

# THE JOURNEY

*By Sofie Couch*

“HEY THERE.” I rubbed the back of her hand as she came out of it. “You were out a long time.”

“Huh?” She was still groggy. Re-awakening usually only took about thirty minutes. “How long?”

I looked down at the watch on my wrist, and checked her pulse. It was a little accelerated, but not outside of safe parameters. “Little over an hour.”

“What were you studyin’?” I asked.

The woman on the gurney next to my chair rolled her head to the side. There’s a look they all get at the end of a download. She licked her lips. She would have the munchies, too. That was another common after effect.

“Psychology. What’s that?” She gestured with her chin toward the book that was open in my lap.

I held it up. “*The Odyssey*.”

“Ah. Western Culture.”

“Er, Homer, actually. You’ve read it?” Small talk helped with the re-awakening.

She started to sit up, so I dropped my book on the bed and put a hand on her upper arm. Slowly, she swung her legs over the edge of the gurney, the paper cover crinkling and tearing.

“Here.” I handed her a cup of water, sweaty with ice. There were cookies, too, but that could wait. Re-awakening could take a while and she had been out longer than usual.

She laughed. “Read it?” I downloaded the whole class just two weeks ago. I’d have taken the second part, but they make you wait a month between downloads. That’s bullshit.”

“What?” My voice was edged with concern. “You got a download today? Before your month was up?”

She shrugged. “S no big deal.” She reached for the packet of cookies on the bedside table. I’m a regular.” Cracking into the wrapper, she shoved a whole cookie into her mouth.

“How?”

She narrowed her eyes, sizing me up. Her gaze fell to my book on the bed, and her mouth turned up into a smile. It was one of those smiles you might use with a precocious child. “Well, they recommend that you complete an associates degree in no fewer than twenty months. That’s one three credit course per month. The download takes about an hour and the re-awakening, about thirty minutes. At that rate, it’s no faster than just taking the live class. This way, leaves a lot of down time... unless you double up.”

“The school won’t let you download any more than one course a month.”

She smirked. “They won’t let me,” she pointed to her chest, “take more than one download per month. But my sister,” and again, she pointed at her own chest, “can take one download per month, too. So a person who is in the system as two people could each take one download on an alternating semi-monthly schedule, cutting the time to graduation in half.”

I could see that her enthusiasm and talking so soon was wearing her out. She leaned back on the pillow again, and I handed her a cup of yogurt.

“You can tolerate dairy, can’t you?”

“Sure.” She took the cup from my hand. I noticed a tremor in her hand too.

“How long have you been reading your book?” She tipped her chin toward my dog-eared copy.

“I’m not a fast reader. I’m only about half-way through.”

“Time?”

“About a week. I can only read during breaks.”

My job at the school did not require an advanced degree, but it did require my attention, especially immediately before and after a download. During the download, I was pretty much free – just a warm body in the lab while the information was disseminated.

“Like I said, I’m not a particularly fast reader.”

Her eyelids fluttered. No wonder if this was her second download in two weeks.

She opened her eyes again, like a too sleepy person behind the wheel. “You should schedule a download for yourself. Like I said, we covered *The Odyssey* in Western Culture.”

I smiled patiently. Downloads were expensive. I had one once. You held on to the information only so long as you made connections to that information. I’m a whiz at remembering the students who have come through my lab, but like the information that was downloaded – a semester’s worth of information in as little as an hour – you had to make associations to enhance the neural pathways. It’s like trying to remember a person you’ve just met. It helps if you also learn five things about that person. Those things ensure multiple connections and strengthen the knowing of a thing.

The student faded out again and I let her sleep. It was nearly fifteen minutes before she opened her eyes again.

“What time is it?”

“Gettin’ on four o’clock.”

She looked to her phone. Phones are not allowed in the lab, but this woman was obviously not bothered by rules.

“You should avoid looking at screens and devices for twenty-four hours.”

“Places to go. Things to see and do.”

She sat up again, this time, showing a packet of cookies in her pocket for the road, then looking around for the bag that came in with her. During the download, all personal items are stored in a bag on a hook at the end of the gurney. She grabbed the canvas bag off of the hook and hoisted it onto her shoulder.

“You should consider just downloading the book next time.”

She looked me over from head to toe. Was that pity on her face? Sure, the more you downloaded, the faster you could gain the degree, then the job, joined by potential higher earnings. I lived paycheck-to-paycheck, but what did I need with faster cars or multiple homes. I had books, an apartment, food. I looked down at my clothes. Scrubs counted.

“Consider it. Download next time.”

I put my book into one of the large pockets on the front of my scrubs.

“I’ll consider it.”

“It really is the only way to remain competitive. You don’t wanna be stuck here, plugging other people up to downloads for the rest of your life. ‘Always the bridesmaid...’”

“I guess that’s fine... if the destination is your goal.”

There was only a flicker of doubt. “What’s that?”

“The journey. Sometimes, knowledge is the end goal. Don’t forget the journey in pursuit of the destination.”

She left, looking twice over her shoulder. Was that a glimmer of doubt? I opened my book... and waited for my four-thirty “student.”