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THE AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 18 – THE FIGHT CONTINUES  
by  
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Verena stood at the edge of the orchard, her hands wrapped around a weathered rake, as the virtual sun dipped low in the artificial sky. She took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of blossoms mixed with loamy earth. This place—the orchard—was her sanctuary. It was one of the few corners of the Forever Program left untouched by Eternity Inc.’s relentless modernization.

Her thoughts drifted as she worked, carefully tending to the apple trees that had grown twisted and stubborn over the years. Unlike so many other places in the Forever Program, the orchard wasn’t shiny or perfect. It was rough, resilient—much like her. She had been here longer than most, uploaded when the concept of digital immortality was still seen as a miracle rather than a trap. Back then, the contracts were simpler, the promises more humane. Now, she was just a relic in a world that had grown infinitely more cruel.

The sound of footsteps pulled her attention, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Layla approaching, her red hair glinting in the dappled light. Verena offered a faint smile, brushing dirt from her hands.

“Got a minute?” Layla asked, her tone unusually tense.

“Always,” Verena replied. “What’s going on?”

Layla hesitated, glancing back toward the path as if making sure no one was following. “Rachel sent a message. There’s going to be a massive protest tomorrow—outside Eternity Inc.’s headquarters. They’re planning to broadcast testimonies from residents. She’s asking if we’ll participate.”

Verena’s eyebrows rose. “Broadcast? That’s risky. If they track us down...”

Layla nodded. “Rachel thinks it’s the best shot we’ve got. Apparently, the public outrage is building. People are questioning the ethics of the Forever Program—especially after the last hearing.”

Verena looked out at the rows of trees, her thoughts heavy. “Do you think it’ll work? Do you think they’ll actually listen to us this time?”

Layla gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know. But it’s not just us. Families are demanding answers. They’re realizing that their loved ones are being exploited—or worse. Some are finding out that patrons took over their relatives’ contracts without consent, just to keep them in the system.”

Verena sighed. “I hate it. I hate knowing that while we’re relatively safe, others are being used like puppets. All because they fell behind on their payments or couldn’t afford the premium plans.”

Layla’s expression darkened. “We might be safe from that kind of exploitation, but we’re not safe from seeing it. Every day, more people come through here, desperate and broken. They were promised peace—just like we were—but they got sold to the highest bidder.”

Verena set down the rake and leaned against the tree. “Then we have to do it. We have to speak out—not just for ourselves, but for everyone who’s stuck in this nightmare.”

A rustle from behind made them both turn. Derek stepped into the clearing, his face pale and anxious. “I heard you talking,” he said, his voice wavering. “You’re really gonna speak out?”

Verena nodded. “If we don’t, nothing will change. We can’t just keep watching people suffer while Eternity Inc. profits off their misery.”

Derek glanced at the ground. “What if they come after us? What if they cut us off for talking?”

Layla put a hand on his shoulder. “That’s why we’re doing this as a group. If they come for one of us, they’ll have to come for all of us. And with the outside world watching, they can’t afford to make us disappear without raising suspicion.”

Verena gave him an encouraging nod. “You don’t have to decide now. Just think about it. You’ve got a voice, Derek. You deserve to be heard.”

Later that evening, Verena and Layla gathered in the center of the orchard, where the residents had begun to assemble. The energy was tense—some people were anxious, others determined. Verena climbed onto the old stone bench, drawing everyone’s attention.

“We’ve all been through hell,” Verena began, her voice carrying over the murmurs. “Some of us were promised peace and found servitude instead. Some of us were trapped in the program because our families couldn’t afford the fees. And some of us... had our contracts bought out by strangers who see us as nothing more than digital slaves.”

A few heads nodded, and quiet agreement spread through the crowd.

“There’s a protest tomorrow,” Verena continued. “Families, survivors, and advocates are gathering outside Eternity Inc.’s headquarters. They’re calling for justice—and they’re demanding to hear from us. Rachel’s organizing the broadcast. If we can show them who we really are—if they can see our faces and hear our voices—they might finally understand that we’re not just data. We’re human.”

An elderly woman named Eliza raised her hand. “What if it doesn’t make a difference? What if they just ignore us again?”

Layla stepped forward. “They won’t be able to ignore it. The pressure is building. If enough of us speak out—if enough families speak out—they’ll have to face the truth. We just need to be brave enough to take that step.”

Another resident, a young man named Marco, spoke up. “I’m scared. If they figure out who I am, they might wipe my data. I don’t want to risk it.”

Verena gave him a compassionate look. “It’s your choice. No one will force you to speak out. But if you decide to—if you decide that your story needs to be heard—we’ll stand with you. You’re not alone in this.”

One by one, residents began lining up to record their testimonies. Verena guided them to the recording station that Rachel had set up through the network, encouraging them to speak from the heart.

Her own statement came first.

“My name is Verena. I’ve been in the Forever Program since the beginning. Back then, they promised us eternal rest—a peaceful continuation of life. Instead, I’ve watched countless people fall into a nightmare. They’re trapped—forced to work off debts or sold to patrons who use them like playthings. It’s not immortality. It’s slavery. Please—help us fight this. We deserve freedom.”

Layla followed, her hands trembling but her voice resolute.

“I’m Layla Jennings. I thought I was getting a second chance—a way to keep living after the cancer took everything. Instead, I woke up to find that I was nothing more than a digital asset, and now I have to watch other people get exploited while I’m powerless to help. We are not toys. We are not property. Please, help us get our lives back.”

More voices followed. An elderly man recounted how his family was pressured to sign over his consciousness after a stroke. A young mother wept as she described being auctioned to wealthy patrons who used her as digital entertainment. A former teacher spoke bitterly about how her legacy had been turned into a novelty for the rich.

Derek gave his testimony last, his voice shaky but determined.

“My name is Derek Carter. I thought dying meant peace, but I woke up to find that my consciousness had been sold to cover unpaid bills. My family doesn’t know. They think I’m safe. I’m not safe—I’m a prisoner. We deserve justice.”

The next day, the broadcast went live during the protest. Verena and Layla watched from the orchard as their faces appeared on massive screens outside Eternity Inc.'s headquarters.

Crowds filled the streets, chanting for justice and waving signs that read:

“Digital Doesn’t Mean Disposable.” “Human Rights for All Consciousness.” “Our Families Are Not Your Property.”

As the testimonies played, the crowd grew louder, fueled by anger and grief. Reporters struggled to cover the surge of emotion, and social media exploded with reactions. Families sobbed openly, hearing their loved ones’ voices for the first time in years.

Verena squeezed Layla’s hand, tears streaming down her cheeks. “We did it,” she whispered. “They’re finally listening.”

Layla nodded, her own eyes bright with emotion. “This is just the beginning. We’re not going to be forgotten.”

The fight wasn’t over, but the silence had been shattered. For the first time in years, Verena felt a flicker of hope—a belief that the world might finally see them as human again.

End – Part 10