

Mom. We've been over this. Don't read the comments," I say, sighing as my mother stares at me with her fretful deep-set eyes. They're dark green, just like mine, and stand out against her soft brown skin. Wrinkle lines trail out from the corners like thin tree branches grown over a lifetime of worrying.

I wish I could wash away all of her worries, but I only seem to be causing her more lately.

"I'm just not comfortable with it anymore," my mom counters. "I appreciate what you're doing with...you know, your earnings or however that sponsor stuff works, but I can't stand seeing what they're saying about you on the Internet."

"So don't read the comments!" I exclaim, reaching out and taking her hands in mine. Her palms are weathered, like the pages of the books she moves around at the library, and I can feel the creases in her skin as my fingers run over them. Bundles of multicolored bangles dangle from both of her wrists, clinking about lightly.

"How am I supposed to do that?" she asks, giving my hands a squeeze. "You're my daughter. And they say such awful things. They don't even know you. Breaks my heart."

"What did I *just* say?" I ask, letting go of her hands, trying to give her my warmest it's-going-to-be-okay smile. I know she only reads the blogs, the articles covering this and that, so she just sees the replies there, the sprawling comments—and not what people say on social media. Not what the trolls say about *her*. Because moms are the easiest target for those online monsters.

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of that sign in your room with your slogan regarding comments," Mom scoffs, shaking her head and getting to her feet. She groans a little as she pushes herself off the tiny sofa, which sinks in too much. Not in the comfortable way a squishy couch might, but in a this-piece-of-furniture-needs-to-be-thrown-away-because-it's-probably-doing-irreversible-damage-to-my-back-and-internal-organs kind of way. She stretches her back, one hand on her waist, and I make a mental note to check online for furniture sales at Target or Ikea once she heads to work.

"Oof, I must have slept on it wrong," Mom mutters, turning to look at me. But I know better. She's saying that for my benefit. The air mattress on her bed frame—in lieu of an actual mattress—isn't doing her back any favors.

I'd better add a cheap mattress to my list of things to search for later. Anything is better than her sleeping on what our family used to go camping with.

Still, I force myself to nod and say, "Probably." If Mom knew how easily I saw through this dance of ours, the way we pretend that things are okay while everything is falling apart around us, she'd only worry more.

Maybe she does know. Maybe that's part of the dance.

I avert my gaze from hers and glance down at my watch. It's the latest in smartwatch tech from Samsung, a beautiful little thing that connects to my phone and computer, controls the streaming box on our television... Hell, if we could afford smart lights in our apartment, it could

handle those, too. It's nearly 8:00 p.m., which means my Glitch subscribers will be tuning in for my scheduled gaming stream of *Reclaim the Sun* at any minute. A couple social media notifications start lighting up the edges of the little screen, but it isn't the unread messages or the time that taunt me.

It's the date.

The end of June is only a few days away, which means the rent is due. How can my mom stand here and talk about me getting rid of my Glitch channel when it's bringing in just enough revenue to help cover the rent? To pay for groceries? When the products I'm sent to review or sponsored to wear—and then consequently sell—have been keeping us afloat with at least a little money to walk around with?

"I'm going to start looking for a second job," Mom says, her tone defeated.

"Wait, what?" I look away from my watch and feel my heartbeat quicken. "But if you do that—"

"I can finish these summer classes another time. Maybe next year—"

"No. No way." I shake my head and suck air in through my gritted teeth. She's worked so hard for this. *We've* worked so hard for this. "You only have a few more classes!"

"I can't let you keep doing this." She gestures toward my room, where my computer is.

"And I can't let you work yourself to death for... What? This tiny apartment, while that asshole doesn't do a damn thing to—"

"Divya. Language," she scolds, but her tone is undermined by a soft grin peeking in at the corner of her mouth. "He's still your fath—"

"I'll do my part," I say resolutely, stopping her from saying that word. "I can deal with it. I want to. You will not give up going to school. If you do that, he wins. Besides, I've...got some gadgets I can sell this month."

"I just... I don't want you giving up on your dreams, so I can keep chasing mine. I'm the parent. What does all this say about me?" My mom exhales, and I catch her lip quivering just a little. Then she inhales sharply, burying whatever was about to surface, and I almost smile, as weird as that sounds. It's just our way, you know?

Take the pain in. Bury it down deep.

"We're a team." I reach out and grasp her hands again, and she inhales quickly once more.

It's in these quiet moments we have together, wrestling with these challenges, that the anger I feel—the rage over this small apartment that's replaced our home, the overdrafts in our bank accounts, all the time I've given up—is replaced with something else.

With how proud I am of her, for starting over the way she has.

"I'm not sure what I did to deserve you."

*Deserve.*

I feel my chest cave in a little at the word as I look again at the date on the beautiful display of this watch. I know I need to sell it. I know I do. The couch. That crappy mattress. My dwindling bank account. The upcoming bills.

The required sponsorship agreement to wear this watch in all my videos for a month, in exchange for keeping the watch, would be over in just a few days. I could easily get \$500 for it on an auction site or maybe a little less at the used-electronics shop downtown. One means more money, but it also means having my address out there, which is something I avoid like the plague—though having friends like Rebekah mail the gadgets for me has proved a relatively safe way to do it. The other means less money, but the return is immediate, at least. Several of the employees there watch my stream, however, and conversations with them are often pretty awkward.

I'd hoped that maybe, just maybe, I'd get to keep this one thing. Isn't that something I deserve? Between helping Mom with the rent while she finishes up school and pitching in for groceries and trying to put a little money aside for my own tuition in the fall at the community college... God, I'd at least earned this much, right?

The watch buzzes against my wrist, a pleasant feeling. As a text message flashes across the screen, I feel a pang of wonder and regret over how a display so small can still have a better resolution than the television in our living room.

THE GALAXY WAITS FOR NO ONE,  
YOU READY D1V?  
—COMMANDER (RE)BEKAH

I smile at the note from my producer-slash-best-friend, then look up as my mom makes her way toward the front door of our apartment, tossing a bag over her shoulder.

"I'll be back around ten or so," Mom says, sounding tired. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I always am," I promise, walking over to give her a hug. It's sweet, her constant reminders to be careful, to check in, especially since all I generally do while she's gone is hang out in front of the computer. But I get it. Even the Internet can be a dangerous place. The threats on social media and the emails that I get—all sent by anonymous trolls with untraceable accounts—are proof of that.

Still, as soon as the door closes, I bolt across the living room and into my small bedroom, which is basically just a bed, a tiny dresser, and my workstation. I've kept it simple since the move and my parents split.

The only thing that's far from simple is my gaming rig.

When my Glitch stream hit critical mass at one hundred thousand subscribers about a year and a half ago, a gaming company was kind enough to sponsor my rig. It's extravagant to the point of being

comical, with bright neon-blue lighting pouring out the back of the system and a clear case that shows off the needless LED illumination. Like having shiny lights makes it go any faster. I never got it when dudes at my school put flashy lights on their cars, and I don't get it any more on a computer.

But it was free, so I'm certainly not going to complain.

I shake the mouse to awaken the sleeping monster, and my widescreen LED monitor flashes to life. It's one of those screens that bend toward the edges, the curves of the monitor bordering on sexy. I adjust my webcam, which—along with my beaten-up Ikea table that's not even a desk—is one of the few non-sponsored things in my space. It's an aging thing, but the resolution is still HD and flawless, so unless a free one is somehow going to drop into my lap—and it probably won't, because you can't show off a webcam in a digital stream or a recorded sponsored video when you're filming with said camera—it'll do the trick.

I navigate over to Glitch and open my streaming application. Almost immediately, Rebekah's face pops up in a little window on the edge of my screen. I grin at the sight of her new hairstyle, her usually blond and spiky hair now dyed a brilliant shade of blood orange, a hue as vibrant as her personality. The sides of her head are buzzed, too, and the overall effect is awesome.

Rebekah smiles and waves at me. "You ready to explore the cosmos once more?" she asks, her voice bright in my computer's speakers. I can hear her keys clicking loudly as she types, her hands making quick work of something on the other side of the screen. I open my mouth to say something, but she jumps in before I can. "Yes, yes, I'll be on mute once we get in, shut up."

I laugh and glance at myself in the mirror I've got attached to the side of my monitor with a long metal arm—an old bike mirror that I repurposed to make sure my makeup and hair are on point in these videos. Even though the streams are all about the games, there's nothing wrong with looking a little cute, even if it's just for myself. I run a finger over one of my eyebrows, smoothing it out, and make a note to tweeze them just a little bit later. I've got my mother's strong brows, black and rebellious. We're frequently in battle with one another, me armed with my tweezers, my eyebrows wielding their growing-faster-than-weeds genes.

"How much time do we have?" I ask, tilting my head back and forth.

"About five minutes. And you look fine, stop it," she grumbles. I push the mirror away, the metal arm making a squeaking noise, and I see Rebekah roll her eyes. "You could just use a compact like a normal person, you know."

"It's vintage," I say, leaning in toward my computer mic. "I'm being hip."

"You. Hip." She chuckles. "Please save the jokes for the stream. It's good content."

I flash her a scowl and load up my social feeds on the desktop, my watch still illuminating with notifications. I decide to leave them unchecked on the actual device and scope them out on the computer instead, so when people are watching, they can see the watch in action. That should score me some extra goodwill with sponsors, and maybe it'll look like I'm more popular than people think I am.

Because that's my life. Plenty of social notifications, but zero texts or missed calls.

The feeds are surprisingly calm this evening, a bundle of people posting about how excited they are for my upcoming stream, playing Reclaim the Sun on their own, curious to see what I'm finding... Not bad. There are a few dumpster-fire comments directed at the way I look and some racist remarks by people with no avatars, cowards who won't show their faces, but nothing out of the usual.

Ah. Lovely. Someone wants me to wear less clothing in this stream. Blocked. A link to someone promoting my upcoming appearance at New York GamesCon, nice. Retweeted. A post suggesting I wear a skimpier top, and someone agreeing. Charming. Blocked and blocked.

Why is it that the people who always leave the grossest, rudest, and occasionally sexist, racist, or religiously intolerant comments never seem to have an avatar connected to their social profiles? Hiding behind a blank profile picture? How brave. How courageous.

And never mind all the messages that I assume are supposed to be flirtatious, but are actually anything but. Real original, saying "hey" and that's it, then spewing a bunch of foul-mouthed nonsense when they don't get a response. Hey, anonymous bro, I'm not here to be sexualized by strangers on the Internet. It's creepy and disgusting. Can't I just have fun without being objectified?

"Div!" Rebekah shouts, and I jump in my seat a little.

"Yeah, hey, I'm here," I mumble, looking around for my Bluetooth earpiece, trying to force myself into a better mood.

*This is why you don't read the comments, Divya.*

Excerpted from *Don't Read the Comments* by Eric Smith, Copyright © 2020 by Eric Smith. Published by Inkyard Press.