

## Broken

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by [kes7](#)

### Summary

John Quigley's life so far, measured by the noses he's smashed in anger -- and those he managed to refrain from breaking.

The first time it happens, he's just ten years old. One of the neighborhood kids calls his mother a worthless piece of shit and even at ten, John knows it might be true, but then the kid says his stepfather is probably a lot happier now that he's left them, and something snaps.

He lashes out, fist connecting with bone, and he wasn't aiming for the boy's nose, but feels the satisfying crunch as it gives way beneath his fist, feels the spray of blood as the kid yells out in pain, and it doesn't stop there. He swings again, knocks the kid down. Then he's on top of him, knuckles pounding flesh, and the kid is screaming for backup, for mercy, for his own damned perfect mother but John can't hear it over the rush of blood in his own ears as the rage boils over. When they finally pull him off, it takes three sixteen-year-olds to do it, and one of them almost gets his own nose broken for his trouble.

"What the hell is your problem, kid?" one of them asks, shock and a little bit of awe evident on his faintly pockmarked face. John can't even answer. He's in a daze, staring down at the bloodied, bruised face of the thirteen-year-old who definitely needs a hospital and he swears for a moment that it's his mother's face instead.

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The second time it happens, he's twelve. He's taller now -- his last growth spurt pushed him up over the 180 centimeter mark -- and he's on the thin side, but he's strong. The sting of his stepfather's abandonment is fading now, but the constant ache of his mother's not-quite-presence as she loses herself deeper and deeper in the bottle -- of drinks, of pills, doesn't matter, because she loves them both more than she loves her son -- is building into something ugly inside of him that wants to claw its way out.

He tries to stay out of the house as much as possible, but he's only twelve, and there are only so many places he can go without a license, a skimmer, or credits for the transit. One cold February night, all his friends have plans and it's easily thirty below, and the café will only let you sit so long when you're not buying, so when the library closes at six, he has no choice but to go home early.

When he arrives, she's not alone. There's a man there, one John's seen a time or two before; he supposes they are dating, but really they don't go out, they just drink and fuck. He's an ugly, sharp-nosed man, probably six centimeters shorter than John, with oily black hair that's starting to recede, exposing more and more of his too-shiny scalp. He's nothing like John's stepfather, and that's probably for the best -- his stepfather was a decent man and no one decent should have to put up with his mother's shit. Even if John still desperately misses him, even if he wishes he'd been willing to stick it out -- *Or at least take me with you*, he thinks -- he's starting to understand why he had to leave. Some things aren't worth fighting for, and his mom just might be one of them.

But she's still his mother, and when he walks in the door just in time to see her boyfriend give her a good hard shove into the ancient plaster wall of their shitty old apartment as she cries out in surprise and pain, there's not a moment's hesitation. He crosses the distance between them in a fraction of a second and before Alan -- that's his name, Alan -- even registers he's there, John has him on the ground. This time, the tackle comes first and the punch comes next -- and this time he *means* to break the ugly fucker's nose, and does so easily, on the first try.

"John!" his mother screams -- all horror and no relief at being saved. "John, get off of him right now!" He feels her hands, small and ineffectual, tugging at the back of his winter parka, still damp and dusted with a thin layer of frosty snow. "Get up, stop this! What are you doing?!"

Her voice is hysterical, and somehow it cuts through the freight train racket of anger and adrenaline and he does stop. Anyway, he thinks he's made his point.

He gets up, grabs Alan by the shirt, and hauls him up to nearly eye-level. He ignores the blood that runs down Alan's face, onto his cheesy black sweater and all over John's hand before dripping on the worn-out old wood floor. "Get out," he hisses down at the older man. "Don't ever come back here, and don't you ever touch her again."

“John!” his mother protests, but when he swivels his head to look at her, her face goes pale and she shuts her mouth. Something in his expression has clearly scared the shit out of her, and if that’s what it takes for her to do the smart thing, to kick this bastard out and never let him near her again, he’ll take it. She can find someone else to fuck, someone who won’t shove her into walls and call her a bitch – oh *yeah*, he heard that, too – or she can be alone. Or maybe, just maybe, she can pull her shit together, quit drinking and doping, and find someone to build a real life with.

John is pretty sure, even at twelve, that that’s not going to happen, but he’s still young enough to hope.

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Times three through five, he’s in his teens, and it’s more or less for fun. Street hockey, ice hockey, nasty scuffles that always end with someone getting hurt. Sometimes it’s even him.

The first time his own nose is the one to break, he’s fifteen, and he laughs. He laughs until his eyes water, even as the blood dribbles into his open mouth and coats his teeth and tongue, tangy and sticky. *So this is what it feels like*, he thinks, and he realizes that in some twisted way, he likes it. It makes him feel alive, and he’s not sure what that says about him, but it’s probably not good. His friends look at him like he’s gone crazy, but they haul his ass down to the clinic without asking too many questions. The medics there know most of them by name now. They cluck their tongues at the boys and their antics but they always patch them up. They don’t ask too many questions, either. After all, what else are a bunch of teen boys in a basic stipend neighborhood going to do for fun?

Questions are for the times he calls the ambulance for his mother, who has a particular talent for mixing the wrong kinds of booze with the wrong kinds of pills. It doesn’t matter how many times he throws it all into the recycler, she always gets more. It’s times like these he wonders if the basic stipend all Federation citizens receive at eighteen whether they choose to work or not is really such a good idea. Maybe if she had to hold down some kind of job in order to keep a roof over her head and buy her drinks and dope, she’d get her act together.

Then again, maybe not. At least the stipend means he gets to eat, so he can’t really complain.

“Does she hurt you?” they ask, and he always wants to laugh at them. He’s nearly twice her size. It’s not like she smacks him around. He’s scarred in other ways, ways he couldn’t begin to explain, so he always just says no, she doesn’t hurt him, and waits to take her home.

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The sixth time is different. So much different. A lot has changed in the few months he’s been at the Academy. He’s almost twenty, and happy for the first time in his life. He’s a new person here, a person without a past. He can be anything he wants to be. He has close friends, and maybe more importantly, he has hope. Hope that he won’t ever have to return to Edmonton, hope that he’ll escape this beautiful, fucked-up planet with all its empty promises, promises he learned long ago might well apply to other people, but never to him.

Never, that is, until the day he was accepted here.

There’s a girl here, Maren – slender, pretty, sensitive and terrifyingly smart – and he thinks he’s in love. Like an idiot, though, he waited too long to make his move and now she belongs to someone else. That someone else is the most bizarre choice she could possibly have made, and John watches him like a hawk, waiting for him to make a wrong move. Whatever he is now – and that’s sort of hard to tell – he was once Borg, and John doesn’t like the idea of that one bit.

Unfortunately for Maren, neither does the rest of the Academy.

One day he waits with her in the line for the replimat. It’s Thursday, and they always have lunch together on Thursdays because Icheb has some genetics seminar that lasts well into Maren’s first afternoon class, but John’s schedule matches hers just fine.

When Freddie Jensen gets in line behind them, John tenses up, preparing himself for what he knows is coming. The older boy is from Europe – Copenhagen, or somewhere near it – with pale blond hair and eyes like ice, and a nose too large for his face that reminds him, strangely, of the man he punched out in his mother’s living room when he was twelve.

Sometimes John thinks he’d like to punch Freddie, too.

Freddie Jensen hates the Borg with a hatred John thought was reserved only for those who’d lost someone to them, but Jensen hasn’t lost anyone, not that John knows of. Rather, Jensen’s fury at Icheb seems to be based in envy – not jealousy over Maren like John has to contend with; it’s pretty clear Freddie’s into guys, not girls – but some kind of weird inferiority complex.

Icheb’s at the top of his class; it’s not even close. He’s good at absolutely everything. John used to read comics as a kid, superhero stuff where mutant kids get special powers, and Icheb might as well be one of them. He looks like a skinny little kid, but John’s seen him throw people halfway across the room during PT sparring with hardly any effort at all, and his intellectual processing power probably rivals LCARS.

John’s got at least ten centimeters and probably ten kilos on him, and he’s still not sure who’d win in a fight. It’s obvious enough what Maren sees in him, smart as she is, but it scares the hell out of him because if he’s not the gentleman she swears he is, she won’t stand a chance and he could easily destroy her, and John may not be able to do anything about it.

Given all that, he would never throw down for Icheb (or so he believes right now). But Maren is another story, and when Jensen starts in with the insults and the vile, sexually explicit speculation on what exactly it is she and Icheb do together when no one is there to see it, John’s fingers start to twitch.

She’s told him again and again to ignore them. That’s what she always does, and she’s doing it right now. She stands there perfectly still, the picture of studied nonchalance except for the hot blush he can see creeping up her cheeks and toward her ears. She refuses to turn around as Freddie talks about cybernetic cock, anal assimilation and letting the Borg Queen watch them over subspace. He’s in rare form today, and half the line is laughing at him – no, at *her* – and finally John just can’t take it anymore.

He turns around and decks Freddie, and it's all business, no fight. A single punch, and Freddie's on the floor. His nose is smashed and there's blood everywhere, but he doesn't feel it because he's out cold. Beside John, Maren gasps. The replimat goes dead silent.

"Anyone else have anything to say about it?" John challenges the crowd, and beside him, Maren's eyes are wide and she's grabbed onto his elbow, gripping it like she can't decide whether to hold him back or help him flee the scene.

No one has anything more to say, and moments later, security shows up, along with medical. There will be a disciplinary hearing for sure, John might even lose his commission, but when he pictures the way Maren's face burned with humiliation while she pretended not to care, it's worth it.

Some people *are* worth fighting for.

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The seventh time, he almost gets kicked out of school. This time, the face he shatters isn't just anybody's face, it's Eric Atherton's, and Eric's father is an admiral. His other victim, Vingu Rothi, gets off easier. Whereas Eric needs full facial reconstruction and spends a week at Starfleet Medical, Vingu only gets a black eye and a broken arm. It's a spiral fracture; John grabbed him as he tried to pull Eric away from John, twisted his arm and shoved him to the ground, hard. The snap surprised even him – he hadn't planned to break his arm; then again, he hadn't planned any of this. Hadn't planned to love Icheb almost as much as he loves Maren, hadn't planned to find in those two the family he never had.

And really, enough is enough. It's been over a year; why can't everyone just leave those two the fuck alone? Atherton, Rothi, Jensen – God, it *still* galls him that Jensen managed to get away just as the fight began – they're just the icing on the shit cake that the other cadets feed Maren and Icheb day after day, just because of who Icheb is and where he came from.

Just when John is sure his career is finished, as he sits outside the conference room where his fate will be decided by the disciplinary commission, he finds out that Eric Atherton isn't the only one with allies in high places. Icheb – Icheb, who never asks for anything, who never tells anyone when something is wrong – has called in a favor, and Admiral Kathryn Janeway walks into the building and saves his ass.

He swears to her – and more importantly, to himself – that he'll never break another nose outside the line of duty ever again.

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After that, he loses track of how many noses he breaks and how many times his nose is broken, because he makes it into the Advanced Tactical School and that's half of what they do when they're not learning strategy, is break each other's faces. The better you are at it, the higher your grades, and John graduates in the top ten – good enough for a posting on the USS *Titan*, which isn't the flagship, but it's damned well close enough.

For the next year and a half, he travels the Beta Quadrant, training and exploring and generally having the time of his life. He breaks a few more noses, but these ones are all hostile alien types and he's got Starfleet backing him up. The only time his own nose gets broken is during particularly athletic sex with an Orion girl. (Not a slave, of course, he would never *ever*. She works in astrometrics.) But he waits a day to patch it up, because that? That's a fucking badge of honor. (And by that, he absolutely means a badge of honor for fucking. She – no, *they* were incredible.)

He loves the *Titan*, loves Commander Tuvok and Captain Riker and Lireya the frisky Orion and everyone else, but when he hears about the mission to the Delta Quadrant, he knows he wants to go. Icheb and Maren haven't spoken for months, but somehow he knows they'll both be on the mission. He lets himself hope that when they all get there, things will be just the way they used to be, and he'll have his family back for good.

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The eighth time – because nothing that was done in the line of duty counts, right? – almost happens the night he returns from an evacuation mission gone terribly, terribly wrong. He's already angry. He was lied to, by both of them, for years, and he can't even look at Icheb without part of him wishing he would just *die* already, get it over with and spare Maren the pain of wondering when he'll go. But Maren isn't feeling anything right now, because she's unconscious, unconscious as fuck, in a fucking *coma*, and it's all Icheb's fault because he's selfish and he brought her into danger because he wanted her there and he knew she'd follow him anywhere. He's everything John feared he'd be and worse, because he doesn't even know how wrong he is.

John reminds him of the threats he made, back when they were shiny new cadets and John thought he was badass enough to do what no one else at the Academy had been able to do, intimidate Icheb. "*She worships you, and I have no idea why. If you ever hurt her, I will end you.*" Fuck all it did for her; look at her now. He stares at the broken woman lying motionless on the biobed and it takes every bit of his rapidly unraveling self-control not to turn on his best friend, his brother, with every bit of the rage he felt when he was ten and it took three near-adults to tear him off the kid who called his mom a worthless piece of shit.

But he's not ten anymore. He's twenty-seven. And it's taken this long, but he's finally learned that a broken nose never fixes anything except to buy you a little time to escape. And there's no escaping this, not anymore. No escaping the way he feels, no escaping the love he has for the girl on the bed nor the fucked-up cybernetic mess of a man who stands beside him.

Instead, he tells them both how he feels, even though he knows she can't hear him, and he walks away.

Some things are worth fighting for. Some things are worth surrender.

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