**April 28, 2021: Brain Melter Pt. 6**

*Continuation of April 27, 2021 "Brain Melter Pt. 5"*

"Now I can take you in but I can't spend much time away from the desk, unfortunately," said Steinhauser as he handed Jessie/Violet their badge. "But I think I can arrange for someone to show you around, when she's free…"

"O-okay," said Jesse/Violet, in a shy voice. They were excited and nervous at the prospect about going into a real adult-sized daycare. This was not the turn they'd expected their day to take.

Steinhauser picked up the phone and made a quick phone call, then set it down and gave Jesse/Violet a smile and a thumbs up. Then, he grabbed a little man-bag and set a 'back in ten minutes' sign out on the desk.

"Okay, sweetheart, said Steinhauser, jogging back out from behind the desk. "Now if you need to be big again, it's okay, but I want you to know that this is a safe space to be little. Heck, at least thirty percent of the clientele here consists of littles, so we know all about it."

"Th-thanks, Ben. That helps, though after all that happened today… I'm not exactly feeling very safe anywhere."

"Aww, sweetie, said Steinhauser taking both her hands as they stopped in front of the locking door to the nursery. "I know just what can help. I have my magic wand here," Here, steinhauser pulled out a long piece of foil from his bag. "And if you spin around three times, and I tap you with it, it can magically transform you… into a darling little princess. And everybody will *see* you as a darling little princess… if that's who you believe you are."

Jessie rolled his eyes at this, but his little side got very excited. Although he felt silly doing it, he spun around three times while Steinhauser said the magic words and tapped him thrice with the wand, and sure as sugar, out came Violet.

"Are you ready to go inside now," said Steinhauser, looking excited for what was to come.

"I sure am," said Violet, with a nod.

"Okey, doke, in we go!"

Steinhauser opened the door and in Violet went. She was immediately inundated with sounds, smells, and sensations that called to mind all her best memories of daycare. Only it was way better, because everyone was around her age or older, so she didn't feel self-conscious or out of place at all. She didn't even notice the door latch behind them and the little light go red on the card reader.

Steinhauser pointed out all the things that he could from where they stood. There were big kids coloring, others laughing at cartoons on the big screen TV, others doing active sporty activities in the gymnasium/physical therapy room, and even a reading corner. And that's just what they could see from the entrance. It was almost enough to make Violet forget why she was here. But she couldn't lose focus.

"I love the look they get when they first step inside," said steinhauser to himself, as he led her deeper in. He sat at the coloring table with her for a few minutes while they waited for her escort and watched her color. Violet was reluctant at first, feeling bad that she was going to be having fun while her friends were sick, but he reassured her.

"Well, we have to wait anyway, so you might as well make something nice for them. Right?"

Violet liked that idea, and she colored several pages for her friends.

 After a while, Steinhauser stood up, prompting Jessie to look up from her coloring book. She had completely lost track of time. "Here she comes now," said Steinhauser. "I sure wish I could spend more time with you, cutie, but I do have to be getting back to my post. Can I keep one of your drawings for myself? You did such a wonderful job with them."

"Y-yeah!" said Violet, surprised and flattered. "Please, take any one you like!"

"Thanks, sweetie. Come see me on your way out, okay?"

"Yes, I will. Thank you again…" but her face fell as she saw who was approaching them.

"Hello," said an older woman with silver hair and an air of determined confidence. "I'm Zelda."

Violet recognized her from the website and suddenly remembered the fear she had felt after reading all the online conspiracy forums. It was the director of the daycare. She gulped and introduced herself. "H-hi.. I'm… I'm Violet…"

Zelda looked down at her tag and smiled a maternal smile. "Oh, a *little*. We love littles here. Welcome. I'm sorry it wasn't under better circumstances."

"Me too," said Violet, quietly, looking down.

"You'd better get back out there, Ben, I saw another load of arrivals from my office just as I was leaving." Once Steinhauser was gone, she turned her attention back to Violet. "I'm sorry to hear about your friends, sweetheart. We've been up to our necks in new arrivals since this brain-melter showed up in town. Let's go find your friends, I know you must be worried sick."

Violet grabbed the coloring book. "I made them some pretty pictures to help them feel better. They *will* get better… won't they?"

"I sure hope so sweetie, and I'm sure they'll love your drawings." The woman's words were kind, but her face was grim. Though she tried to push it down, Violet couldn't help but feel like the fight for them had already been lost.

"They should be finishing up with mealtime now. So let's see if they're in the highchairs."

Violet knitted her brow as Zelda walked her to their destination. This woman didn't seem like the egomaniac she'd expected. There wasn't a hint of malice in her demeanor. Could she really have something to do with what happened to Dane and Jeff? Or was Jessie just becoming paranoid after digging through so many conspiracy forums? When they got to the highchairs and she saw her two friends, she stopped, nearly dropping the coloring book she was holding.

Jeff was smiling and staring vacantly into space, his bib and face covered in spaghetti sauce while an attendant went about cleaning his face and hands with a wet wipe while Jeff was clumsily finishing his own bowl of spaghetti and meatballs using his own hand, albeit with a toddler-style fist-grip. An annoyed looking teenager was sitting between them, crossing his arms and waiting to be let out of his highchair.

"Oh my gosh, it's really you… Jeff… Dane… a-are you okay?"

Dane looked at Violet and smiled.

"Jessie! Hi… where ya been?"

"Looking for you, silly," said Violet, her voice cracking slightly as she tried to sound cheerful and casual. Dane didn't seem to notice.

"How do you feel, Dane? What happened after I dropped you off at the hospital?

"Oh… man… it was so weird… some guys in masks shined this bright light in my eyes… then they floated me out to this bus… and like… we went way way away… and now here I am. And here you are. And… hehe… hey, do you have any weed on you?"

Violet laughed and shook her head. "You're so silly, Dane. That's what got you here in the first place. What am I going to tell your parents?"

"Oh…" Dane thought for a second. "Say 'hi', I guess. Huh huh… 'high'... get it? Hehe… hey," he said, looking over and seeing Jeff begin rubbing the front of his diaper as the tray was removed. "Hy, what is this tray doing here…? I wanna rub my diapee…"

He began to bang the tray until an attendant came and calmed him down with a shiny ring of plastic keys and he shook them in his fist, commenting on the pretty colors.

Zelda gently guided Violet away as the attendants helped them down for their diaper changes and naps.

It was then that Violet/Jessie really began to understand that her friends might be gone for good.

"Even after I found them…," he began, before turning to Zelda.

"Be honest with me," she said, "what is the chance that they'll recover. How many people have recovered so far?"

"And I'm speaking to the big you right now, aren't I?" Asked Zelda.

Jessie nodded.

"If I'm being honest," said Zelda, "none."

Jessie felt deflated. "It's… it's not fair… There wasn't even a warning… one puff and they were gone…"

"I know, sweetie. We're trying to figure this out as much as you are but… until then, just know that your friends are in good hands."

Jessie thanked her and said she'd like to leave now.

"Would you like me to walk you out?" asked Zelda, gently.

"No, I've taken enough of your time. I think I can find my own way out…"

"Okay, dear," said Zelda, with an empathetic look of sadness. "I know… how hard it can be. My own son stays here as well…"

Jessie didn't know what to say. He looked around and wondered how many others there were here with stories like Jeff and Dane's. And how many loved ones were thinking of them. Suddenly he felt so much smaller in a *different* way.

"You take as long as you want getting out of here," said Zelda. "You can knock on the door and wave to Ben when if no one is nearby to unlock the door."

"Unlock?" asked Jessie.

"Not everyone here is a little, sweetie, and we can't have people like Dane or our special needs clients wandering off…"

Jessie nodded, that seemed reasonable enough, if slightly off-putting. Jessie didn't dally, but went straight for the exit, where an attendant named Ashley let him right out.

"I can see you would fit right in here," said Steinhauser when Jessie came by to say his goodbyes and thank the man once again. "And you know… I don't know how long your friends are going to be here but… you can always come back to visit."

"I'm going to check on them every day… you can count on it," said Jessie, with a smile.

Steinhauser nodded and smiled. "You're a good friend, kiddo. Now go and get some rest. You look like you need it."

"Yeah, I think I do," said Jessie, who promptly crashed out in the back of Jeff's van and slept for two hours straight while messages began to crop up on his online Telegraph and Tweeter accounts.

*-Written by ChampTehOtter*