Excerpt from Chapter 3 of my 2019 novel *A Song For A New Day* (Berkley Publishing)

This was the most people Rosemary had seen in one place since she was a kid, even in hoodspace. More than any of her classes, or any party she’d ever been to, though in truth she preferred smaller gatherings. She wondered if this was an unlimited space, or if there were multiple iterations of this same bar, or if it was coded to allow overlay. She could look, but she didn’t want to know. The thought of someone else standing in the same spot as her, even virtually, made her shudder.

The room buzzed with voices, a baseline noise. Snippets of conversation drifted her way. Discussions of bands they’d seen, bands they wanted to see, bands they wished they had seen. The weather where they were. She concentrated on their clothes, on what people put on their avatars in this place. She’d used her work avatar, with her work avatar’s uniform, a polo shirt and slacks. She hadn’t been sure if she was allowed to change into more casual clothes, given that she was here on assignment. Her real body wore her uniform as well, of course. A majority of the crowd wore T-shirts for Patent Medicine, or else for other SHL bands. One man had dressed all in feathers, another person in tight leather pants and a skin that she was fairly sure she recognized as a celebrity from her parents’ generation. She filed the information away for the future, if she ever got to do this again. Even if they didn’t ask her for the fancy Hoodie back, she couldn’t afford a subscription, so it was a moot point.

The dim overhead lights got even dimmer. The crowd cheered. Who were they cheering? It wasn’t like the band could hear them. Rosemary hesitated, then joined in. It felt good to add her voice to a group. She’d never done that before. It left a pleasant vibration inside her; she’d done it in realspace as well. She imagined what it must have been like in the old days, when entire stadiums cheered together.

The rig overhead whirred to life. Rosemary glanced up and was rewarded with a blinding flash. She looked back to where ghost gear now rested in what had been the empty space. A drum kit at the center, a couple of large amplifiers, three microphone stands. A rack full of ghost guitars. Somebody near the stage reached a hand out and chopped through a guitar neck. He disappeared a second later; there were penalties for disturbing the illusion.

The lights flickered, and a moment later musicians stood holding the instruments. The effect was eerie. The original empty stage must have been a recording, because there wasn’t even a second’s pause before they hit a chord. Out of nothing, music: three voices and two guitars. They held the note for ten seconds, then drums rolled over it.

Rosemary had been to a wave pool once when she was five, at a run-down amusement park, in the Before. She had waded out into the water holding her father’s hand. The pool was crowded and flat, full of people lounging in tubes in the lull between wave sets. She spotted something on the bottom, a nickel or a quarter, shining just beyond her reach, and released her father’s hand to grab it. That was when the first wave hit, knocking her back toward the shallows. She surfaced lost and sputtering and terrified, but strangely exhilarated.

The music hit Rosemary like a wave, knocking her breath from her. Louder than anything she had ever heard, filling every corner of her. One chord, and she was full. Don’t stop, Rosemary thought. Don’t ever stop.

The song shifted, and she recognized it now. It was one of the songs she had checked out this evening before the show, but altered. The intro in the recorded version had been tamed, tempered. She had thought it was okay, nothing special. She hadn’t realized music could reach inside you.

She pushed closer. Camera flashes went off throughout the room. The bag checker outside had said pictures were possible for the first two minutes, but she couldn’t tear her attention away from the band long enough even to blink a screenshot. What would it have captured anyway? Ghostly faces, a tinny recording. Nothing like the magnet in her gut drawing her toward the stage.

The holo quality changed, the second-minute change the girl had mentioned, a momentary shimmer. Rosemary pressed her avatar up against the people in front of her, the closest she had been to strangers in her adult life. The Hoodie gave a warning jolt, but the other people didn’t notice, or if they noticed, they didn’t care. A gap opened between two men in front and she pushed through, hoping there wasn’t etiquette against it. The space expanded before her, a highlighted path leading her to a better spot.

She found herself in the front row and right of center, gazing up at the bassist, a tall, lean, shaven-headed woman with skin so brown the hologram pushed it into purple. She wore jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, showing off amazing biceps, and she was barefoot. She had a bruise under her left big toenail, which made her more real. Rosemary fought the urge to touch her; God, she fell in love easily, not that it ever led anywhere.

Rosemary had always liked music, even if she didn’t know much about it. She’d listen if somebody told her to listen to something, bought songs and posters of artists she enjoyed, but she had never gone out seeking anything. She didn’t know what was cool and what wasn’t. She’d played this song, “The Crash,” after the Hoodie arrived this evening, and had thought it was decent. Nothing like how it sounded now. Nothing had ever satisfied her the way writing code did, but now she was the code, and she was being overwritten.