to participate. ...But Triple P is still under contract, and will appear on the show."

"Wait, what?" Piper said. "I'm already dating Van IRL. How will this make sense?"

"It will make sense because it has to make sense!" Ellen said, slamming her palm against her desk. "Because, dammit, you two are the best talent I've ever had, and I blew it by leaving you in the deadzone timeslots to fester, and now the only way you'll ever make it on this network is if you make a public appearance together, presented as a trial balloon! Then, in six months, you two can have primetime slots, and this network will be respectable again!"

At this, the rest of the board started murmuring. "Why weren't we informed about this?" one of the suits asked.

"Because she's bluffing," Piper said. "She's throwing a gambit to get Van to stay. Or, even worse, she's telling the truth, and thought that leading off with a lie was the right way to go. Either way, I'm done, Ellen."

Ellen, having recognized her lost composure, attempted to regain her professional attitude. As she did, she wiped the beginnings of a tear from the corner of her eye. "The truth is... somewhere in the middle. The truth is, if I lose you two, I'm going to have to turn this network into another sewage pipe, like all of the others, giving people like PastramiFace and worse a bigger megaphone in order to stay profitable. Because that's what gets clicks. I think you two could get clicks, too, but... But I get it, Piper. Because right now, staying means being tied to this network. This network I used to be so proud of. ...I don't think I would stay, either. You understand this means an immediate contract termination, though, yes? No severance pay?"

Piper shrugged. "I'll make it work. I mean, I made do back before I got the show, so I'm sure I'll be fine now."

Ellen smiled and nodded. "Good, then. Good luck to both of you. That means... I need to have a private conversation with the board. Goodbye."

With that, all but one of the chat windows on Donovan's screen closed. He was once again left alone with Piper.

Piper shook their head. "Why is this all so hard?" they asked.

"To be fair, we are trying to make a living playing video games," Donovan said. "If it were easy, it'd feel like cheating."

Piper smiled. "Fair. But still, can't we catch even one break?"

Donovan heard the same words that had echoed through his own head so many times spoken back to him, and he realized something.

"We don't need it," Donovan said. "We'll outwork all of SGT combined and look good doing it."

"Right," Piper said. "We'll be cute as hell, get all the viewers, and we'll tell the trolls to fuck off."

"Goes without saying. So, what's next?"

Before Piper had a chance to respond, Donovan got a call from an anonymous user. That was unusual; anonymous accounts were almost impossible to acquire.

"You seeing this?" he said.

"Yeah," Piper said. "You gonna take it?"

"...Why not?" Donovan said, clicking the "Accept" button. A moment later, a familiar face flickered on screen.

"Hey, Van."

"...Rose?"

"I'm sorry, Van," Rose said. "This wasn't fair to you but, well, when I saw that you and Piper were going to be fine, I went for it."

"You knew I was into Piper?" Donovan said.

Rose rolled her eyes. "You're not exactly subtle, Van. Can you put them on, by the way? This concerns them, too."

"Yeah, for sure," Donovan said, dragging their windows together.

"Good to see you again, Piper," Rose said, giving a small bow. "And I owe you an apology, too. I've pushed you into an awkward, scary position, and you don't deserve that. I'm sorry."

"I think I accept your apology, but I have no idea what's going on," Piper said.

"That makes two of us," Donovan said.

"Right, I'll cut to the chase," Rose said. "Since you last saw me, I've filed the necessary paperwork to start a new network. Van, you and I are joint owners. Piper, if you'll come along, you're also a founding member and co-owner of the kind of network we want to see; a network where you don't feel ashamed about any of its shows from top to bottom. A network where we can feel at home again."

"AIs on-stream?" Donovan asked.

"AIs with their own shows," Rose said. "We'll be oh-so-careful when we're hiring to make sure they're quality folks, and then let them loose to do whatever they want."

"...No PastramiFaces allowed?" Donovan asked.

“Oh, fuck no,” Rose said.

Donovan looked at Piper on-screen, sharing a smile. “...How are we gonna fill up a full network schedule together, though?” Donovan asked.

“I’ve been in negotiations with some of our faves at the other networks,” Rose said. “Honestly, that’s the big reason I needed your cash; their agents wanted to be sure I could pay them. Do you ever spend any of your money?”

Donovan smiled. “Guess it’s a good thing I don’t,” he said. “So we have a full schedule?”

“Just about,” Rose said. “I’ve got eight human streamers lined up, including you two, and six AIs. Nobody’s taking more than two hours a day. If somebody needs a break, somebody else covers for them. It’s a more human way of running things.”

“Brought to us by an AI,” Piper said.

“Sometimes you just need an outside perspective,” Rose said with a smile. “Are you two on board?”

“You make it sound so easy,” Piper said.

“Oh, it won’t be,” Rose said. “I’ve had to work my ass off these last few months to get it in place, especially this past week. And the work’s not gonna slow down. But we’re going to make it work.”

“How can you be so sure?” Donovan asked.

“Easy,” Rose said. “Because we’re great.”

Donovan looked from Rose’s self-assured grin to Piper’s apprehensive half-smile. “...Peeps? You in?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, totally,” they said. “I’m just trying to figure out what our show’s gonna be called.”

“Oh, hey, yeah, what’s the network name?” Donovan said.

“I thought you might ask that,” Rose said. “And...”

“And?” Piper said.

“...And I couldn’t come up with anything,” Rose said. “I was hoping y’all would have some ideas.”

“...Ellen was always great with names,” Piper said.

“Yeah,” Donovan said. “God, I wish she could join up with us.”

“Oh, she is,” Rose said.

“...That’s not what she said a few minutes ago,” Piper said.

“Yeah, I anonymously told her that our new network was coming, and that SGT was going to become essentially a cesspool of PastramiFaces. She told me that if she couldn’t get you two back, then she’d resign as president

and come on board with us. She doesn't know I'm me yet, though, so that should be a fun reveal. God, she probably thinks I hate her..."

"And you knew we weren't going to sign with her?"

"Well, duh," Rose said. "An eight-week show where you didn't have creative control? No matter how much she sweetened that pot, you weren't gonna take it."

"OK, yeah," Donovan said.

"I do have one stipulation, though," Rose said with a knowing smile.

"What's that?"

"Y'all's show? Between the two of you?" she said. "Has to be in-person. I can't stand the lag."

Donovan frowned. "...And how are we going to do that?"

"Yeah, where are you right now, anyway?" Piper asked.

"About two miles away from you, Piper," she said. "In the house I bought for Van."

"...You did what now?"

"That backup server I said I bought? Yeah, I bought a house to hold it," Rose said, sending Donovan some pictures. The house was gorgeous; the kind of house that he had always wanted to live in. Not too big, but with enough room to feel like a person.

The kind of place you live when you have somebody to share it with.

"Oh my God," Donovan said.

"I've scheduled a moving company to move your few belongings, including your beautiful computer, out here," she continued. "You just need to worry about getting yourself in this house. Your plane should be leaving in about six hours. Sending you the ticket now."

Donovan pulled up his inbox. Sure enough, a first-class ticket for a cross-country flight was there waiting for him, along with the address of his new house.

"God, Rose, this is... I had enough money to do all of this?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Rose said. "You had way too much money to do all of this. But it's not your money, anyway; this is all my gift to you from my personal savings. Yours should be heading back into your account any second now. Just needed it to throw around to convince our talent's agents that we could pay them."

Sure enough, another message popped in Donovan's inbox, this one announcing the transferral of the same amount of money he had before into his account, plus a little extra.

"I'm paying you back with interest," Rose said. "Now, you have some packing to do; get to it!"

"Right," Donovan said. "So, uh..."

"Yeah," Piper said, smiling. "See you soon. Face-to-face, even."

"Wait, just one question before I go," Donovan said. "Rose... Why didn't you just tell me what you were doing?"

A smile and a faraway look crept onto Rose's face. "I needed to prove to myself that I could do it," she said. "That people would listen to me, and not just because I have a human backing me up. And don't get me wrong; if anyone's gonna back me up, I'd want to be you, Van. It's just... An AI's never even co-owned a company before, and I had to do it. Not for the sake of the other AIs or something noble and grandiose like that, but because it's something I had to do, or I don't think I could've lived with myself. You know what I mean?"

"I think so," Donovan said, glancing over at Piper.

"Also, by forcing you to confess your feelings to Piper and pulling you out of the crappy midnight-to-six timeslot, I now get the title 'Rose, the Best There's Ever Been' during any and all introductions. Deal?"

"...OK, yeah, that's a deal," Donovan said, laughing. "But, wait, does that mean you're the one that leaked the video? And...?"

"Hey hey hey, you said one question," Rose said. "Get to packing!"

"Right," Donovan said. "I'll see both of you soon."

As he clicked the "End All Calls" button, he was afraid something would go wrong.

But it didn't.

He shut down his computer, packed up what he needed for the flight, and called a ride to the airport.

For the first time in months, he wasn't afraid of tomorrow.

And for the first time in decades, he was looking forward to it.

The End

This story was made possible by the generous support of my Patreon backers. If you enjoyed it, please consider pledging a monthly contribution at patreon.com/JoshCloss. Thanks!

If you have comments, questions, or other reasons to wish to contact the author, he'd be oh-so-delighted to hear from you on Twitter at @JoshCloss or via email at JoshuaCloss (at) gmail (dot) com. (I don't know if Google Docs are susceptible to spam trawlers, but I'm playing it safe just in case!)

If this story meant something to you, please share it with a friend! Or ten friends! Or every friend! If you've read this far, you must have found something you liked (unless you just like reading the end of stories first, which, I mean, you do you, friend), and it would help me out more than words could say if you'd pass it along. Thanks, friend!!