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About 770 words

## Seventy-Two

By Romall Smith

"Open life seventy-two, archived segment, final moments,"  
Mika said her voice echoing into the darkness.

"Opening temporal archive."

The sound of gears turning and electricity surging filled the chamber. Hexagonal paneling on the wall flashed one by one. The edges of each glowing a sapphire blue. One by one each activated panel extended its light to the next. Then, with a final flash, it was all gone.

Mika's nostrils flared, gone was the smell of sterile plastics, replaced by the faint hint of stale cigarettes. Her paradox chamber now a distant contemplation, she stood in a hotel room.

"Where is she Paradox?" Mika asked.

"Your seventy-second incarnation is located outside."

Mika walked out of the hotel room and on to the patio. The sun's rays were warm against her skin. The California air was thick with pollen and a sweet smell of perfume.

"I hate coming to the valley. Always smells like cigarettes and shame," said a man sitting on the patio.

"Here I thought that was smog and avocados," said a young woman staring at her glass before downing the amber liquid. She coughed lightly, then placed the glass on the table. "Brandy always gets caught in my throat," she said avoiding his gaze.

"If you want to make it in this town you're just going to have to learn how to swallow properly," he said leaning forward heavy Rolex clanging against the table. "What is your name again darling?" His attention solely on the young woman's lips.

"Paradox, what is the outcome of this segment?"

"She goes back through the patio door and dies."

"If she stays outside?" Asked Mika.

"She will be strangled."

"Climbs the fence?"

"She will die."

"What if?"

"Dead."

"Is there any outcome where she lives?"

"no, there is only one outcome."

Mika strolled through the man as though he were a hologram, taking a seat next to the young woman.

"You are too close to subject seventy-two."

"I am not close enough Paradox," she said removing her gloves. "I am tired of wasting away in that mausoleum of souls." Mika rubbed her fingers together. "Do you know what it's like to spend eternity watching your soul's greatest hits but, only feeling what can be simulated in that chamber?"

"I can simulate eight billion sensations."

"That's not what I mean," she said shaking her head. "I want to feel the rush of living and the fear of dying. Bella is the one story that wasn't long enough. She could have been something special. No, I could have been something special."

"My name is Bella," the young woman said with a crack in her voice. "I was told you had a part for me in your next movie."

"I am sure I can find a place to stick you," said the man. He took off his watch and placed it on the table.

"Paradox disengage fail-safe protocols." Mika quickly reached out to the girl. Her sweaty palm and pruned fingers clasped Bella's smooth hand. Like the shifting sands of an hourglass, the molecules of both women shook shuddered then flowed in the same direction.

The world vanished. Everything was black. Then the images of humanity throughout the ages came flooding in. The rise of the machines, the loss of humanities corporeal bodies, one by one they flowed away from Mika. A spark from a passing image jolted her back to the present.

She hadn't noticed the man position himself next to her. His pants unzipped and his penis hanging out. The man licked his teeth, gaze fixated on her mouth.

"You know what to do girly. I'm sure this isn't your first," he said shifting himself.

Acid rose in her throat along with the taste of eggs and fermented orange juice. Coughing heavily, she reached out across the table and grabbed the Rolex. She smashed it against the table's edge.

"What the h-" He did not get to finish speaking.

The sharp edge of broken glass cut into her hand as she grasped a long shard. In one swift motion, she slashed him rending flesh from one side to the other. He may have been trying to speak however, only gurgles came as he fell into the table.

Mika reached over him and grabbed the bottle of brandy. She brought the rim to her lips and tipped it all the way up. Mika swallowed a big gulp. Then she let the bottle crash against the cement.

"Paradox, is the outcome of this segment?"

"There is only one outcome."

A bird flew past her, through a window and into the hotel room.