



# The People's Samizdat

*the collected fiction*

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The Collected Fiction

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# The Last White Man

by Mason Morrison

I awoke in a daze; it was midnight and I had been camping in the remains of a Jamba Juice inside the long abandoned West Town mall in what used to be Knoxville, Tennessee. After the secession of 2045, Tennessee and the surrounding states had become the Free Republic of Robertson, named after the neo-Confederate lieutenant Max Robertson who'd [REDACTED] inside the headquarters of The New Socialist Front, [REDACTING] commandant XXX during the Bronx offensive of 2038. After the Republic's forces were defeated by a battalion of NSF soldiers financed by Bain Capital in 2052, the state formerly known as Tennessee was where the first camps were built to house dissidents. The facilities were scuttled after NSF withdrew from the area in 2060 but the fences and building frames remain, rusted remnants of where tens of thousands of neo-Confederates were tortured and executed. I had driven by them on my way to the mall, making my way past the bullet casings and barbwire. My older brother Steven had died in a facility like this. I remembered the night I'd gotten news of the capture of his unit. I saw an NSF flag painted on the exterior wall of the ruins of one of the prison buildings, a symbol I had come to hate and fear since the inception of the organization in 2029 following the assassination of XXX.

I got slowly to my feet. My leg still ached dully where I had been ambushed and shot by an automated NSF drone three days ago while scrounging for rations and ammunition in an abandoned military encampment in the area formerly known as Cookeville. I had been careless and gone out during the day. The drones were solar powered due to the NSF's green energy policy and didn't operate at night. Luckily, I managed to deploy one of my EMP grenades and while the drone was disabled, I

made my escape in my old gas-powered Dodge Challenger which I'd salvaged from a demolition yard where vehicles that ran on fossil fuel were taken to be dismantled in accordance with the previously mentioned green energy policy. I removed the bullet and bandaged the wound after I'd arrived at the mall. I had some of my remaining rations and built a crude camp inside the Jamba Juice. The pain in my leg was intense. I reluctantly took half a tablet of *Amednazol*, a painkiller with natural ingredients that had been promoted by Joe Rogan shortly before he had been arrested and tried in front of a military tribunal for hosting a neo-Confederate sympathizer known only as *SneedGroyper* on his podcast in 2031. The pills were extremely hard to come by.

The painkillers worked fine but sapped my energy and gave me some bizarre dreams. It was during one of these dreams that I had first encountered the Demon. But I didn't want to think about that now. I gathered my gear, a first aid kit, a halogen flashlight, several batteries, a sleeping bag, a 1911 handgun with only three bullets of standard 9mm ammo, an energy field scanner I'd used to detect drones, four tins of rations, a makeshift radio I used to tune into pirate bands and try to find anyone who was broadcasting, a hunting knife, a canteen, my three remaining EMP grenades, a canvas rucksack, a small tool kit, my grandfather's watch, and a few tablets of *Amednazol*. All my belongings were precious to me and had been very difficult to find, especially after the NSF mandated weapon confiscations shortly after they seized power.

I walked through the mall's devastated skyway and tried to imagine what the place had looked like before the war had started. My father had told me stories of his childhood experiences going to malls, how glowing neon and concrete expanses had seemed to stretch on forever as a testament to 20th century capitalism and the promise of material wealth to all that entered its doors. But here was nothing but a cavernous husk where bullet holes lined the walls, store fronts had been smashed and broken glass covered the floor. A bomb had taken out a large portion of the ceiling, huge chunks of concrete and steel littered the floor

below, exposed wires hung everywhere, any piece of metal had long since been stripped out of the building, the lower levels were flooded with ghastly brown water and moss had begun to grow on the walls. It stunk terribly.

I looked inside one of the shops as I passed, it had been burnt out by an incendiary grenade or Molotov cocktail God knows how long ago. I saw figures of obese, gender-neutral mannequins lying on the ground, the flames had contorted their plastic faces into hideous masks. Next to one of the mannequins laid a large banner with single marks depicting a pretty white woman surrounded by leering blacks. I hadn't been too familiar with this type of advertising as my parents forbade me and my brother from watching television. My father would tell us stories about how after the NSF was formed a splinter group of black mercenaries calling themselves the Independent African Coalition would go around to what few remaining white towns and villages there were and kidnap women and girls to be used as war brides, anyone who resisted was cut down by machetes or automatic gunfire. The police with their rainbow uniforms and cruisers just sat by and abetted it, their state-backed superiors in the upper echelons of law enforcement considered IAC to be off limits. I felt a twinge of anger thinking about it, and thinking about what had happened to my parents, but anger was just a waste of energy. I needed to be clear-headed, I needed to take time and prepare. My mission was just beginning. My name is Mason Morrison, I am 25 years old, born during the great American schism, and as far as I know, I'm the last white man in America.

## I Sakura

I made my way towards the abandoned Kohl's on the second floor of the mall. There was an exit back to the parking lot on the

far side of the store. I had hoped no one would notice my Challenger parked outside, I had been losing blood quickly when I'd arrived at the mall and didn't have time to properly hide the car. It had been retrofitted to run on ethanol, which was valuable, granted not as valuable as actual gas, which was a rarity since the Jamnagar oil refinery had been destroyed in a [REDACTED] from Kekistani separatists in 2035, but before then a nationwide adoption of nickel-manganese-cobalt batteries for cars had already been mandated. I had brokered a deal with some of the few remaining corn farmers operating in the outskirts of the Robertson Republic. They supplied me with ethanol, I supplied them with DVDs, electronics and salvaged GPUs I came across so they could mine Bitcoin. I noticed the store's sign had been destroyed by what looked like machine gun fire, only the 'O' and a portion of the 'L' remained. Vines growing from the smashed skylight above wrapped around what remained of the façade, they covered up what appeared to be pro-NSF graffiti. More mannequins were scattered about, some wearing tattered remains of clothing, others had been shot full of holes or smashed to pieces.

As I entered the decimated store I could hear footsteps and voices...and what sounded like a woman yelling. The sounds drew closer from the opposite end of the store. I hid behind a smashed display case and carefully watched in the direction of where the voices were coming from. I could make out five figures drawing nearer, four Hispanic men and what appeared to be an Asian woman. One of the men had his hand clasped around the woman's wrist and his arm locked around her neck, another man was fondling her breasts and laughing.

"My father already paid you!" The woman shouted; this prompted the group of assailants to laugh.

"Baby we ain't interested in money!" shouted one of the men excitedly, "We just want your ass! And if your old man was wise, he'd let us take what we want, he knows the price of doing business!"

He produced a large knife out of his jacket and held the blade between her breasts. The woman yelled out and began franti-

cally kicking at him. He backed off with a smile on his face, "Pablo! Time for this bitch to say goodnight!" The man to his left hit the woman in the head with the butt of his rifle, there was a sickening crack and she fell to the floor limp. All four men burst out laughing, the one with the knife kicked her in the stomach hard, she gasped in pain and began groaning.

"Alright sweet thing," he began, "Time to get my money's worth..." he knelt on her and rolled her over onto her back, she moaned in protest causing him to backhand her, the rest of the group howled with laughter. From behind the display case, I studied the men, the one kneeling over the woman had a knife, as did the man standing to his right, as for the two men behind him one held a revolver and the other an AR. I weighed my options, I only had three bullets left in my pistol's clip, I had to get to my car, hopefully it was still in one piece, I needed to get the fuck away from here. This wasn't the first time I'd seen something like this, it was a daily occurrence among those unfortunate enough to still call the Republic home, I hadn't always chosen to intervene either, there had been times when I just couldn't. And I knew the cost of showing my face to these men. The NSF had a bounty on anyone who looked like me, and they paid well. I shifted in my position and accidentally kicked a perfume bottle. It skittered across the floor and hit another display case with a pronounced thud, I froze.

"What the fuck was that!?" One of the men shouted, the guy with the AR began aiming it in my direction. The guy who was kneeling over the woman pointed his knife at the display case I was hiding behind said, "Pablo go check that out, I'm busy." Then he turned his attention back to the semi-conscious woman, beginning to cut into her shirt with his knife.

I hit the forward assist of the rifle and began moving closer to my position, I couldn't sneak back around, they'd spot me, and I knew there was no negotiating with these guys, I drew my 1911 out of its holster and flipped the safety off. From my position I could see a light fixture hanging down near where the group of guys were. Thinking quickly, I booted a nearby mannequin head



from out behind the display case, it flew towards a pile of rusted display racks and made a loud crash. Pablo shouted and began firing towards where the head landed. Had to be quick now. I vaulted the display case and fired a bullet at the hanging light fixture, it exploded with a flash and a shower of sparks.

The men began screaming and Pablo was shielding his eyes. I raced towards him. the man with the revolver fired a shot at me, which went wide. Pablo gasped, his eyes grew wide, and he tried raising the rifle at me. I repositioned my free arm and closed the distance, I hit Pablo in the face as hard as I could with my elbow. A jet of blood sprayed out of his nose, I grabbed him by his collar and used him as a human shield. Revolver man fired another shot, closer this time. I threw Pablo's heavy body as hard as I could at him. It hit him hard and he lost his footing and sprawled on the floor, his head hit the tile with a crack and the revolver flew out of his hand. Rico yelled out but before he could get to his feet I brought my knee into his face, knocking him backwards. As I did so I felt a knife slash my shoulder blade, there was a burst of pain, but I ignored it and wheeled around in time to block another arcing strike with my free arm, from my hip I fired one of my two remaining bullets into the bottom of his jaw, chunks of brain exploded out of the top of his head, and he collapsed in a heap.

"Hey white boy!" came a voice behind me, I turned around to face Rico, who had his arm around the woman's neck and his knife close to her throat. "I don't know where your bitch ass came from, but this shit is over now, imma carve this bitch up then imma bleed your monkey ass slow." I aimed my 1911 at him, but I couldn't get a clean shot. That was when I noticed the woman had a long shard of glass in her bloody right hand. Our eyes met and, with my gun still trained on Rico, I gave her the slightest nod. She brought the shard down into Rico's thigh.

He bellowed and loosened his grip. The woman threw her head back and hit him in the face. Then, free of his grip, she ducked out of the way as I fired my last remaining bullet at Rico. It grazed the side of his neck. Rico brought his knife up and

charged at me at full speed, I dropped the 1911 and brought my arms up to counter him. He swung the knife at my face. I maneuvered out of the way but could feel the wind of the blade as it slashed the air less than an inch away from my eye. He brought the knife back aiming for my neck, with my right forearm I blocked the strike and managed to get my right hand around his wrist, with my left hand I grabbed his elbow and managed to lock his arm, I brought my right knee into his stomach. Rico let out a woofing sound and began struggling against my arm bar. I twisted his wrist as hard as I could, there was a pop and a scream of pain from Rico as the knife fell from his hand and clattered to the floor.

Still holding his wrist, I brought my left arm around and got him in a head lock. I noticed there was an open section of the Kohl's floor that was a long drop to the floor below. The safety railing had long been ripped out by scrappers. With all my strength and against his struggling and cursing I dragged Rico towards the opening. I felt his free hand reaching for the knife on my belt. I brought my knee up into his chest and in one motion threw him off the ledge. There was a scream and a loud splat as Rico's body hit the concrete below, I peered over the edge to see him sprawled out. Before I could turn to check on the Asian girl, I heard the hammer of a run clicking back. To my right was revolver man. He was sneering and aiming his gun at me. "You know how many of you I killed back in the day?"

I slowly moved my left hand towards my knife, not taking my eyes off his gun, I measured the distance between us and slowly started positioning myself to lunge at him. Before I could make my move a shot rang out and revolver man's head snapped to the side. With his last ounce of life, he squeezed the trigger of his revolver and fired a shot into the floor before collapsing. I wheeled around to see the Asian girl holding Pablo's rifle with the barrel still smoking.

She lowered it and looked at me, "Those bastards...they did a job for my father...they gathered scrap steel for him...m-my father paid them, but they said it wasn't enough...they grabbed

me and clubbed him over the head...they dragged me here and I don't know if my father is alive or dead." I moved toward her, and she aimed the gun at me, I raised my hands.

"Hey," I began, "I'm not gonna hurt you, you can lower that rifle. I just needed a place to stay for a little while, I'm going to be moving on...I can take you back to your father."

"How do I know I can trust you?" She demanded, still aiming the rifle at me. "I haven't seen any of your kind for years, I was told all white men were thieves and liars, I was told it was good you all died out."

I took a step closer to her and she fired a round at my feet.

"Whoah! Relax!" I pleaded, "You were fed lies by the NSF, so was I, if I was really as bad as you think I would've just let those guys rape you."

At this she lowered the rifle and glared at me, "Fuck the NSF" she said, "Those bastards raised our taxes, when we couldn't pay, they took our home and forced us to live in this hell hole. They said my little brother was trans...they sent men to our home and..."

Tears began welling up in her eyes, she loosened her grip on the rifle, I took another step towards her, my arms still raised.

"Hey look," I started, "I want to get those sons of bitches as badly as anyone, they took from me as well, and they said it was for the good of society. I lost so many people, people I loved..."

The girl dropped the gun and looked away from me, tears streaming down her face now. "I just don't know what to do..." she began, I took off my jacket and slowly approached her, gently placing it over her shoulders. I looked her in the eye and said "You can start by telling me your name." She wiped tears away from her face and met my gaze.

In a low voice she said "Sakura".

## II

### Toji

Sakura and I grabbed all the weapons and ammo from Rico's gang, along with a pair of boots, a lighter, and a tin containing eight hand-rolled cigarettes. Tobacco was a rarity and only grown by a handful of farmers in the Republic and even then, it was heavily taxed. I figured I could barter with the cigarettes or maybe even slonk them if the mood called for it. We left the mall and made it back to the Challenger. Fortunately no one had found it. Sakura told me Rico had parked in the adjacent lot. We found his truck and with Sakura standing watch with the AR, I siphoned the fuel and took the battery. In the bed were a couple of high-powered rifles, a case of ammo, a flare gun with several flares, a shovel, an axe along with some other miscellaneous tools, and a large burlap sack with dark stains on it. I cautiously opened the sack and shone the flashlight inside, inside were what looked like severed limbs and a decapitated head stared back at me.

"Oh *FUCK!*" I yelled and jumped back, prompting Sakura to wheel around and point the rifle at the truck.

"What!?" She demanded. Regaining my composure, I told her there were body parts inside the bag. She scoffed and said, "Yeah I'm not surprised, guys like Rico dismember people, sometimes it's to get at tech implants and upgrades in their bodies to sell to NSF transhumanists. But mostly it's turf war shit or what happens when someone can't pay a debt." A small smile crept across Sakura's face, "Don't tell me you haven't seen shit like this before, especially after the way you handled those guys in there..."

I felt a bit embarrassed; I had seen things like this before, more times than I'd cared to remember. My brief time fighting for the neo-confederates had shown me a great deal of God-awful things. I remembered going on patrol in towns after the IAC had been through, the state of the corpses they'd left be-

hind still haunted me. Sakura giggled a bit then walked up to the driver's side door of the truck and tried the handle, discovering it was locked. She used the butt of the rifle to break the glass.

"Careful!" I exclaimed, "There could be more of those assholes out here!"

She scoffed at me again, "You worry too much, white boy," and began exploring the truck's interior. I took the contents of the truck bed, minus the bag full of body parts, and tossed them in the trunk of the Challenger. I turned back to Sakura.

"You find anything in there?" She climbed out of the truck and turned around holding a small statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in one hand and a huge joint in the other. "Say what you will, those s\*\*\*\* know how to party!" she giggled, "Let's spark this shit up!"

I told her I was good, I didn't fuck with weed, and besides we needed to get her back to her father. Sakura rolled her eyes and begrudgingly walked back to the Challenger. We got inside, and she produced a small lighter, "You sure you don't want any?" I gave her a scowl and said, "Just make sure you roll the window down."

We left the mall and I drove Sakura back to her father's farm. Asians didn't fare much better than Whites during the war. A lot of them had immigrated with the promise of professional positions inside the NSF's corporate oligarchy but, they were only wanted for their penchant to vote for the progressive policies offered in the NSF's official platform. Once supreme leader XXX was dead, and the NSF had entrenched itself fully within the institutions, corporations, and academia, there wasn't any need for a high IQ demographic with proximity to "whiteness". Instead, higher up positions were offered to queer, indigenous and brown folx with Asians left working in dangerous or redundant industries for subsistence wages. It didn't help when other major Asian countries like China had begun annexing and ethnically cleansing Africa, or that Japan had developed hyper realistic holographic anime waifus, or that Kim Jong Il had finally succeeded at nuking South Korea. These occurrences soured the

reputations of Asian minorities in the States.

I asked Sakura how she had run afoul of Rico and his friends. She told me, in between taking drags of the joint, that she knew them because they had done some jobs for her father in the past, gathering scrap metal that her father used to make farm implements and tools, along with sculptures. He had had a reputation as an artist in Japan before emigrating to America in 2028. She said one day there had been an argument over payment, which had typically come in the form of ethanol refined from her father's corn, apparently the amount her father offered wasn't enough and things had gotten physical. Sakura's brothers wound up fending off Rico's gang at gunpoint, but he had sworn revenge. A few days later Sakura had been out for a walk just outside her father's property when she was approached and grabbed by Rico.

"Always knew he was a piece of shit." Sakura remarked as she tossed what was left of the joint out the window. She turned to me, her eyes a light red color, "Thanks for helping me, I know I didn't say that before...but there'll be more like Rico, those bastards don't know when to quit." I nodded to her, and we sat in silence for a few moments before Sakura pointed towards a large barn on the horizon. "That's my father's farm."

I pulled off onto a dirt road between two fields of corn. I noticed a tall metal structure rising above the stalks with what appeared to be a camera perched on it. It made me slightly nervous. I also noticed what appeared to be a network of hoses crisscrossing above the corn supported by metal risers. Each riser looked like it had a sensor on it. Sakura explained that it was the irrigation system, but accelerant could also be bumped through the hoses to douse and ignite the corn in the event the NSF tried expropriating the farm. She said that her father's property had once extended over 300 acres, but more than two thirds of it had been requisitioned by the NSF for undisclosed purposes and her father swore they wouldn't get any more from him.

After driving for about a quarter mile there was a clearing with a farmhouse and what looked like a modified antique trac-

tor with a makeshift plow parked out front. About 50 yards away from the house sat the barn and a grain silo which appeared to be made from the fuselage of a commuter plane. Rising above the farmhouse was a large tower adorned with satellite dishes and cameras. There was a piece of machinery installed at the top. I recognized it as a military grade signal jammer. I parked the Challenger and got out, when suddenly I was blinded by spotlights and could hear footsteps closing in along with a gun being cocked. I shielded my eyes and wheeled around to face an Asian man pointing the barrel of a rifle in my face.

“Who the fuck are you?!” he demanded; I was about to make a move for the revolver but just then Sakura’s voice rang out:

“Stop it Haru! He’s with me!” He lowered the rifle.

“Sakura!” He exclaimed, “Where have you been? Dad’s been freaking out!” Haru slung the rifle over his shoulder and walked over to Sakura. He reached for her shoulder, “What happened to you? We were looking all over the property, we thought you had gotten grabbed!”

Sakura placed her hand over his, “I...I did...it was Rico, they took me to the mall...” Haru’s eyes grew wide, “He did *WHAT?!?*” Sakura pointed to me, “He stopped them, they won’t be showing up here anymore, we made sure of that.” Haru turned in my direction and studied me for a moment, then he turned back to Sakura.

“What the hell are you doing hanging out with a White guy?” Sakura became indignant.

“That White guy saved my ass.” They began arguing loudly in Japanese, hadn’t taken a lesson in a while so I couldn’t really make out what they were saying. Occasionally one of them would look over or point at me. I started wondering if it wouldn’t be a bad idea to leave when the door to the farmhouse opened and out stepped an elderly Asian man with a prosthetic leg followed by two younger Asian men who stood on either side of him, each holding guns. Haru and Sakura stopped arguing and began looking sheepishly towards him.

“Sakura,” began the old man, “Where have you been?”

Sakura looked down and told him about what had happened with Rico at the mall.

The old man looked at me and asked, "Is this true?" I told him that yes, it was. He stood for a moment, looked as if he was thinking. Haru opened his mouth to say something but a stern look from the old man was all it took to shut him up. The old man turned back to me and made his way towards me. "Those men you killed, there will be more like them." He said as he strolled, "But you have brought my stubborn daughter back to me, and for that you have my thanks."

He stopped a couple feet in front of me and began looking me up and down as he paced in a circle around me. "I have not seen one of your kind in quite a while." He said, "I was beginning to wonder if there was any of you left." He stopped in front of me. "Tell me my White friend...do you have any family left?"

I responded, "My parents were killed during the secession, my brother was captured and killed by NSF forces after the neo-Confederacy fell."

The old man shook his head and looked down thoughtfully, "Those boys fought a war they knew they couldn't possibly win, admirable in a way, to die fighting for what you believe in, yet ultimately foolhardy." I felt a twinge of anger at his remark, but decided not to respond. The man looked like he had seen some shit, especially if what Sakura had said about her brother had been true. The old man noticed the bloodstain on my pants from where the drone had shot me and asked if I'd been injured. I told him that yes, I had, but the wound had been dressed. He looked me in the eye.

"Come inside, we'll at least get you something to eat and Sakura can inspect your wound." He turned and began walking towards the house, then stopped and turned back to say, "How foolish of me, you've met Sakura and my son Haru, the other two are my sons Akio and Botan, my name is Toji."

The farmhouse looked as it had been built in the early 20th century, but Toji and his family had kept it up well. Toji told me he had been there for twenty years and had moved in shortly



after the Robertson secession. He had taken his family from San Francisco. The local government was replaced in 2043, and the city had become a massive autonomous zone under control of the BIPOC reconciliation council, a radical group of ex-BLM separatists armed and funded by the IAC and lead by a black trans nonbinary amputee named Kokayne O'Shaughnessy. The city had been renamed New Mali and had undergone drastic changes. Every piece of "Euro-centric art and expression" had been removed from museums and public spaces and replaced by "art honoring the Afrocentric legacy of oppression", corporate chains had their local stores destroyed and employees forbidden from entering the city, police were taken hostage or outright killed until the state acquiesced to the council's demands and refused to police black and brown bodies any longer and the city's police precincts were shut down, as much as I hated to admit it, that was actually pretty based. American and state flags had been torn down and burnt and replaced by the council's official flag which depicted a brown fist smashing a white skull. Local stores, offices, and restaurants had their assets seized and redistributed. Barriers and checkpoints had been installed and a communal system had been implemented which operated as a hierarchy placing any non-blacks remaining in the zone at the bottom. The borders of the city were patrolled by technicals made from SUVs.

The murder rates inside the zone exploded, and it had gotten to a point that military drones patrolling the area captured footage of IAC soldiers could be seen piling bodies on top of each other in the former city square and burning them, the armed forces couldn't intervene because New Mali was recognized by NSF as being independent from government control. Toji said he was among the last Asian families to leave the New Mali; they were only allowed to leave with what they could carry and were spit on and jeered by a large group of gay brown residents as they entered the bus out of the zone. Toji said, "I had entered the city with hopes of raising my family as forward-thinking citizens and being able to live in prosperity, as the bus left through

the barriers for the last time the only thing, I could think of was how only prosperity was now only reserved for the broken and profane among us.”

Sakura led me to a back room and had me remove my pants so she could inspect my wound and change the bandage. It was a little awkward to say the least but her and I seemed to be developing a bit of a repour.

“My dad wanted me to be a doctor when I was younger, but it was impossible to get a scholarship even though I kept my grades up.” She explained as she looked over my hastily stitched bullet wound. “HmMMM” she remarked, “Not a bad job considering the circumstances, you must have stitched people up before.”

I thought about how I’d learned about field dressings from a medic in my brother’s unit, but I decided to spare her the gory details. “Yeah, I kinda learned how over the years”, I told her, “Used to have some medical files in an old tablet, I’d look through them when I was bored.”

Sakura said “Ahhh” in acknowledgement and produced a small jar of a funny smelling substance, she scooped some out with her fingers and rubbed it gently onto my wound, it started to sting.

“Ah fuck, what is that shit?” I blurted out a little more loudly than I intended to. Sakura giggled and told me it was a special organic balm to prevent infections. I kept my mouth shut as she did her work, tried not to think about how long it had been since I’d last had my pants off around a woman. She then placed a fresh bandage over the wound and told me I’d have to rest for a couple days, but that her father shouldn’t have an issue with that. I thanked her and put my pants back on, I told her I couldn’t be staying too long, that I had a journey to make.

Sakura turned and looked me in the eyes, “Well, at least stay for dinner.”

We sat down for a dinner of rice and bell peppers, beef and other meat was considered a luxury now. Toji told me that he used to raise cattle, but the NSF had taken them shortly after they requisitioned most of his property, the NSF had declared

the practice of livestock farming barbaric and all foodstuffs had to be naturally based. This coincided with their green policy and provided massive subsidies to companies producing plant-based products, as long as their executive boards were properly diverse, of course. We finished eating and Toji told his sons to get ready for the next days harvest.

He looked at Sakura and said “Don’t think we won’t be talking about what happened today, young lady.” Before dismissing her from the table Sakura rolled her eyes and gave me a quick smile as she left the room. Toji turned his gaze towards me, “She tells me your wound is healing, but you need rest, you can stay here for a few days, it’s not a problem.”

I thanked Toji for his hospitality and got to my feet, telling him I needed to be moving on. Toji looked at me thoughtfully, “Haven’t seen someone of European stock in quite some time, but your people always had a reputation for being in a hurry. At least stay the night, you must be tired.” I was going to insist on leaving, but something about Toji’s calm demeanor disarmed me. I had been travelling nonstop for days now, the more I thought about it, the more a night of rest appealed to me. Toji got up from his seat and walked over to me, “Tell me young man, where is it that you need to go running off to?”

I hesitated for a moment, then told him, “There was a remnant of my brother’s old unit still operating in the West Virginian woods, I lost contact with them a while ago, but I was heading in that direction.”

Toji eyed me, his expression grew serious. “Your brother, I’m guessing he fought the NSF.” I nodded, there had been nonstop propaganda against the neo-Confederates broadcast 24/7 during the conflict, most Americans had sympathies towards the NSF even as their intentions grew more hostile, I didn’t know if Toji would be one of them, but Sakura certainly didn’t seem to be. Toji stood for a moment, it looked as if he were contemplating something. He then looked up at me and said, “Follow me young man.”

We entered a small room on the ground floor of the house, inside was what looked like a small shrine with portraits of a

middle-aged Asian woman and another of an Asian teenager. Both pictures had black sashes draped over the corners of the frame.

Toji said, "That's my wife Yumi and our son Daichi. A few years after we moved here the NSF implemented a system where it began to profile children based on some algorithm they developed, even though me and Yumi homeschooled we still needed to comply. They determined Daichi was actually a girl and would need to be transitioned, me and Yumi were crestfallen. They sent armed men to our house to extract Daichi, I fought with them, and one of the men shot me in the leg and dragged Daichi away screaming. That's how I found up with this..." He knocked on his prosthetic leg. "Yumi was beside herself, and she couldn't cope, she took her own life less than a month after Daichi was taken. We were never told where he was taken to or if he was even alive."

I stood in silence, I'd lost people I'd loved as well, but a child and a wife were something different. Toji approached the shrine and took hold of an old tanto knife that had been sitting on a shelf.

He faced me and said, "My great grandfather fought for Hirohito, a fact I used to carry with shame, but since then I've learned that there are some things men must do to protect what's dear to them, even if the rest of the world disagrees." He pulled back the sheath of the knife and the blade glinted in the light. "My great grandfather killed six Americans with this knife in the Pacific theater before he was gunned down, it was returned to his son, my grandfather, after the war ended." He extended the knife out to me, "Take this, and plunge it into the heart of every NSF soldier you encounter."

I looked at Toji, then at the blade. I couldn't take it from him, if anything one of his sons should have it. I was about to protest but, once again, Toji's demeanor disarmed me, I reached out and took the knife.

I looked at him, "I...I don't know what to say..."

Toji smiled and lead me out of the room. "You don't have to say anything, and hopefully you won't have to use it. Come, I'll

show you where you'll be staying tonight." We walked from the house out to his barn. He drew back the large door to reveal a shop inside. There were tanks to refine corn into ethanol with computerized readouts, farming implements made from what looked like scrap metal next to welding equipment. There was a pile of scrap next to a large worktable with all manner of tools scattered across it, there were innumerable sacks of corn, and a large John Deere harvester parked under a hay loft.

Toji explained, "My sons do most of the harvesting and refining, they also aid me in designing tools. I'm getting to the age where I can't be exerting myself too much so I use what energy I have in...shall we say, creative pursuits." Toji lead me towards a door with Japanese lettering, through it was what he called his studio. Inside the room were a half dozen sculptures, each one unique in its own way. One looked like it was made from a bomb casing, others had gun parts welded onto them, one was about ten feet tall and resembled a tower with jagged pieces of metal jutting upwards, another was smaller and consisted of several crouched figures underneath a slab of steel.

Toji said he'd get contacted about his work from collectors in coastal cities. They paid well, but he would always use a pseudonym for the transactions and would deal with shipping his pieces through a third party. I walked around his gallery for a bit and examined his work, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a sculpture or any piece of art that hadn't been made with the express purpose of valorizing the "Afrocentric experience". Various chapters of the IAC had gone to museums and universities in urban areas across the US, and removed everything made by European artists, most of it was vandalized or burnt in huge public displays. Neo-Confederates had worked in conjunction with sympathetic artists and curators to save what they could or at least keep a record of what was taken, creating art like Toji's sculptures could have been considered a subversive act.

I finished my impromptu tour of his studio and Toji pointed me towards the hay loft. He said I could sleep there for the remainder of the night. I said goodnight to him and climbed

the ladder to find a bed, a lamp on a nightstand, and a small shelf containing several books. I took off my coat and placed my grandfather's watch on the nightstand, then laid on the bed. It wasn't particularly comfortable, but it was a hell of a lot better than what I was used to. I figure I'd gotten about three hours of sleep before an explosion woke me.

### III

## Banditos

I jumped from the bed and rushed to the small window overlooking the property. Looking down, I saw my Challenger ablaze and a handful of men firing automatic rifles into the farmhouse. One of them broke formation and lobbed an incendiary grenade into one of the second-floor windows. A burst of flame exploded outwards, blackening the siding surrounding the window. There came the sound of automatic gunfire. Someone was shooting out the lock on the big door. The door was pushed back and two men with rifles entered. One pointed to the ethanol containers.

"Load the truck up with that shit, the other guys'll take care of that old slope."

I grabbed my pistol and made sure it was loaded. I peered over the edge of the hay loft and spotted one of the men drawing closer. The loft was a good thirty feet above the barn's concrete floor, and the ladder was creaky as hell. There was no way I could make it down without drawing their attention, and I needed to get to the house to get Sakura and the other's out.

Thinking quickly, I tossed a spent clip across the barn. It clattered loudly against something metal and the two riflemen below wheeled around and began firing at the far side of the barn. One of the men was standing almost directly under the loft, knowing I had no time to spare. I jumped off and landed on him. I felt his body buckle under mine and there was a loud crack as his head contacted the floor. I rolled off of him and raced

towards the other man who was still distracted. As I closed the distance he turned around and I stuck the tanto blade into his throat.

He let out a gurgling cry as blood began pouring from his mouth. I yanked the blade out and a jet of his blood covered my face. He collapsed backwards grabbing at his neck. I was about to plunge the blade down into his heart and finish him off when there came a voice from outside the barn door.

“Hey, did you guys find anyone in—” A form appeared at the door, it was a short man holding a rifle, he looked at me and at the corpse of his comrade at my feet. He raised his rifle; his draw was quick, but mine was quicker. I got off two rounds, one went wide, the other struck him squarely in the chest. He shouted and squeezed his trigger. Bullets sprayed all over the interior of the barn. I ducked out of the way behind Toji’s work bench and could hear voices yelling outside.

“There’s someone in the fucking barn!” and immediately afterwards there was another hail of gunfire. Jagged holes were torn in the wooded sides of the barn and bullets ricocheted around, they struck the ethanol vats and the yellow liquid began leaking out, pooling on the floor. Sparks were kicked up as bullets hit the metal surface of the desk I was using for cover. Two more men entered the barn. One was firing his gun, the other was grabbing his wounded compatriot and dragging him outside. I reached my arm around the top and began blind firing back. There came more yelling and shouting. Suddenly there was a loud clanking sound as something was tossed inside the barn. I peeked out from my hiding spot to see an incendiary grenade was rolling towards the punctured ethanol vats.

The barn door began closing and I could hear an engine. It appeared they were blocking off the door with a truck. The grenade ignited with a bright spark and flames began engulfing the vats. They grew taller, I could hear the pressure building up inside the vats as the flames raged on, making a loud whistling sound. I knew it wouldn’t be long until they exploded. I looked around for an exit. Flames were blocking the entrance to Toji’s studio, the

temperature was rising, and the interior of the barn was filling with smoke. I could hear the wooden joists creaking and splintering under the heat.

I noticed the hulking shape of the Harvester under the loft. I ran over and climbed into the driver's seat, praying Toji had enough fuel in it. I started it up. The engine roared to life. It had been a while since I'd been behind the wheel of one of these things. When I was a teenager, my brother and I had done some farming work for family friends. I spent a lot of hours that summer in combines and tractors.

I pulled the harvester forward. Just then, one of the vats did explode, there was a ball of flame, and a piece of twisted metal struck the harvester's window, nearly shattering it. I could feel the flames even from inside the machine's cabin. I drew forward more, then slammed the thing into reverse, with a whine and a loud clunk the harvester moved in reverse towards the far wall of the barn. I built up speed and crashed into the wall as hard as I could. The wood buckled and I could hear a couple loud cracks, but it didn't give way. I hammered the gas, the wheels found traction and I could hear the wall groan under the force of the harvester.

A moment later there came a loud crash as the wall finally gave way and the harvester rolled out into the field behind the barn, which was engulfed in flames. More shots rang out and hit the cab. My little stunt had drawn some attention. I kicked open the harvester door and dove out onto the ground, ducking behind the hulking machine as several gunmen closed the distance. I needed to get to the farmhouse to check on Sakura and her family before it was too late, I didn't even know if they were alive. I readied my pistol and climbed under the harvester. I could see two sets of legs running closer, I fired at them, I managed to hit the knee of one man. He screamed and sprawled out on the ground mid-run.

His gun fell from his hand, and he began scrambling quickly towards it. I aimed and fired again, hitting him squarely in the cheek. He jolted back in a jerking motion and collapsed. His com-



patriot began yelling in Spanish and firing at the harvester ties. I fired two shots at him from my position, one struck his groin, the other his chest and he fell backwards. I rolled out from under the harvester and got to my feet, racing towards the farmhouse with my gun drawn. I took a moment to grab the rifle away from the bandit who was still alive. He was still grasping onto the grip and trying to aim the barrel at me with his remaining strength, I fired my pistol twice at point blank range into his face and continued my path to the farmhouse. There were four men positioned outside the house, two were watching it burn and two others spotted me running up from the side and began firing at me. I fired a burst back and ducked behind Toji's tractor. From where I was positioned, I could see movement inside the house, suddenly one of the ground floor windows burst open and I could see Haru firing shots at the bandits outside.

Haru managed to strike one in the gut. They returned fire and hit Haru in the arm. He ducked back into the house. I tried leaning around the tractor and aiming at the bandits, but a hail of bullets forced me back. I peered around the other side of the tractor to see one of the men race up to the front porch of the house, screaming in Spanish and firing wildly into the front door. He ran up to the door and lifted his leg to kick it in, but then a shotgun blast from inside tore a hole in the door and forced him backwards in a cloud of blood. The door swung open, and out came Sakura aiming a Mossberg.

One of the men that had been approaching my cover spot behind the tractor wheeled around and aimed at Sakura. His comrade to the right of him was still firing at me. Bullets hit the metal body of the tractor and kicked up sparks. He also hit the ground and clouds of dirt began spraying up, forcing me to keep my eyes shut. After another burst of gunfire there came a pronounced *click*, his clip was empty. I jumped to my feet and aimed over the top of the tractor. The gunman's face was twisted into a mask of horror and surprise as I fired a burst into his chest. His comrade who had been aiming at Sakura cried out and wheeled around just in time for her to fire a cartridge of buckshot into his back.

I fired as well and struck him in the middle of the forehead. His head snapped back and he fell to the ground, I ran from behind the tractor and headed to Sakura, I noticed Haru was behind her carrying a wounded Toji out of the house.

Sakura scanned the area with her shotgun as Haru gently placed Toji on the ground, it looked like Toji had a chest wound, Haru himself had been shot in the arm. I went up to them.

“Where’s Akio and Botan?” I asked.

Haru turned his attention away from his father and walked quickly over to me. “They’re dead thanks to you, these bastards must have followed you and Sakura back from the mall!”

Haru got up in my face and shoved me backwards. I kept my footing and put my hands up. I didn’t want to have to fight Haru, not after this.

“Haru! Stop!” Came Sakura’s voice from behind us, “It’s not his fault!”

Haru ignored her and took a swing at me, which I side-stepped. He came at me again, trying to swing at me. This time I countered and kicked his leg out from under him, sending him sprawling backwards.

“Mother fucker!” Haru clutched his arm and screamed as he scrambled back to his feet. I put my hands up again and tried to calm him down.

“Look man,” I started, “I know what you’re going through, I lost people too!” Haru closed the distance again, but this time Sakura got in between us.

“Haru stop!” She yelled out again, “You’re shot and father is wounded, this is no time for this bullshit!”

Haru shoved her to the side and drew a pistol from behind his back, pointing it at my head. I drew my pistol in response.

“Go ahead white boy!” Haru sneered, “Put one in me, you may as well have done it to Akio and Botan!”

Suddenly Toji’s voice rang out, “Haru! Stop this foolishness!”

Haru lowered his gun and turned to face his father. Sakura rushed to Toji’s side and began examining his wound, Haru knelt next to his father and took his hand.

“Father,” he said quietly, “You’re going to be okay..”

I approached them quietly, Haru turned to face me and yelled, “You stay the fuck back!” I backed up a few paces, then Toji turned to face me.

“This was always bound to happen, one day it wasn’t going to be enough for them, and they would come like they did tonight... I should have left this place and taken you all years ago...” He began coughing, which prompted Sakura to open the first aid kit she brought outside and begin applying pressure to his chest with some medical gauze.

Toji took her hand and weakly said “It’s over my dear...my journey ends here...”

“No!” Yelled Sakura, “No dad, don’t say that we can find a doctor!” Tears began streaming down her face and Toji used his remaining strength to offer a smile,

“Y-you two...” he began “You get away from here...go with Mason...find his people...” He turned his head towards me and said, “Don’t forget what we t-talked about, Mason.”

I clutched the knife he had given me and said, “I won’t.”

This prompted an angry glare from Haru. Toji turned back to his children and said something in Japanese. After a few moments he touched them both on the cheek, closed his eyes and breathed his last. I didn’t know what to do, had it been my fault? Had Haru been right about them following us back here? I’d been lucky not to encounter any bandits like these for a while, I knew that the Republic was no longer safe, and I’d have to double my efforts to get out of the area. But I hadn’t been planning on bringing anyone with me on my journey to West Virginia, and Haru certainly didn’t seem to want to be anywhere near me. I couldn’t blame him as he’d just lost three members of his family. I was reminded of the time the NSF visited my family, the horror I’d witnessed, and how I’d never wish it on anyone.

After a few moments Sakura looked at Haru and then me, “I need you to check around the property for any survivors, I’m going to fix Haru’s arm.”

I nodded and began making my way around the ruins of the farmhouse and barn, retrieving weapons, and rifling through the pockets of any corpse I came across. I found cash on some of them, dollar bills with Malcolm X's face, twenties with Harriet Tubman's face, a couple fifties with Frederick Douglas's face on them. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen legal tender with a White president's face on it. They'd even recast coins with the likenesses of various black figures, including George Floyd on the quarter. It was released at the same time a fifty-foot marble sculpture of him was unveiled in Minneapolis. It didn't really matter who was on the money, as cash these days had retained only a small percentage of its value from previous decades since the economy collapsed in 2037. Most financial transactions these days came from cards issues by the NSF after they'd taken control of the federal reserve in 2048 after the directors of the Fed were accused of being insensitive towards colonized transgender furries and arrested and executed. To possess one of the NSF cards you had to swear undying loyalty to the regime and promise to destroy any white, cisgendered society you came across for the betterment of the progressive empire.

I wondered where these bandits had gotten their hands on actual cash when I noticed a trail of blood leading into the cornfields behind the farmhouse. As I drew closer, I could hear dragging and grunting sounds and see the form of one of the wounded bandits slowly moving through the corn. I readied my gun and approached him as quietly as I could. He noticed me when I was about a yard away and attempted to roll on his back and aim his gun at me, I ran up and kicked the gun out of his hand and knelt on his chest, aiming the barrel of my gun at his head. I demanded to know where he'd come from. He moaned in pain and attempted to squirm free. I struck him in the side of the head with the butt of my gun and grabbed him by the collar, yanking him upwards into a sitting position I repeated my question over his protests.

"I don't know man! Me and my boys got the call and rolled out, we got told there was a white man in the area, and he may

have been hiding out here, we got told to make it look like a raid, the fucking g\*\*ks have been causin' trouble out this way! Fuck lemme go!"

I pointed my gun under his chin and asked him who'd called them. "I don't know, I just got told our boy Rico got clapped and we was gonna make whoever did it pay! Got told we'd get more credits for takin out your white ass!"

I figured these c\*cksuckers knew Rico. Some gangs that operated in the Republic were just looking for food and resources. There were rumors that in exchange for protection the NSF enlisted some of these groups to do their dirty work and make it look like random attacks to conceal their involvement. This was a tactic used by the NSF to avoid the prying eyes of the World Global Council, which had been formed from the remnants of the EU to promote globalism and crush any remaining "white supremacist terror" that crept up in ravaged former superpower America after the secession and ensuing civil war. Officially the WGC condemned the NSF's actions but took no action to prevent the hunting down of white Americans as to not cause an international incident. The NSF was allowed to operate so long as their methods were deemed legitimate.

My patience with this assh\*le was running thin. I pushed the run up to his chin and asked him how he knew where we were, again he sputtered and yelled that he didn't know. I heard footsteps behind me, I turned around to see Sakura and Haru standing behind me. Haru had a fresh bandage on his arm and was carrying a rifle.

"Move aside white boy," he said, aiming the rifle at the wounded bandit I'd been interrogating.

"Wait!" I pleaded, "I need to know where he came from and how he found us!"

Haru scoffed, "This motherf\*cker ain't telling you anything, he's just a footsoldier, check his pockets..." I reached inside one of the bandit's jacket pockets and found an NSF card emblazoned with AOC's horse face and stained with blood from where he'd been shot. Holding the card in my hand, I faced the injured ban-

dit again. I was about to ask him who'd given him the card when a shot rang out and his head snapped back with a jet of blood. Haru had just shot him in the face. I jumped to my feet

"Haru! What the fuck are you doing?!" I yelled at him.

Haru slung his rifle over his shoulder and said calmly, "He wasn't gonna tell you shit, man, and that's the only way to deal with guys like that, parasites the lot of em'." Haru began walking back towards the remains of the farmhouse. There was blood spatter on my face and my ears were ringing. Sakura handed me a rag and gave me an apologetic look.

We spent the next couple hours gathering weapons and anything else we could find on the bandits including a couple more NSF cards. Each of the bandits also carried with them a communicator. Cell phone networks had gone down in the last few decades after radical acolytes of Ted Kaczynski pulled down the majority of network towers, and debris from Elon Musk's exploded space station had taken out a good number of cell satellites. The communicators were one of the few effective means of talking with other people over a certain distance. They had a range of roughly twenty miles.

We searched through the house, my Challenger, and barn to salvage anything we could and buried Toji, Akio, and Botan. Sakura presided over their bodies and recited what sounded like a prayer in Japanese. We found the trucks the bandits came in parked on the edge of one of the corn fields. There had been a handful of cans of ethanol that survived the fire. It might have been enough to get me to West Virginia.

I thought about my journey and the tragic events that had unfolded on Sakura's family because of me. Haru clearly blamed me for what had happened to his family, but did Sakura? I had wanted to leave that night, but Toji had insisted I stay. If I had left would the bandits have still attacked them? Would Sakura's brothers and father still have been alive? I decided it was best not to think about it, what's done is done, and now I'd just wanted to get the hell out of there, out of the Republic and find any of my brothers that remained. I didn't know what to tell Sakura and

Haru though, but I knew it would probably be best if I was out of their lives, even though Toji had thought otherwise. I didn't want to cause any more harm to what remained of his family. I loaded up the truck with weapons, fuel, and equipment and was preparing to take my leave when Sakura hopped in the passenger seat next to me. I looked at her,

"I think it's best if you stay with your brother, I've caused you guys enough harm."

She gave me a sharp glance, "My father wanted us to come with you," she responded, "So we're coming, if your friends are still out there it's our best chance at survival. I think you owe us that much."

Haru walked up to the side of the truck. "What are you doing Sakura?" He asked, growing indignant.

"We're going with him," said Sakura, "It's what father wanted, we need to get the hell out of here. Haru, get in the truck."

Haru became angry, "There's no way in hell I'm going anywhere with him!" He shouted, prompting a loud argument between him and his sister. They yelled at each other in Japanese for a few minutes, it culminated with Haru throwing open the door to his truck and grabbing his sister's arm, Sakura screamed in protest and twisted out of her brother's grip.

"I'm going!" she yelled in her brother's face, "That's all there is to it!" Haru stood there scowling.

After a moment he looked up and said, "I'm staying, I can rebuild somewhere else, I'm going to go to the Yamigata's and the Sakimura's and tell them what happened, we're going to take the fight to these bastards and end this shit once and for all!" Haru looked at me, "You take Sakura somewhere safe, and if anything happens to her, I'll fucking find you!" He said slamming the truck door, I didn't say anything I just nodded.

Sakura and her brother exchanged more words in Japanese. Haru embraced his sister and kissed her cheek, taking the time to shoot me one more dirty look. Haru nodded after the exchange and walked over to what appeared to be a control panel for the irrigation system. After typing a code into the pad a small

hatch opened revealing a red button, Haru pressed it then walked around and gave a final look to his sister before getting in the other truck and driving away. I noticed fluid spraying out of the nozzles above the corn, coating the stalks as I drove through the field. As we approached the road away from the property, I noticed sparks emanating from a few of the nozzles. Suddenly bright orange flames erupted and began engulfing the corn on both sides. Surprised, I looked at Sakura. She looked back at me and said,

“They won’t be getting anything else from my family,” She turned her attention back to the road. I could see a tear streaming down her face. I wanted to say something to comfort her, but I decided silence was the best option in the moment. I turned onto a paved road and sped away from the fields as they burned, and pillars of smoke reached the early morning sky.

## IV

A short while after we left the farm Sakura fell asleep in her seat. I’d steal glances at her occasionally, as she dozed. Occasionally she’d jostle around and I’d see tears streaming down her cheeks. I thought about waking her but decided against it. She needed the rest, I could only imagine how she was feeling in this moment. West Virginia wasn’t too far but we’d have to cut through Kentucky, which held a few NSF strongholds, granted most of their military forces had receded to the coasts but the last reports I’d gotten from my brother’s unit had spoken of troops still operating in the area near Mt. Vernon. Granted, that info was months old and a lot could’ve changed since then; still I decided it was best to take the back roads.

I found a rural back route and drove down it for a bit. It was a dusty stretch and cut through some farms. I’d see small, abandoned houses dotting the sides of the road sitting on plots of land that had been razed in anticipation of the NSF’s movement



through the area. A few of the houses had been requisitioned by the NSF and had steel barricades placed on the doors and were covered with graffiti. Some other houses had been demolished or burnt, scraps of charred wood were all that remained. This area had been where neo-Confederate troops had hidden when they were forced back from the Republic after a massive NSF offensive. Allowing any neo-Confederate a place to stay or safe passage was punishable by death. There were mass graves around here, the whole place reeked of death, and it gave me a horrible ominous feeling just driving through it.

I passed by a two-story farmhouse on the left. The front of the house looked like a bulldozer had driven through it. I could make out bullet holes and walls stripped of wiring inside. A second story window faced the road I was on. Someone was standing in it and watching my truck as it passed. It looked like a tall man in a suit wearing a skull shaped mask over his face.

I gasped and stopped the truck as I had seen this figure before. He had appeared in my dreams. I would see him on the edge of my vision, or far away. I could hear him speaking to me, but I could never make out what he was saying, weeks ago when I was camping near the area formerly known as Jackson, Mississippi, I had dreamt I was walking in the woods and I could hear his voice speaking from somewhere deep in the trees. Suddenly there were footsteps behind me and I could feel a skeletal hand clasp my shoulder, that had woken me up. I had figured it was a side effect of the Amednazol, and I hadn't thought much of it, even though I had checked the shoulder and saw the faint outline of what looked like finger marks quickly fade away after I'd woken up. Seeing this figure now freaked me out: was I hallucinating?

The truck stopping had roused Sakura from her slumber, "Wuh...what's doing on?" She asked. I turned to her and told her I thought I saw somebody. Her eyes grew wide, "It might be one of them!" she said nervously.

I turned back around to look at the window but he...or it, was gone. The ominous feeling came back in waves. Part of me

wanted to get out the truck and check the house quickly, but another part was demanding I step on the gas and get the hell out of there. I sided with the latter and sped off from the house.

“What did they look like?” asked Sakura in a shaky voice.

“It looked like a guy in a mask, but I might be seeing things, the radio has been quiet for hours, this area is totally abandoned save for some scavengers maybe.” This didn’t seem to do much to reassure Sakura, who asked me how long it would be until we were in West Virginia. “Should be another eight hours or so if we keep taking this route.” I gave her my best guess.

We drove for another hour and came across what looked like a NSF troop transport. It was shot to hell by what looked like armor piercing rounds. I slowed the truck to take a better look. There were skeletal remains of what appeared to be ambushed NSF soldiers laying in front of it. God knew how long they’d been there. Behind the driver’s seat was another desecrated corpse with a couple sizable holes in its chest. On the side among the bullet holes torn in the armor plating was neo-Confederate graffiti.

I took another look inside the truck’s cabin, and the man in the mask was sitting in place of the corpse. He turned to look at me, behind the mask I could see his eyes. The irises were a piercing red color. They seemed to be peering directly into my soul. Before I could stop myself, I yelled out and hit the accelerator. Sakura shrieked and asked me what was wrong. I slowed the truck and gathered my thoughts, what the hell was wrong? Was I going crazy? I shot a glance back at the transport. Although the rear-view mirror was smashed I could make out the reflection of the corpse still behind the wheel, glaring out into nothingness as it had been for what was probably years.

“I...I thought I saw that corpse move...” I stammered out to a concerned looking Sakura who appeared to be growing more nervous.

“Are you okay Mason?” She asked. She had been thorough a great deal in the last few hours and my theatrics were likely doing little to help her disposition. I stopped the truck again and

looked at Sakura, trying to be as reassuring as possible given the circumstances.

“I’m fine Sakura,” I forced myself to say, “I think I’m just freaking myself out, but I’m okay.” She didn’t look convinced, “Do you want me to drive for a while?” she asked, “You look tired...”

I took a couple of deep breaths and collected myself as best I could. The last thing I needed was to have a schizophrenic episode with someone’s life in my hands in a place where the NSF could strike any second. I was about to respond to Sakura when a loud beeping took my attention away. It was the energy field scanner, it had detected something. I grabbed it and looked at the screen. It had picked up what appeared to be a drone heading in from the east and moving quickly, it would be on top of us in a matter of minutes. Thinking quickly, I spotted a small house nearby. There was a makeshift steel awning sitting on metal supports on the side of a dirt driveway. I drove the truck quickly towards it and parked underneath, killing the engine and hoping the drone wouldn’t pick up the heat signature. I got out of the truck, covered it with a tarp I’d taken from Toji, and readied a scoped rifle as me and Sakura hid under the awning.

Looking at the scanner and tracking the drones movements, I used a spotting scope I’d found on one of the bandits to scan the sky and try to pinpoint where the drone was. They usually operated at a high enough altitude that I didn’t think my rifle could hit it, and even if I was able to bring it down it would send a clear signal to any NSF outfit that was still in the area, I just hoped the metallic awning would shield us from the drones sensors. Listening carefully, I could barely make out the drone’s engine sweeping across the sky. Adjusting my scope I was able to spot it, it was an older NX-90 model, but one that could operate autonomously for extremely long periods of time, this one could have been patrolling the area for years. Ducking down I watched the scanner as the drone left the airspace, Sakura began tugging on my arm,

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” she pleaded.

“No,” I told her, “It could be circling back around, we need to give it a few minutes.” We watched the scanner for a bit longer. It wasn’t picking up any more signatures. I thought of getting back in the truck and cutting across the nearby fields. There were a lot of back roads crisscrossing the area. It may have added some time to our trip, but it was a fair exchange for safety from any hardware or troops the NSF still had in the area. After a little while longer, and more begging from Sakura, I gathered the equipment and pulled the tarp off the truck.

Suddenly there came a crashing sound from inside the house, both I and Sakura jumped, and I pointed the rifle at the direction of the sound. I saw what looked like a shadow cross in front of the large window.

“Hey!” I shouted, drawing nearer to the house. Sakura crept up behind me, tugging at my jacket and begging to go in an increasingly harried voice. I gave her the truck keys and my 1911 pistol and told her to wait in the truck and not come out until I returned. If someone was stalking us, I wanted to deal with them. Sakura reluctantly agreed and returned to the truck, watching me with wide eyes as I drew closer to the front door of the house with my rifle trained at the window. I kicked the door in, it swung back against the wall on creaky hinges. I entered the house sweeping the room with my gun. It was empty save for some smashed furniture. On a nearby wall was a wooden desk with a cracked mirror. I passed by it, loudly demanding for anyone in the house to come out. The ominous feeling returned to me. I had a horrible feeling that I didn’t want to be in the house any longer and I was about to turn to leave when I heard a voice say “*Mason*” in a hushed tone, it came from my right.

I looked in the direction to see the mirror reflecting the room and myself, behind my shoulder I could see the masked man standing on the opposite side of the room and glaring at me with his red eyes. His reflection was distorted by the cracks in the mirror, it looked like there were several of them. I wheeled around with my rifle and saw...nothing. Then, again to my right came the voice.

“Over here,” it said. I turned and saw him, standing well over six feet tall and wearing a coal black suit I could see the little cracks and imperfections in his mask and his burning eyes behind it. He was inches away from me. I brought my rifle up but in one movement he grabbed the barrel and forced the gun upward. In desperation I pulled the trigger and sent a round into the ceiling. I could hear Sakura screaming, the truck door being thrown open and her footsteps racing towards me. I took my left hand off the rifle and grabbed at the handle of Toji’s tanto knife, but before I could bring the blade out the masked man reached out his hand and grabbed my face. I tried to break free of his grip but something flashed before my eyes and I felt my consciousness leave my body. I didn’t know how else to explain it, I was there in the house with the man in the mask and then there was something like a flash of light and the next thing I knew I was standing in the middle of the woods.

After the shock wore off, I readied the gun and looked around, calling out for anyone. The sun cast rays through the tree branches and illuminated a trail. An odd sensation came over me, I knew this place. Yes, these were the woods near my parents’ property when I was a kid. Me and my brother had built a fort close to a clearing where the trail led. I looked up the trail and saw something moving, I called out but got no response. How did I get here? Was I dreaming? Was this a hallucination? Who or what was the man in the mask? And more importantly, how the hell do I get out of here?

Not knowing what else to do I made my way up the trail, the leaves rustled beneath my boots, and I could hear birds and other animals in the distance as I walked, but there was something else on the wind, something like whispering voices. I knew that I wasn’t really in these woods, that I *couldn’t* be. The sky was an unnatural hue, the whispers in the distance grew louder and it began to feel like some sort of nightmare I had to wake up from and make sure Sakura was still okay, yet I still felt compelled to follow the trail. I saw more familiar things on my way, a crooked oak tree where I’d carved my initials when I was ten years old, a

cross consisting of two branches banded together with rope that marked the grave of a stray cat me and my brother had found. I knew the path well; if I kept walking, I'd find the fort up ahead, some force compelled me to walk on, it was like my subconscious, but it felt more...direct, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd know what I'd find when I got to the fort.

I came to the clearing and saw the fort on the edge of it, it was made of repurposed wood pallets and had a plastic tarp as a makeshift roof. I remembered sitting in it reading books I'd taken out of piles outside the library after it was declared a propaganda outlet and the NSF ransacked it. Most of them had been burned, but I was able to salvage a few with singed pages. I remembered how they'd smelled of smoke and my hands would be blackened with ash after reading them. I took a step forward and felt something crunch under my boot, something that wasn't a leaf. I looked down and saw it was a page from a book, the edges of it were black and curled. It looked old. I bent down to pick it up and realized it was from a book of Robert Frost poetry. Before I could read it, I heard something move up ahead in the direction of the fort. I absentmindedly stuffed the page into one of my pockets and moved closer to where the sound was coming from. As I neared the fort, I saw something moving inside of it. I aimed the rifle at the entrance to see a shape emerge. It grew taller and started to vaguely resemble a human, and then I could see it was the masked man.

"Hey!" I shouted at him and began running closer. He turned his head to look at me for a moment and then turned away and focused on something off in the distance. I got next to him but before I could start questioning him, I heard a scream coming from somewhere outside the woods. I followed the masked mans gaze and saw a huge plume of smoke outside the edge of the forest, right near where my old house was, and a memory came rushing back to me so intensely that I was almost knocked off my feet. This was the day the NSF had found my parents; this was the day my childhood ended. This masked guy had known that, and he had somehow dragged me back into the worst memory of my life.

I turned to face him again, but before I could get any words out his hand shot out and grabbed my face again. There was another flash and before I knew it, I found myself back in that abandoned house again. I gasped and fell to my knees. I felt something shaking me and a voice calling my name somewhere off in space, but I was too dazed to respond in my current state, suddenly my consciousness came back in a wave, and I realized it was Sakura.

“Mason! Mason!” she yelled frantically, “What the fuck is going on?!” she demanded. I got to my feet and put my arms on her shoulders, trying to calm her down.

“It’s okay, it’s okay...” I said, offering my best reassurances to her. She recoiled from my grasp and told me she rushed in after she heard the gun shot to find me just standing there, catatonic for approximately fifteen minutes, I noticed the side of my face was burning as if it had been slapped. Sakura copped to it as she had been trying to awaken me from whatever state I had been in. I began apologizing to her, but she wasn’t having it.

“I should have just stayed with my brother if I’d known you were going to freak out on me!” She said. I couldn’t think of a response. I raised my hands in what I hoped was a calming gesture and told her that I was okay now. The thought occurred to me that the masked man could still be in the house. I began looking around, scanning the dark corners for anything that might move. Could Sakura even see him? Should I even bring him up? Was he even real or a product of my traumatized mind? Had travelling the ruins of the southern part of the country and getting into gunfights with murderers and bandits finally taken its toll?

“What are you looking for?” Sakura asked me, and I didn’t know what to tell her, but I had to tell her something.

Looking her in the eye I asked “Did you see anybody in here with me? Have you seen anyone that looked out of place? They might have been wearing a mask.” There was silence for a few moments then Sakura shook her head no. I felt bad for scaring her, but it hadn’t really been my fault, had it?

Suddenly a realization came to me. I reached in my pocket and was shocked to feel the burnt page from the book of poetry inside. I pulled it out and straightened it as best I could.

“What is that?” Sakura asked. Almost as quickly as I pulled the page out it began turning black, first at the edges then it worked towards the middle of the page, it was if it was being burnt but there was no flame. I managed to read the last sentence at the bottom of the page *I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep* and with that it disintegrated into ash. Sakura and I exchanged glances, “Okay” she said indignantly, “You’re going to start explaining this to me right fucking now.”

I was still coping with the fact that the “vision” I’d had from the man in the mask was real. I really had been back in those woods or at least some part of my mind had been. I was deliberating with myself over what I wanted to tell Sakura, and if I could make it sound as if I wasn’t going insane, but even that seemed like a huge task because I really couldn’t prove I wasn’t going crazy.

“Something has been following us...” I told her, she just stood there with her arms crossed, possibly deciding on whether or not she should shoot me and steal the truck.

I continued, “It looks like a man, it could actually be...I don’t know but I’ve seen him...or it, a few times while we were driving and just now when you were here trying to wake me up, he had...” I trailed off and judging from Sakura’s reaction she wasn’t believing me. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped and looked behind me. Her eyes grew wide, and I thought for a second the masked man had returned until I heard footsteps enter the house and somebody pull back the action of a rifle behind me.

“Don’t fucking move, whitey.” A feminine yet still oddly masculine voice demanded. “Drop the gun and turn around, and don’t try anything funny.”

I complied, letting the rifle slip out of my hands and hit the floor, I turned on my heel to face this new assailant. It was a woman of indeterminate race, at least I think it was. “She” stood over six feet tall looked to weigh north of three hundred pounds.



Flab bulged out from around “her” body armor, red and black, the colors of the NSF. “She” had a shock of green and blue colored hair that covered part of “her” face and held an AR-15 at “her” hip. On an armor plate on “her” right forearm, I could see a few rows of what looked like white faces with red x’s crisscrossing them. “She” was flanked by an emaciated looking black woman with cornrows on “her” left and on the other side stood a Hispanic looking man with tattoos covering his face. They each had similar rifles and armor and they were all pointing at me. I thought of the drone. It must have seen Sakura and I when we signaled this nearby unit. Sakura moved behind me. She still had the gun and I knew she was a good shot, but the odds were stacked against us here.

The “woman” leading the group spoke again. “Don’t fuck with us colonizer! We have two more individuals in our unit!” They said in a weird husky voice. I looked out the window and saw two more soldiers patrolling outside, one had bright pink hair and a nose ring the other had dreadlocks and was smoking what looked like a blunt. It was hard for me to determine either’s gender. “We ain’t seen no mayo motherfuckers out this way in a minute!” the Hispanic guy quipped; they all began to laugh.

“Fuck off!” shouted Sakura from behind me.

“Shut yo sweet and sour ass up, you yellow bitch!” taunted the skinny black woman. So much for the tolerant left. The NSF’s orders were to kill any straight white men on sight, or anyone who aided them, but sometimes they could be bartered with. Domestic supply lines had dried up ages ago and the NSF was forced to import most of its goods from overseas. Lots of lower ranked NSF soldiers got the short end of the stick and were forced to use other means to acquire what they needed to survive, still it was tricky business trying to barter with them. I’d heard stories of desperate NSF soldiers making deals with the remnants of neo-Confederate factions only to later call-in bombing raids on the men who’d helped them. My negotiating skills weren’t that great, even if I’d had something they wanted they were just as likely to kill me and take it anyway.

Standing there with my hands raised I asked, "What do you want?" the trio looked at each other and laughed again, then the "woman" in the middle turned back to me and said, "Dead white men!" and aimed her rifle.

I made a move to reach for the gun tucked in my waist band but I was too slow. "She" fired a burst that hit me square in the chest, one bullet in my kidney, one in my sternum, the last in my solar plexus. I fell backwards and hit the floor hard. Pain erupted throughout my chest and the feeling began to fade from my arms. Sakura screamed out and fired a shot. There came some yelling and another burst of automatic fire that hit her, causing her to collapse in a pile next to me. With my strength fading I took another look at my attackers. They were laughing and walking towards me and Sakura as we laid helpless on the dirty floor with puddles of blood forming around our bodies. Sakura was still alive. I could see her face twisted in agony as she tried to scramble closer to me, I could barely move my arm, but I reached out to her. I took a final look at the NSF soldiers and regretted that I was going to be done in by these dysgenic freaks.

Suddenly, there came a shift in the air, and things seemed to slow down, I didn't know if it was just an effect of being about to die but just as I was about to close my eyes and accept my fate, I noticed a figure standing over me. It was the masked man, had this been what he'd wanted, to lead me to my death? I could barely stay conscious, but I tried to reach my hand out to him, he looked down at me and I could hear a voice...his voice in my head.

"YOUR JOURNEY DOESN'T END HERE, MASON," he said in a booming tone, behind his mask I could see his eyes blazing, he continued, "YOU STILL HAVE MILES TO GO BEFORE YOU SLEEP." He turned and looked at Sakura, who was barely hanging on. The soldiers had their guns aimed at us, and they were moving closer, albeit very slowly as if they were moving in slow motion. Their footfalls came at longer and longer intervals, and I could still see spent bullet casings spiraling towards the ground.

I looked towards the masked man again, he met my gaze and

said, "I CAN HELP YOU...AND HER...BUT YOU MUST CONSENT." At this he knelt down closer to me and took my hand, his fingers gripped my palm and felt like steel. He spoke again, "THERE IS NO TIME TO WASTE." Facing death or a pact with a demon, I chose the demon. I looked at him again and nodded, the masked man let go of my hand and stood straight up still staring into my eyes he said: "AVERT YOUR GAZE... AND HERS," and placed a hand on his mask.

I could hear something coming, some sound in the distance like wind howling. It grew louder and louder and became deafening. The house began to rumble. I could see the soldiers faces, each of them looked horrified and they began firing wildly all around them, it felt as if there were a whirlwind surrounding me. With the last of my strength I wrapped my arms around Sakura and pulled her close, covering her eyes with my hand. I took one final glance at the masked man before I lost consciousness, he looked at me and winked, and then pulled his mask off.

## V

### Refuge

There was darkness, but I was still alive...somehow, I still had consciousness. I had been bleeding out on the floor with my organs perforated by rifle rounds, everything was fading to black but I could still think, and feel. There was a cool breeze, I could feel it on my face and there was a smell, it was like sulfur but there was something else *underneath* that, the horrible acrid smell of burning flesh. It brought back memories of seeing bodies stacked on one another, torn apart by gunfire, and set aflame.

I opened my eyes and saw the sky. White cumulonimbus clouds bleached by the sun shone through a huge hole torn in the ceiling of the house. I raised my head and my surroundings came into focus. There was splintered wood, glass, insulation, and roof tiles covering the interior of the house, it was like it had been hit

by a tornado. There were shapes on the floor near me, it took me a moment to realize they were the bodies of the NSF soldiers that had attacked me and Sakura. I was sore, every muscle in my body ached.

I managed to raise myself into a sitting position, I lifted my shirt and checked my chest to see several closed bullet wounds, circular imprints of darkened flesh on my stomach and chest but no sign of blood. I looked to my right to see Sakura, unconscious but alive. I checked her body for wounds and saw similar imprints on her flesh but also no signs of blood. My legs felt numb, but I was able to will them to work and get to my feet. There was a moment of dizziness as I stood, it felt like a hangover, at least what I could remember a hangover feeling like. The last time I'd had alcohol, it was from a makeshift still at an encampment with my brother years ago. We'd been celebrating a successful offensive that had pushed a battalion of NSF troops north of the area formerly known as Louisville, Kentucky. I remembered how good I'd felt that night, it was one of the last time I could remember feeling truly happy. But a week later another larger contingent of the NSF would attack from the east and wipe out our base with mortar fire, me and my brother had barely escaped with our lives.

I took a step forward toward the NSF bodies splayed out on the floor. There was still the faint smell of gunsmoke hanging in the air, there were bullet holes punched in the walls and floor, it was as if they'd been firing in all directions. I recognized one of the corpses of the obese "woman" who'd been the primary agitator. Their face was twisted into a mask of agony, a look of terror permanently frozen into their eyes. There was what appeared to be a dark fluid emanating from their mouth and nose and pooling on the floor next to their head, it smelled terribly. The other corpses I checked were in a similar condition, upon closer inspection it could see a small pattern of holes in each of their bodies, they weren't bullet holes, they were smaller, judging from the spacing it looked like someone had taken their hand and forced their fingers into their bodies. Had this been the work of our masked

friend?

I checked around the property but there was no sign of anyone. There was an armored NSF transport flipped over onto its roof, it looked like one of the doors had been torn off, I drew nearer with my pistol drawn and checked the interior, there was a body inside still belted into the driver's seat. I could see more finger marks in his cheeks and temples, it was as if someone had grabbed his face and forced their fingers inside his skull, the wounds were deep, so deep I could see singed tissue that could have been his brain. His mouth was open in a permanent scream and more of the viscous dark fluid was pouring out into a growing puddle on the upturned roof of the truck. I had seen what terrible things human beings were capable of, dressed wounds, saw my friends torn apart by explosives and artillery fire, it was terrible to admit but this kind of thing hadn't phased me for most of my life. But this...this made me quiver. I felt a twinge of sickness, again something I hadn't felt in years, and I had to take a moment to get my head right.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten in over a day and I knew we were running short on rations. I didn't know if there'd be anywhere to find food along our way to West Virginia. I spotted a pry bar on a rack bolted to the truck's exterior, I grabbed it off and used it to break the lock and pry open the back door of the truck's cargo area. Inside I saw various supplies spilled out everywhere, whatever or whoever had flipped the truck had done it with an unimaginable force. Sifting through the detritus I came upon a stash of MREs wrapped in foil. I grabbed them up and was surprised when I heard the radio on the dashboard explode with static, after a few seconds of noise I could just barely make out a voice.

"Unit 73 what is your status?" Another moment passed.

"Unit 73, confirm your status..." We needed to leave *now*.

I looked under the steel awning and saw the truck still parked there, it looked like it hadn't taken any damage at all. I tossed the food in the bed and raced back into the destroyed house to recover Sakura. Scooping her up I made my way back to the truck

and placed her gently in the passenger's seats but before I could enter the truck myself, I spotted something laying on the ground between two corpses of NSF soldiers. Against my better judgement I approached it. Whatever it was gleamed in the sun. Getting closer I could see it was a mask, the same mask my supernatural friend had been wearing. It looked like it was hand made from some kind of resin and vaguely resembled a skull.

I knelt to pick it up but as my fingers touched its surface something flashed before my eyes, it was like a vision, but it only lasted for a few seconds. I could see the man who'd appeared to us yesterday, or whenever it was, "he" had his back turned to me. We were surrounded by what felt like howling wind and spiraling smoke, I could barely see anything save for his form obscured by the chaos, I could make out yelling and see muzzle flashes of people firing guns wildly in all directions. It took me a moment to realize they were the NSF soldiers who'd found us, I was seeing what had happened before I'd lost consciousness. Before I could process it the man, the *demon* turned his head to look back at me and I could see was not only not wearing a mask, but he also didn't have a face. I don't mean to say he didn't have any facial features; it looked like there was a jagged hole where a normal humans face would be, it was as if his skull had been sculpted from clay and smashed in. I only glimpsed this for a fraction of a second before I was thrown back into reality, but I could hear his voice booming, "SEE YOU SOON" as it ended. The shock as the vision ended was enough to rob my legs of feeling for a moment. I fell over onto my side and yelled out before I could stop myself. Who or what was the masked man, how did he find me, why did he or "it" *attach* itself to me? I couldn't have been going crazy, this was actually happening.

I didn't have time to ponder the situation: if that NSF unit had found us that quickly after the drone passed by there had to be more in the area. I looked at the mask again, I wanted to kick it away or smash it and run, but I felt more compelled to pick it up. I reached by hand out slowly and poked at it...nothing no vision, no whirlwind, so screaming. I grabbed it up and took it with

my back to the truck. I had a metal case in the bed with a lock. I placed it inside and locked it up, one less thing to have to explain to Sakura whenever she wakes up. I got into the driver's seat and started the engine which thankfully fired up with no issue. I pulled away from the house and headed across the nearby field, toward a line of trees, this truck was outfitted for off-roading and I would take full advantage of that, I couldn't risk having another run in with the NSF. There was an old Neo-Confederate supply line that had been cut through the woods near here, to my knowledge it wasn't on any NSF maps. That could've changed in recent months, but it was our best shot of making it to West Virginia undetected. I didn't know what I'd find there, if any of my people were still alive, but it was our best chance at survival. For now, me and Sakura were alive, we'd been given a second chance by our masked friend, whether he was truly on our side, or something from hell, remained to be seen.

The supply line was rough, cut through thickets of trees and going through miles of back woods. The truck's suspension clunked over roots and rocks jostling me and Sakura in our seats. She was still out cold though and the bumpy trail didn't seem to disturb her sleep. I didn't know what I was going to tell her when she woke up, if she even would remember anything that happened over the past 24 hours. I guess I would cross that bridge when I came to it, I wondered how her brother Haru was doing, if I'd ever see him again.

I crested a hill and the truck bounced as I made my way down the other side, I swerved to avoid a tree stump and the wheels lost traction. The truck started fishtailing and before I could correct the truck's direction the right rear tire hit a tangle of thick roots and got lodged in place. I tried accelerating but could only hear rubber burning. I shifted into higher gear and pressed the gas down, the axle groaned and the truck lurched forward a few inches but no more, we were stuck. Cursing under my breath I hopped out of the truck to survey the damage, looking underneath I could see the wheel lodged between two roots. One of them had jammed under the axle itself, near the leafspring. I had

a hatchet in the truck bed, but it would take me a while to hack through. There was also the option of tying the truck's winch to a nearby tree and pulling it out that way, but with the way the axle was lodged a winch pull may damage the suspension. I looked at the sky, it would be dark soon and I was growing tired. I'd been on the forest path for a couple of hours, judging by my rudimentary map and the truck's barely functional GPS I figured I had to be getting close to the West Virginia border by now. Should we risk walking through the woods at night?

The passenger side door of the truck opened up and Sakura stuck her head out. She looked at me and asked where we were. I told her in the Kentucky woods near the West Virginia border. She stood there for a minute, contemplating, and then asked "What's wrong with the truck?"

I told her we got caught up on some roots, she gave me a quizzical look and asked, "How'd you manage that?"

I ignored her and began searching the truck bed for the hatchet. Sakura hopped out of the truck and began stretching and yawning. She walked closer and asked how long she'd been sleeping. I told her she'd been out for about ten hours at my estimation, I wasn't exactly sure since we'd both been unconscious for God knows how long after the NSF attack at the house.

"Huh..." she said, "Last thing I remember we were just entering old Kentucky..." she trailed off and began looking around the woods, "I guess this wouldn't be a bad spot to camp, y'know if we *had* to." She added a mocking inflection to her statement which irked me, I thought about telling her off but decided against it, I didn't feel like getting into a fight in the middle of the woods, especially not knowing who or what was lurking. I found the hatchet and began taking swings at the roots surrounding the axle and tire, carefully angling my strikes so as to not do any more damage to the truck. Sakura leaned against the truck and put her head in her hands, "How long do you think this is going to take?" she asked. I summoned my patience and told her I didn't know, but if she was bored, she could start looking around for firewood in case we had to camp here for the night. She scoffed



and said “Fine!” but before I let her walk away, I told her to take a rifle from the truck and be on the lookout for anybody. She rolled her eyes but grabbed a gun and made sure it was loaded before slinging it over her shoulder and heading off.

I worked on the roots for a while, damn near an hour by my best guess. I’d succeeded at breaking through the root the axle was propped up on but the truck was still stuck in a precarious position, but now at least it seemed safer to use the winch. It had gotten dark as I worked and the last fifteen minutes I’d spent using a flashlight. Sakura showed up with her arms full of various lengths of wood and asked how the progress was going.

“Good,” I told her, placing the hatchet back into the truck bed. I felt my stomach rumbling, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten anything. I thought of the rations I’d gotten from the flipped NSF transport, they sounded pretty good right about now, but first I wanted to get the truck free. I looped the winch cable around a nearby tree and with Sakura working the gas I activated the motor, the line grew taut and after some groans from the suspension the truck lurched forward with a loud *CRACK* coming from the severed roots. The truck zoomed forward a couple feet, bounced up and down as the suspension freed itself, then came to a stop. Sakura cheered and clapped her hands; the truck was finally free.

We built a fire and shared a few portions of rations. The food was salty, but it tasted amazing considering the circumstances. Sakura and I sat close together. She remarked that while the rations didn’t taste great, but she was sick of eating corn. She began talking about the food her father would prepare for the family and then she stopped and brought her hands to her face, it looked like she was getting choked up. I wasn’t sure what to do, I hadn’t had to comfort a woman in quite some time, against my better judgement I put a hand on her shoulder, she responded by gently placing her right hand over mine while her left was still covering her face.

“Sakura...” I started, she sniffled and turned to look at me.

“Promise me Mason,” she said with tears welling up in her

eyes, “promise me we’ll make those bastards pay, we’ll make sure they don’t tear apart any more families.” I gave her a solemn nod and she leaned in. We kissed.

It was the first time I’d kissed a girl in years, at least since my late teens when my brother and I had joined the Neo-Confederates for the first go around after the NSF began tightening it’s grip on the Republic. I remembered meeting a girl back then. Her name was Katie. She had been in a similar situation as I was, her family torn apart by an NSF incursion. We had gotten close, and were spending a lot of time together, it was like a relationship in a lot of ways. We’d been hunkered down in an outpost in Knoxville with white refugees whose homes had either been burned or requisitioned by the NSF. The order had come down to kill any able-bodied white man and to capture white females for breeding purposes. We’d gotten the order to move out as NSF troops had begun an incursion into Kentucky and were slaughtering anyone they could find. I told Katie I’d see her again. She gave me a heart shaped pendant that her mother had given her as a child. I kept it in the front pocket of my jacket.

After we’d shipped out word came on the radio that the Knoxville outpost had been attacked, and that there were only a couple survivors, Katie wasn’t among them. I learned that the NSF troops had tried to drag her away, she managed to fight back and stab one of them and was gunned down for her trouble. After that I never let myself get close to anyone, I knew the world was nothing but tragedy and that forming relationships with people was an exercise in heartbreak, when we got back to the remains of the outpost, I buried the pendant with Katie’s body. I wondered if there was someone in Sakura’s past, some boy that held her affections only to get ripped away by the war, maybe it was best not to find out, and maybe it was best to not tell Sakura about Katie.

After we kissed Sakura pulled away briefly, she looked down at the fire for a moment and said, “I never thought I’d find someone else...not like this...” Then she smirked and added “Least of all not a white boy.” I was about to respond but Sakura placed her

hands on my shoulders and leaned in for another, longer kiss. In that moment, nothing else mattered, not the war or the horror I'd seen, not the masked man. Now, all that mattered was I and Sakura sitting in these woods. Still, I wondered if I could allow her in, if I could allow myself to be vulnerable and feel for someone who could be ripped away from me at any second. Could Sakura strip my armor from me? We laid down on a canvas tarp and watched the stars through the treetops, gently embracing one another.

Sakura turned to me and asked "Mason? What happens when we get to West Virginia?" I looked over and met her gaze. "We find out if any of my brothers are still alive, see if we can mount any kind of offense." She looked at me with concern "But...but what if no one's left? What happens then? Where do we go?"

Truthfully, I hadn't considered that, I spent so much time and energy visualizing my brothers being alive and just hiding out at the old base in West Virginia I hadn't really considered if they were dead. I hadn't wanted to consider that a possibility even though it absolutely could have been. And I hadn't really considered what would happen if I was truly alone, what would I do in that case? Where could we go? Where was safe from the NSF? Was I really prepared to run or hide for the rest of my life? So many of my white brothers and sisters had been killed, were there any of us left? I didn't know how to convey that to Sakura.

I turned back to her and said, "If that's the case, then we just keep driving, we find more people to help us, if they're out there we'll find them, and we'll stop any NSF bastard that gets in our way."

Sakura rested her head and hand on my chest and asked, "Then what? What happens when we beat them, where do we go?"

I thought for a second and then said, "We find a place, we stay there, we hunt, we fish, we dig for ground water, we start a garden, we live our lives."

Sakura raised her head, and her eyes met mine once again,

“Do you really think we can?” Again, I nodded, and we shared another kiss. Sakura laid her head back down and drifted off to sleep. I looked back up at the stars and wondered if I had just lied to Sakura. Could it be possible that my brothers were still alive? Yes. Were there resistance networks still operating in the area? Yes, but they were well hidden, NSF was still intercepting radio signals in the area, I wasn’t sure how I’d get in contact with any of them, but there had to be a way. I closed my eyes and listened to Sakura’s breathing, I felt myself drift off and dreamt about living on a homestead somewhere with her.

## VI

### Traitors

I awoke when it was still dark out, the dirt floor of the forest had caused my back to ache dully, I checked my watch, it wasn’t even 6AM yet. I gently rolled Sakura onto her side and got up with a wince to shovel dirt on the dying embers of the fire. It had been risky to camp out in these woods, but I’d kept my pistol at my side and was generally a light sleeper, I checked the truck and supplies and walked around the camp just to make sure we hadn’t had any night visitors. I heard Sakura yawn and saw her sit up on the tarp, rubbing her eyes. She asked what time it was, I said “It’s about 6AM, we need to get moving, figure if we stick to back roads, we can make it to the West Virginia camp before the afternoon.” Sakura nodded and got to her feet, we rolled up the tarp and tossed it in the bed of the truck. I checked the scanner...nothing. The truck had a CB radio, but I’d avoided using it since I knew the NSF had been monitoring old Neo Confederate bands, when the war was still going on my brothers and I had used specially coded language to communicate, utilizing sequences of numbers and letters to signify troop movements or supply requests and constantly changing up the codes to avoid detection. I could remember some of the old codes we’d used, but they’d probably

been updated since I'd lost contact with the last regiment of Neo Confederates, or there was the distinct possibility that no one was around to receive radio calls anymore. Before our last transmission, the remaining bands of Neo Confederates had agreed that the West Virginia base would be our fallback point, where we could rally if the ongoing conflict ever caused us to disperse, but I found myself having the same thoughts as I'd had last night in response to Sakura's question, was anybody even there? Or what if there was an NSF trap waiting for us there? I chased the thought from my mind and got in the truck with Sakura.

After a few more miles of traversing the old route cut through the forest we arrived on a paved road, there was a map the previous owner of the truck left in the glove box that highlighted which routes were blockaded and which were still open, according to this map the road we were on would take us through Kentucky to the western border of West Virginia but on the map the route was highlighted in red marker and there were several X's at certain spots, signifying blockades. This road had been a major route for supplies and weapons for Neo Confederates so it wouldn't be surprising that they'd want to lock it down as much as possible, but there were several smaller routes crisscrossing it at several points. It would add time to our journey, but these routes would probably be our best option, although none of them led into West Virginia, we would need to take the old supply route eventually. I told Sakura how dangerous this could be, she responded with a dour look and a nod, she knew the risks.

We travelled down the road for a while, after a time the forests gave way to more open fields, this made me nervous, there were plenty of spots for snipers or sharp shooters to attack from, areas where I couldn't get a clear view. Sakura held a scoped 30.06 rifle between her legs, her actions when her family farm was attacked led me to believe she knew her way around guns, I assumed Toji had taught her well, she looked out her window, scanning the environment as we drove through. So far it was nothing but fields that had once yielded produce, now burned black by either the NSF or the former farms owners as

they evacuated, you'd see vast swaths of fire blackened land, acres long and stretching out into the horizon. I thought of all the environmental initiatives the NSF supposedly championed and how they'd declared that whites owning farms was a direct threat to them, and how black and brown people would take care of the property better and laughed quietly to myself.

"What's so funny?" asked Sakura, turning away from the window.

I looked at her and said, "I was just thinking about all the NSF propaganda I'd heard talking about how they wanted to create a better world for everyone, and how many people bought into it just to get arrested or killed. And now look at the world they gave us, we were called conspiracy theorists for suggesting the NSF was full of shit, then we were called terrorists for resisting them...I hate being right."

Sakura turned from me to look out the windshield, "My family believed it as well...at least initially, friends of my family thought the NSF wouldn't come for them, they thought they were safe as long as they repeated the party line, they thought it couldn't happen to them until they were dragged from their homes." A mournful expression formed on Sakura's face, I reached over and placed my hand on top of hers and gave it a squeeze, she responded my giving my hand a squeeze back. She continued, "How can people be so evil? How can they turn against their fellow man like this?" Before I could respond the trucks left front tire blew out.

The truck swerved to the left and I grabbed the wheel with both hands and fought to get it back on the road, Sakura yelled out as a bullet came through the windshield, then another, barely missing my head, someone was shooting at us. I pulled the wheel to the right and the truck jumped off the road onto a field, the ruined tire caused us to bounce around in the cab as more shots hit the truck, I saw bullet holes form in the hood, white smoke began pouring out and entering through the holes in the windshield, I could smell the truck's coolant burning as I raced across the field to find some sort of cover. A bullet ripped

through the door and narrowly missed hitting Sakura.

“Where is it coming from?!” Sakura yelled out as more bullets hit the truck cab.

“Keep your head down!” I shouted back. I scanned the horizon for any position a sniper could be in and spotted a dilapidated grain silo a few hundred yards north of us, if I had a rifle, that’s where I would be, as the truck bounced along I saw a glint from a sniper scope in an opening at the top of the silo. The left rear tire blew out, the truck slowed as the ruined tires tried to find purchase in the muddy ground. I grabbed the rifle we kept in the cab, Sakura took out her pistol and checked the clip, we would need to bail from the truck, bullets had punched holes in the radiator and maybe the engine block as well, more white smoke poured from the holes in the hood and the temperature gauge was climbing, soon the engine began struggling and flames began leaping from the grille.

“Look!” Sakura motioned towards an abandoned grain thresher sitting on the far side of the field between the truck and silo, it was our best bet for some cover. I looked at Sakura and made a “tuck and roll” gesture, she nodded and as the crippled vehicle drew closer to the old piece of farm equipment, we kicked open our doors and leapt out of the still moving truck.

I hit the ground with a roll and jumped to my feet, racing towards the thresher with Sakura right behind me, I ran in a zig-zag pattern, more shots came, I could see the muzzle flash from the silo. A rifle round hit the ground near me, kicking up a clod of dirt, I ducked down and dove behind the thresher, Sakura reached the thresher at the same moment I did. More shots rang out as I readied the rifle, Sakura leaned her head around the far side of the thresher then quickly moved back into cover. She looked at me, “There’s some cover near the silo, burnt out ruins of a house, there’s a brick chimney that’s still intact, if you lay down covering fire, I should be able to reach it.” I was about to protest, I didn’t want to put Sakura in harm’s way, but considering the circumstances I don’t think we had any other options. My gun was an AR style rifle I’d picked from the corpses of one of the

bandits at Toji's farm, it was chambered in 5.56 NATO and had a red dot sight, it wasn't ideal but if I judged the distance to the silo correctly, it should have more than enough range to hit the enemy shooter. Clipped onto my belt was a flash bang I'd grabbed before I jumped out of the truck, I'd grabbed it from the flipped over transport at the house where we'd had our encounter with our masked friend. I reached out and gave it to Sakura and said, "When you get close, lob this into the opening at the top." She nodded and clipped it to her belt. Another shot rang out and hit the side of the thresher near where I was crouched. Suddenly I had an idea, I took my jacket off and draped it around the barrel of my rifle, leaning against the thresher I raised it high enough over my thresher where the shooter could definitely see it, and waited for a few seconds...nothing. Sakura and I looked at each other, he was reloading.

I ripped the jacket off the rifle and took aim around the other side, squarely at the opening at the top of the old silo, I signaled to Sakura, and she took off around the other side of the thresher, racing her way towards the ruins of the farmhouse. I laid down semi-automatic fire at the opening in the silo, I could see sparks kicked up from my bullets hitting the metal surface near the opening and see hints of movement inside the darkened interior of the silo, I fired a few more shots, conscious that this was the only clip of ammo I had, the others were in the bed of the truck, and flames had engulfed it. I moved from my position with the rifle still trained on the silo, I was able to see Sakura reach the chimney, I could see her take the flash bang off her belt and pull the pin, she looked at me, with my free hand I signaled for her to throw it, at that she ran out from behind the chimney and threw the flash bang. It spiraled through the air in a wide arc and disappeared inside the silo, Sakura had a great arm. After a second there was a bright flash and a loud boom, I drew closer to the silo with my rifle still aimed at the top, I could see movement inside now behind a plume of smoke from the detonated flashbang. I gripped the rifle and raced towards the silo, as I drew nearer to where Sakura was, she left her position and moved be-



hind me with her pistol at the ready. We reached the silo and split up, each heading in an opposite direction and circling around the diameter. I could hear movement inside the silo, it sounded like the shooter was climbing down from his position, we had to make sure to intercept him. Sakura and I reached a steel door on the opposite side of the silo, we slowed and readied our guns, I could hear footsteps heading towards the door, a moment later it swung open, and a figure emerged wearing fatigues and a ski mask, a long-range rifle gripped in his right hand, he was moving slowly, groaning and rubbing his eyes, the flashbang must have gone off right next to him. As quickly as I could I ran up to him, he wheeled around in my direction and tried to bring his rifle up, but I was too fast. I delivered a strike to the center of his face with the butt of my gun, he cried out and collapsed backwards hitting the ground hard. I kicked his rifle away and aimed my gun at him, he didn't look like he was part of NSF, nor was he decked out like the bandits we'd encountered. I looked at Sakura for a moment, then suddenly the shooter swung his arm out and batted the barrel of my rifle away, with his other hand he drew a knife out of a sheath on his chest and raised his torso upwards, ready to bury the blade in my kidney. Before I could react, Sakura swung her leg around and delivered a powerful kick to the side of his head, knocking him unconscious.

"Fuck!" I shouted in aggravation, mostly at my own mistake. This son of a bitch had caught me unaware, if it hadn't been for Sakura there was a good chance I'd be bleeding out.

"What would you do without me?" Sakura chided. I grabbed up the shooter's knife and inspected it, it was a large bowie knife with a symbol carved in the handle right under the guard, it resembled a tree inside of a circle. I handed it to Sakura and asked her if it looked familiar, after a few moments of looking at it she turned to me and said "I'm not sure but it looks like the insignia of the Brotherhood of Pine, they operated in the pacific northwest for a while but got chased east by the NSF when they started seizing more west coast territory. At least according to my father, he had contacts with certain groups opposing the NSF but most of

them had gone radio silent in the last couple of years.” She looked down at our unconscious assailant, then back at me. “What do you want to do with him?” she asked. Part of me wanted to put a bullet in his head and be done with it, but I wanted to know more, especially about how this knife had made its way all the way to the Republic.

I looked back at Sakura and said, “Grab his arms, I’ll grab his legs, let’s get him inside the silo before any of his friends decide to show up.”

We got the limp body of the shooter back into the silo and found some old chains to bind his arms to a steel ladder that had been welded to the floor. The guy was big, maybe 6’4” and weighed well over 200 pounds. After we secured his arms and bound his legs, I took his mask off and was a bit shocked at what I saw. He was black, had short hair and an ill-kempt beard and besides the blood running down from his nose from where I’d struck him, I noticed a swastika had been branded into his right cheek, it looked like a quick and dirty job done with a piece of twisted wire and a blow torch. I opened his jacket to see if he had any more weapons on him, under it he wore a tank top and I could see a large scar on his left pectoral muscle, it looked like he...or someone had taken the blade of a knife a cut layers of skin off. I went through his pockets but didn’t find much save for an old photo of a smiling black woman in a bathing suit standing on a beach, she was in front of an orange sun and purple clouds, her braided hair cascading down from her head, she held an open hand out to whoever had been taking the picture. In the upper level of the silo where he had been perched, we found rounds of ammo, rations, a radio, what appeared to be caffeine pills, and a canteen full of water. I thought about the supplies we’d lost with the truck, the smoke from which was sure to attract unwanted attention, we didn’t have time to waste we needed answers now. I gave Sakura my rifle and told her that if he moved put a bullet in his head, then I took the canteen and splashed water in the shooter’s face. It woke him up, spurting and coughing and cursing.

After a moment he regained his senses, he looked at Sakura and the rifle, then he looked at me crouched next to him, his eyes fixated on his steel blade now in my hand and grew wide. He leaned his head back and tried moving his arms, after some rattling from the chains he gave up, he noticed his legs were bound in chains too. At his he sighed, closed his eyes, and said one word "Fuck..."

"Who are you?" I demanded, pointing the knife at him.

He looked at me and smirked, "If ya'll gonna kill me, go ahead and fuckin' kill me, I ain't got time for this bullshit, I didn't get away from those motherfuckers just to wind up getting captured by some white boy and his Asian bitch!" I back handed him, he turned his head back and spat a glob of blood at me that landed on the front of my shirt. At this I grabbed his hair and put the knife up to his throat. "Alright, alright!" He cried out in protest, "That yellow pussy got ya'll actin' strange!" he exclaimed, followed by a chuckle. My patience was running thin, I drew the knife close to his throat again and asked him why he'd been shooting at us. "I thought ya'll was those New Socialists faggots or somethin' you were driving one of they trucks! But since you is white as shit I guess that ain't the case..."

He smirked, "I thought they done clapped all ya'll, how'd you get so lucky?" I felt anger welling up again, but I couldn't let it cloud my judgement.

I drew the knife back from his throat, "If you're not the NSF, then who are you, and where'd you get this knife?"

His eyes moved from mine and looked at the rifle being held by Sakura again, the look she gave him must have disarmed him a bit. "I was in the IAC," he told me, "We had a unit operating in Oregon, our higher ups took orders from the NSF leadership in San Fran—I mean New Mali or whatever those motherfuckers called it. It was part of a broader coalition to clear out any resistance on the west coast after reports of new confederate niggas attacking supply lines were coming in. One night we found a group of those pine bros in an abandoned nature center not too far from Mount Hood, they were there with their fami-

lies, women, and young kids...we gunned them all down, no remorse." A mournful look appeared on his face, he looked down at the ground, clearly feeling ashamed.

After a moment he continued. "After the slaughter, we patrolled the area for anyone else, I struck out on my own, heard a noise in one of the offices, I checked and found a family of three, a man with his wife and teenage daughter." He paused again and stared out into space.

"What did you do to them?" demanded Sakura, taking aim with the rifle, I motioned to her to stand down, she lowered the gun but still kept her fierce gaze trained on him.

"I..." he began again, "I was under orders to kill anyone I saw, but the man begged for the lives of his wife and daughter...I couldn't bring myself to do it, not after I'd just seen kids get mowed down with machine guns. I joined the IAC because I thought it was about liberating my brothers and sisters, not straight up murder. I tried to get the family out, I lead them down a back stairwell and out a maintenance door, two of my unit found me helping them, they'd been waiting in the parking lot. Before I could do anything, they jumped on me, I yelled at the family to run but they didn't get far. They shot the father in the leg, made him watch as they raped his wife and daughter and beheaded them with machetes, then they put a bullet in the back of his head and burnt their bodies along with the rest in a huge pyre they built." Sakura and I looked at each other, after the horrors we'd both experienced this kind of thing shouldn't have been shocking, but it brought back bad enough memories. He continued, "After they were done with the family, they beat me and tortured me, put this brand on my face...this scar on my chest? Used to be an IAC tattoo, they cut it off me with a knife, can't say I miss it too much now to be honest." Our eyes met again, I had heard of horrible things done to people who went against the NSF, especially those who betrayed the cause, what few there were had typically been made examples of.

I had remembered my brother was in contact with an NSF defector years ago, someone who'd been feeding us intel on troop

movements and arms shipments for months. One day we'd lost contact with him, we were able to triangulate his last known broadcast position, when we arrived to check on him all we found was one severed hand still holding a broken radio. I could only imagine the other horrific things he'd seen in the IAC. I asked him how he'd managed to escape. "They were going to hang me..." he said, "They wanted to leave my body as an example of what happens to traitors, I managed to cut my restraints with that knife you got in your hand and wrestle a gun away from one of my crew, shot him in the chest point blank, managed to stab another dude in the neck, and ran my ass the fuck out of there, they fired at me, got a round buried in my back, but I managed to make it to the trucks, I hotwired one and took off in a hail of gunfire, thank God that bitch was armored, and thank God I learned how to boost cars when I was a young buck in South Central."

I stood up and walked around, contemplating what the shooter had just told me, we didn't have much reason to trust him, but his scars were real, I hadn't known of anyone who betrayed the NSF or its allies and lived to tell the tale. I looked at him again and asked, "How did you find your way to the Republic with a bullet in your back?"

He met my gaze again and said "The bullet wasn't too deep, I was able to bandage it pretty well, hurt like a motherfucker though, I was able to avoid detection from the NSF by tearing out the truck's tracking equipment and only travelling at certain points of the day, lucky I knew where their checkpoints were, I camped out a night and was able to siphon enough gas to make it to Colorado. That's where I met my current crew."

"Current crew?" I asked.

"Yeah..." he said, "Dudes were running a convoy, few trucks, few cars, a tanker, and a couple RVs, never stayed in one spot for long. They'd crisscross the country and stay under the radar, mostly made up of ex-NSF footsoldiers who'd salvage any supplies they could and help anyone else who abandoned the movement. Been running with them for about three years now, they call themselves The Horde mostly Mexican bros, and a few

Asians and Indians we met along the way. We headed into the Republic because a lot of NSF forces had pulled out after those new Confederate dudes fell, we can operate without too much interference now, but we still have to watch our asses, I'm sure ya'll know about that."

I approached him, "Where's the rest of your crew now? Why are you out here by yourself?"

He answered, "We found a spot a few miles away from here, old campground a fair distance from the main road, we set up there for a few days and they sent me to monitor for any vehicles coming down this street, there's guys posted west of here as well. Now...let me ask you, where are ya'll coming from, ain't seen any white folks in years."

I explained to him how I'd been in my brother's neo-Confederate unit for a few years before they'd gotten killed, how I'd hid out in old Tennessee for a while before hooking up with Sakura, I told him how we were headed to West Virginia to try to find any body else who was still alive.

Malcolm was silent for a moment, it looked like he was contemplating something, he then looked up and me and said, "We went through West Virginia a few weeks ago, we had intel on old neo-Confederate positions, we checked supply lines, hideouts, old, fortified positions...we even deployed drones to scan certain areas...there's nobody alive there man...sorry."

I was about to protest, I had been so certain that someone must have survived, but I stopped myself. This was an eventuality I had prepared myself for, facing the fact I was the last neo-Confederate alive, not only that, but maybe I was even the last member of my race that was alive.

Sakura walked up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Mason..." she said softly, "I'm sorry...but we both knew this could be the case."

I reached up and touched her hand. "I know..." I spoke. I had deluded myself with fantasies over the last few months, I had to face reality, it was like there was a weight on my shoulders. What the hell was I going to do now?

Suddenly there came a sound of car tires moving over dirt and the faint rumbling of exhaust pipes right outside the silo door. I looked at the shooter, "What the fuck is this?" I demanded.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as his eyes grew wide, "It's my bros, I radioed them after I engaged your truck, I thought ya'll was NSF remember?"

There came a voice calling from outside "Malcolm!?! Malcolm, are you in there man?" Footsteps right outside the door then it swung open and two large Hispanic men armed with pistols walked in, they saw their comrade chained up and me and Sakura standing over him with weapons. "What the FUCK!" one of them exclaimed as they both pointed their pistols at us, Sakura aimed the rifle back at them, I managed to pull out my pistol and aim it at the chained shooter, whose name was Malcolm apparently. I looked at the two men who'd just entered and let them know if they took another step their friend was dead.

"Chill, chill, CHILL!" yelled Malcolm, "Ya'll put your fuckin' guns down, ain't nobody needs to get shot!"

The Hispanic man on the left spoke. "Who the fuck are you white boy?" He still had his gun aimed at me; I held my pistol closer to Malcolm's head.

"I'm the guy with a gun to your boy's head, who the fuck are you?"

The Hispanic guy replied, "We got the call that an NSF truck had been spotted, we rolled up here and saw smoke in the distance, I'm guessing it was you in the truck but ya'll don't look like NSF to me my man. But I do know this, you better lower that fuckin' gun!"

The standoff lasted a few more moments before Malcolm spoke again, "Reggie, Miguel, chill the fuck out, this boy ain't NSF you even copped to that, everybody lower their mother-fuckin' guns!"

I exchanged a quick glance with Sakura, she looked back at me and gave me a slight nod. I looked back at the two other guys,

apparently named Reggie and Miguel, “How do we know we can trust you?”

The men looked at each other for a brief second, then the one on the left lowered his gun and brought his right arm up as if he were making a muscle, with his left hand he raised the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a large scar similar to Malcolm’s. He looked back at me, “I ain’t got no loyalty to the NSF, but I do got a problem with that gun against my boys head.” I exchanged another glance with Sakura, she kept the rifle aimed at the men, but I slowly lowered my gun, Reggie and Miguel lowered and holstered theirs and raised their hands, walking slowly towards us.

“Not so fast!” shouted Sakura, still pointing the gun at them. I could understand Sakura being cagey, when I’d first met her, we’d had to fight off bandits who looked like these guys.

“Sakura...” I said, “It’s okay...” and I motioned for her to lower the rifle, she gave me an angry look but after another moment she lowered the barrel. Reggie and Miguel moved closer to us, I knelt down and took the chains off of Malcolm’s legs and arms and handed him a handkerchief I had to wipe the blood from his face.

“That lady of yours has quite the kick.” He remarked as he slowly got to his feet.

I turned back to Reggie and Miguel and asked, “So...what do we do now?”



# Dreams of a Beautiful Future

*by Woodshop Handman*

I wake up to the smoky smell of bacon and eggs frying. After changing into some day clothes and donning my boots, I head down the stairs to see two beautiful girls in the kitchen by the stove.

They are both adorned in simple, but elegant linen dresses, one red and the other green. Each of them has a white cotton blouse under their dress, with elbow-length sleeves that transition into the fair skin on their slender arms. Both are wearing aprons as well. The smaller of the girls has a wrought iron spatula grasped in her hand and is tending to the sizzling contents of some cast iron frying pans set atop the wood-fire cook stove. The other works to braid the hair of her sister while making sure that her young apprentice works swiftly and safely, giving advice every so often.

My presence does not go unnoticed. “Good morning, dad!” they each say with smiles on their faces. The younger of the two explains to me that her older sister is giving her cooking lessons, and that they had to get an early start because of their plans for today.

Our town is holding the annual Summer Solstice festival today. There's bunting strung between buildings, flowers decorating every windowsill, and a few of the kids are going to be putting on a live concert, though I'm sure the adults will be happy to bring instruments of their own, too. There will be food and drink and dancing and all sorts of games. I am to go meet up with my some of the other men from town to put the final touches on the

stage in the town square and anything else that still needs carpentry or handiwork done for the festival.

I am presented with a plate of food, which I graciously accept, making sure to ceremoniously bow with a dramatic flourish of my right arm as I thank the young chef. The bacon is a bit too burnt and the eggs very slightly undercooked, but for my youngest daughter's first time cooking mostly on her own, I can't bring myself to fault it.

The sound of footsteps can be heard from the stairs and I turn to see my youngest child coming down for breakfast, still in his pajamas. He's only eight years of age, but he's become such a bright and gentle young man.

He hops up from the checkered tile floor onto a kitchen chair and scoots himself in. He doesn't get quite as much food as me, since he's quite a bit smaller in stature, but he is eager and thankful to his big sisters all the same.

I offer to help my girls clean up but they refuse any assistance I could give. "Don't forget you have to help out in town today, dad," the elder sister reminds me. They tell me to check on the ladies in the garden and the boys in the workshop before I go. I tussle the hair of my youngest son and daughter as I take my leave. Only my daughter complains.

Stepping outside, I see that my wife and the eldest of my three daughters are tending the flower garden together. My wife is watering the plants with a copper watering can and my daughter is carefully taking string from the pocket in her green apron and tying stems to sticks to keep the flowers growing upright.

Rows upon rows of vividly pigmented flowers cascade together in a torrent of petals that tremble in the warm breeze. The rainbow in the mist of the watering pail is the only thing that can compare to the sheer spectrum of color they show. Bumble bees buzz around trying to dodge the streams of water as they gather up all the pollen to take back to the wooden hive sitting on its podium adjacent to the garden.

Finally noticing me standing there taking it all in, my wife comes over and gives me a kiss, asking what I'm up to. I tell her

that I'm just in awe of the beauty surrounding me, both in my girls and their garden. My wife calls me a dork.

"After you check up on the boys, you need to get going, dear," my wife says to me. After assuring her that there's plenty of time to finish preparing the town, I start walking towards the workshop. "I'm not sure what they're working on, but they're being awful secretive about it," she chimes.

"It's a surprise, or so I've been told," I say, turning my head and talking over my shoulder while I continue down the path.

I open up the Dutch door that leads into the side of my workshop and see one of my boys sitting on a workbench watching the other carefully carving out small dishes on a piece of wood. I can hear the cut of the curved knife as it digs into the round piece of maple. The aroma of the shop rushes into my nose, particularly the smell of freshly cut walnut, which always lingers in the room and can't sufficiently be described in simple language to those that haven't had the chance to experience it themselves, because there's no other smell quite like it. The racks of fine lumber stacked high arrest the eye just the same as the stone fireplace in the rear of the building, gone cold from a few days with want of use.

The older boy waves and gestures for me to come over, and I lean against the workbench and observe the work being done by his younger brother. "He's been working on this for a few days, pops," he tells me.

"Aaaand done!" says the younger sibling, handing me his project. "It's a fife!" he says, "I found diagrams of them in some of the books in the library. Now I can play it at the festival!"

I turn the instrument over in my hands and run my fingers over the grain. It's a very plain design, to be sure, and still somewhat rough, but it's not bad work at all for someone that's just started their apprenticeship. It's been quite a long time since I last played any instruments, and I'm sure some fine tuning will be needed anyway, so I'll let him be the first to play it.

"Nick, you don't even know how to play it yet, though," his older brother chimes in.

“I can just get someone in town to show me how to. I’m sure there’s someone that knows.”

“Oh, you mean like that pennywhistle girl at the bakery that’s been plucking at your heartstrings? You could just ask her to dance at the festival or something, you know.”

Hearing this, Nick’s face turns bright red and he gets very defensive and flustered. “It’s not like that! I just like the music she plays and I wanted to give it a try too!” he stammers out.

After quite a lot more teasing and banter between the two brothers, I remind them to be safe when they’re working in the shop alone. I tell the younger brother, “Good luck with the baker’s girl,” as I make my escape, closing the door behind me before he has time to respond.

Standing just outside the workshop, I take a deep breath in, stretch, and gaze at the sky. Today, it’s a brilliant deep blue backdrop adorned by a few perfectly-shaped clouds. The temperature is ideal, too: A bit warmer than I’d like, but not enough to make you start sweating unless you’re doing some good, hard physical labor like I’m about to. We couldn’t have asked for a better day to hold a festival.

I turn to look at in the direction of the sun. It’s roughly mid-morning, which means that I need to get a move-on downtown to help out finishing up the preparations. I begin my trek down the old road to the town square.

Maybe this will sound a bit prideful because I helped build most of it, but I’m always taken aback by our little town, especially during festivals. We were blessed to have good clay deposits nearby and quality lime in the area, so most of the buildings in and around town have dark, charred brick foundations and half-timbered skeletons, exposing the wood frame in contrast against the off-white plastered walls and red-orange tile rooftops. Archways lead off the two main roads through town into narrow, winding passageways between, under, and occasionally above buildings; there is no set grid to be found here. Ornate signs, often made by yours truly, hang outside the entrances to shops throughout the little village advertising the workplaces

of tailors, builders, a bakery, and more. Brow-top doors on the facade of each building welcome anyone willing to enter.

When the town was first being built, we decided to design the town in such a way as to not impede on nature. Because of that, most of the town's floor is carpeted in low-growing grasses with trampled dirt paths, with occasional bricked walkways and a few channels for water drainage. Ivy and scales the sides of buildings and brilliant purple Wisteria vines seems to swallow others up. Trees grow all throughout town, providing shade and shelter from rain, while copper lightning rods atop towers protect the trees in turn. The denser growth in some parts of town gives them a sort of darkness that feels more comforting and cozy than eerie thanks to the pure light that beams through the canopy on bright days. Flowering bushes and other plants of different shapes and sizes trying to show off the last few traces of Spring beauty they can adorn the streets and many of the window sills throughout the village have planter boxes full of flowers with myriads of colors, though I still say they pale in comparison to my wife's garden, of course.

Honeybee hives, both natural and man-made are speckles in various places around town and rudimentary spigots are attached to the trunks of the sugar maples for sap collection, both providing the town with its sugar supply. Fruit trees and berry bushes around town offer more than enough treats for those willing to grab them.

If you look up, squirrels can be seen scampering and performing acrobatic feats across buildings and trees. Mother ducks lead their little ducklings around the waterways through town. All sorts of butterflies flap their wings and float about. At night, the butterflies are replaced by fireflies that swarm around town, making it feel like something out of a fantasy novel. Birds of different songs and colors dash around and tweet out their calls. Rabbits and even the rare deer help manage the growth of the taller grasses in town.

I hop over the beginnings of the town's wall border construction, being built less to keep things out, but to ensure that we

stay *in* and don't try to grow too far out. The foundations for the wall are still a short ways out from the closest buildings, so there's still room for some new construction. Outside that wall are all of the farms that grow and raise food and supplies for the town, from flax and wool to vegetables and grain to beef and milk. This region is encapsulated by its own border to prevent over-expansion, though it's a series of crude fences and trenches serving as markers rather than a proper wall. That area is also where my family's house is, since the lumber mill needed to be built next to the river that runs past the village.

Heading towards the nearest group of buildings, I step through the entrance into a small courtyard in between them, unusually devoid of everyone but myself. Everyone must either be still asleep or busy preparing for the festival. I walk under the balconies on the opposite end of the clearing and head into a small tunnel and up a section of stairs leading to a covered bridge arching over the main street and water channel for the town.

Upland from the village, there's a grove full of natural springs. I'm not sure on all the technical details, but I was told something about wells or aquifers in and around the mountain had something to do with it. Whatever the case, we've made use of the water, constructing a large main channel through the middle of the town's main roads that branches off into smaller supply channels into businesses and homes when it enters town and meets up with them again at its exit, where it flows down to the river. Periodically, you can hear the creaking of wooden water-wheel as they turn to power pumps or simple machines.

From my spot on the bridge, I look upstream and see all the preparations that have already been laid out and others that are currently in progress. There are sun-themed banners and decorations hanging all across the main road, from both buildings and trees. Small market stalls are placed up and down the avenue and I can even make out the stage I'm to help finish building at the town square.

Continuing across the bridge, I head down some stairs and hang a right down a short alley and on to the main street. Walk-

ing up towards the town square, I exchange greetings and small talk with many of the townspeople working to set up stands and stalls and games, being careful not to procrastinate too much as I make my way towards my task.

Finally, I reach the main square. It's more of a hexagon than a square, but language is all arbitrary anyway, so we just call it a square. At the center of the square, the very center of town, there's a small artificial island with a massive, old oak tree growing at the middle of it all. The waterway through town splits around it, covered at either side by small bridges joining the island to either half of town, almost making the whole thing resemble a compass rose, normally. Right now, though, temporary raised platforms have been built and set into the stone rebates on either side of the channel, allowing festival-goers to walk over the waterway without being bottlenecked at the bridges.

On the side of the waterway where I stand, there are piles of deal lumber with joints pre-cut and ready for assembly stacked while a crew nearby is hard at work putting together the stage. There's a tall, young man with scruffy blonde hair, age 17, leading the crew and guiding the project. I'll also be under his watch while I work today. I walk over and call out to him.

"Hey, George! I was hoping you'd be done with this already so I wouldn't have to work today!" I laugh.

"Ha! No, you're not getting out of work that easily, old man," he smirks in response.

Yeah, that's exactly how I'd expect to be accosted by my eldest son. This is George, one of the leaders of the next generation of this town.

George studied for several years under the town's old head architect, Leo, and has taken over any sort of overseer position having to do with construction projects since Leo's passing last year. He's done excellent work so far and has dedicated himself to carrying on the legacy of his teacher. I'm quite proud.

"What do you need me to do?" I ask, before being shown the perhaps overly-detailed schematics and told what I needed

to work on. I join the crew and get to work.



# The Desert

*by Free Idealist*

Nothing is more vast than the desert. Space in all its glory cannot compare. In the desert, the heat bares down on your back. It seeps through your clothes, into your body, and saps your strength. Have you ever felt your skin become so dry that it cracks and bleeds? Have you ever witnessed your own blood evaporate in the rays of the sun? Then the night comes. For a moment you feel relieved, only for your body to feel the opposite sensation as it did. Now you're longing for a blanket. Now you miss the harsh sun.

Nothing is more vast than the desert. Things here aren't what they seem. Is it even worth it to carry on? Would it not be easier to lay down and let the flame in the sky take you onto the next life? Why then do you persist? You don't know. It's probably best that you don't. If you had a reason aside from that innate, indescribable instinct, then you might begin to doubt. You might question your purpose. You might wonder if there's any point at all in reaching the other side, if there is one. You hallucinate out there. The heat causes your mind to melt away and let strange things pass into sight that aren't really there. Water, food, shelter, and even women. You know they're not there, but you're tempted nonetheless.

Nothing is more vast than the desert. Time doesn't move here. The sun goes up, and it comes down, but it means little of worth. Hot, cold, hot, cold. More sand. You can taste it in your mouth and feel it in your lungs. It's all pervasive. Why are you here? Didn't you know that it would be this way? Fool. You didn't have to come. No one forced you out here. Now look at you. You're out of water already. Already? How long has it been? How many days and nights? You don't know. You don't care to

know. It makes little difference. You must hurry. But your horse. Your poor horse. Can he make it as well? Does he suffer as you do? For now he carries you forward. Maybe the last of your water went to him.

Nothing is more vast than the desert. The oceans of sand aren't like those of water. They're far less kind. There is no spray to wash off your sweat. No moisture to wet your lungs. Only the distant dunes of dry, devilish sand. That awful dust that bites at your skin. You hate it, don't you? You long to be free of it. It fills your boots. It stings your eyes. It dries your already barren mouth. Surely it will be your tomb. No? You carry on. Does it not deter you? Don't you wish to turn back? It will be quicker than trying to cross over what's left. Do you think you'll be rewarded for your effort? There's nothing at the end. Just more wilderness. It's a fool's errand.

Nothing is more vast than the desert. No sight more welcoming than that which you now see. Not a mirage. Oasis. Water in the midst of this barren land. Your horse slowly makes his way to the edge of the pool. You fall from the saddle as you try to will your stiff body to move. Nothing is more sweet than the first taste. Nothing can compare. The most divine foods. The most beautiful women. The most gorgeous song. It's all nothing. In this moment, you are happier than ever before. You remove your clothes and lay in the water. It's as if you've been raised from the dead. Your horse, that faithful companion, is just as delighted. No one else is there. You close your eyes, and drift off to sleep. The best of your life.

Nothing is more vast than the desert. The journey never ends. The hardship is eternal. Yet, in the midst of it all, there remains the oasis. Space in all its glory can't compare. The water shines brighter than a thousand stars. Things here aren't what they seem. The tasteless fluid is sweeter than any chocolate. Time doesn't move here. It's as if a piece of Heaven has been left for you. The oceans of sand aren't like those of water. They don't crash against you and pull you from rest, or send storms to drag you to your death. They remain as they are, in their sim-

plicity. You awake. As you move on, a part of you remains. Nothing is more vast than the desert. Except, perhaps, the pleasure of crossing it.

# What Alexander was Looking For

*by Victor Emmanuel*

Alexander's arms had lost all their strength several hundred feet ago, all they did now was keep balance and swing the pick into the ice. All that was driving him upwards was his legs which would soon give out. The air was simply too thin for what his body needed, but then he saw it. In just 50 more feet was the summit. Strength he didn't know he had left in him surged through his body; it wasn't much but it just might get him to the top.

Alexander's buddy, Omar, hadn't complained in the last hour. Not because he didn't have anything to complain about, but rather he didn't have the breath or energy required for the effort. He began to gather up what was required to ask Alexander if they could take a break, when he saw, to his despair, Alexander was picking up the pace.

Finally, Alexander crawled over the ledge and onto the roof of the world. He laid there exhausted, breathless, and ecstatic. It was when he saw a hand waving from under the cliff, he remembered his friend. He grabbed the hand; no longer having any strength in his arms or legs but there was still some left in his back so he used that to aid his friend to his place at the top.

They both laid there too drained to do anything. It was a long while before Omar could finally speak. "Why...the fuck...did you make me do this?"

After a moment of heavy breathing Alexander answered "Because...I needed a buddy so someone would know...what happened if something were to happen."

“But...why me?”

“You were...the most physically...fit.”

“I would...have preferred...if you asked me...to help you move.”

“You would have rather...helped me move...than climb Everest?”

“Safer...and easier”

“Those are both words...that mean boring”

“I'd rather be bored...than dead...or unable to move...Why did you even want to do this?”

“Hold on.” Alexander, after finally finding the strength to do so, sat up looked around then stood. The view up at the top was incredible, but that's not what Alexander was looking for. The sky was clearer than any he had ever seen, but that wasn't what Alexander was looking for. There was no noise but for the wind, but that wasn't what Alexander was looking for. The air was cleaner than any he had ever breathed, but that wasn't what Alexander was looking for. What Alexander was looking for was here at some point, but it wasn't anymore. Or perhaps it was here, just hiding. Alexander reached out his gloved hand, hoping to beckon it to him. But then, a Tibetan guide followed by a couple ascended the summit and whatever was left of what Alexander was looking for vanished.

The guide took a picture of the couple, who held up their climbing picks to pose. After handing the woman back her phone, the guide saw Alexander and Omar. Confused the Tibetan looked around then walked over to them. And asked, “Where is your guide?”

“We don't have one,” said Omar still sitting.

“If you left without your guide then your waiver is void,” responded the guide concerned.

“We didn't sign a waiver,” said Alexander

“Do you know how many people die up here?” asked the exasperated guide.

“White people are crazy man,” said Omar, “They don't care about their own safety.”

“Hey we’re white,” said the man as the couple had walked to be in earshot, curious as to what was going on, “and we aren’t crazy, nor do we not care about safety.”

Alexander looked them both up and down and simply said, “Clearly.”

“Is that supposed to be some sort of insult?” asked the affronted man.

Alexander sighed and answered, “It doesn’t matter.”

The guide and the couple walked away to set up camp away from them. Alexander and Omar agreed to descend Everest in the morning. When the Sun began to set, Omar got out the tent.

“Actually, I was thinking of sleeping outside tonight,” said Alexander

“Well if you aren’t going to help, I’m not setting up the tent.”

They both got out their sleeping bags and got in still wearing full winter gear, being sure to brush off any snow so that it wouldn’t melt and become water while they were sleeping. Once the sun had set, a sight appeared which neither had seen before. The entire milky way, in all its glory was on full display. At the top of the world they could see its full extent and constellations which should be beyond the horizon were it not a thanks to their height. It was harder for Alexander to breathe now than at any point on their expedition, such was the majesty that was before him. While this wasn’t what he was looking for, it was close.

“Ok, yea it is pretty,” said Omar

“Pretty?!” repeated Alexander and he began to laugh.

After Alexander’s laughing had died down Omar said, “You never did say why you wanted to do this.”

Alexander sighed. He first tried to figure out how to describe what he was looking for, but then realized that if Omar hadn’t seen it there would be no point in explaining. So Alexander settled on a joke. A joke that would hint at the truth. “I was looking for Dragons.”

“Dragons?” said Omar amused.

“Yep, but there were none here; I think there was one here, but it’s gone.”

“So,” said Omar, not sure if his friend pulling his leg or not.  
“Will you continue to look for dragons?”

“Yep.”

“Where will you next look?”

Alexander thought for moment. He realized what he was looking for wasn't likely to be on earth anymore. So Alexander pointed to the place in the sky that held the moon and said  
“There.”

# A Price for Justice

by Joseph Patterson

## I

Adrenaline pumped, legs dashing over uneven ground.

Gunshots rang out, the constant din piercing and dulling senses as it echoed in the trees.

Red flashes plagued vision, the scent of decay, iron, and blood filling flared nostrils.

A surreal sense of pleasure suddenly suffused the body, a succor unmatched by any mere chemical of man.

Fear and anxiety began to rise faster than pleasure could keep up.

His legs stopped working.

His eyes went wide.

He hit the dirt hard.

The trees stretched infinitely towards a bright sky above.

Voices echoed victorious cheers.

The world was silent, cold, and uncaring.

His eyes went dark.

\* \* \*

Henry was suddenly jolted back into consciousness as the train shook out an uneven bend in the rails. His vision had been painted with blue hues by the sun's glare on his eyelids, creating an unnatural and alien environment. He quickly blinked the eerie dream from them and remembered the world around him.



He was still in the train car, not in some forest, and it certainly hadn't been blue-toned when he had drifted off. A phantom pain rolled in his right shoulder, perhaps from the vision but more likely the hardwood bench that had left his back stiff and shoulder numb.

He took stock of himself and his belongings. His bag was still unmolested next to him. His coat hadn't been tossed, as his cigarillo box and pocket watch were still where he had left them. The familiar weight of his service revolver still tugged at his belt at his side.

Everything was in order.

Order...

His orders!

Panic set in again as he glanced at the floor with a sigh of relief. A few seconds later, the freshly unsealed envelope was safely back into his hands. He chided himself for thinking the worse, chalking it up to the strange dream that left gunshots echoing in his ears. It had been a long trip down from the capital and other than the gentle roar of the wind and the constant explosion of fire and steam at the front of the lumbering machine, the inside of the train car was as quiet, empty, and secure as could be expected. Though, one could never be too careful about these matters.

He released a long-drawn-out sigh, watching the ancient oaks of the southern temperate forest whiz by for a moment as he fumbled for the metal case in his jacket pocket. Tobacco would hopefully allow him to relax, or at least fully rouse himself from the dream.

Henry considered that the scenery had changed somewhat since he had dozed off and that new growth had been added to the tree line. A mixture of scraggly sand pines, lanky palm trees and venerable cypress had mixed in with the thick oak canopy—a far different sight from the birch forests and grassy plains that he was accustomed to.

In a well-practiced gesture, he pulled a pre-rolled cigarillo from the metal box and struck a match to rouse it to life. A

deep inhalation later, and all was starting to become right in the world. Gently, he shifted a sliding window open to freshen the air of the cabin.

The air was certainly cooler than it had been at midday, but it still seemed to cling to him like the air of a dank basement. The smell a rotting miasma of leaves mixed with the acrid ash of the steam engine poorly, but the tobacco smoke would soon prevent his nose from caring. Soon pale gray puffs were rushing out the window of the cabin, a much smaller smokestack joining up with the train's constant belching.

Henry rubbed his head lightly as he considered the countryside. The sun was low and just beginning to take on a red hue. From the brief flashes of orange and red on the forest floor near the train, he could pick out steadily widening pools of water between the forest scrub and bark. The tall cypress trees were beginning to overtake the rest of the forest.

There were no farmlands here, the land was too swampy and warm for the traditional crops that typically lined the sides of the railroad between cities. These lands were mostly abandoned to nature though there were plenty of trappers, hunters, and frontier-men that still worked the bogs as their forefathers had for generations before them. He knew from the documents nearby that he was likely nearing his next-to-last stop at the headwaters of the Alehani River.

As if on cue, the train's momentum seemed to shift and slow as it climbed onto a bridge. The forest soon seemed to give way to a long and wide swath of flooded prairie lands stretching for quite a few miles in multiple directions. Soon there were no trees to look at. They had entirely been replaced by small shrubs, pools of water, reedy grass, strange gangly birds, and the nearby raised road that ran parallel to the tracks

Henry knew from his geography lessons that there was likely an underground spring or two that fed the marshy grassland, alongside the regular thunderheads that pounded across the land from inland and offshore. The waters here would coalesce further down the prairie until they were swallowed back into the

cypress forest that dotted the land stretching all the way down the shoreline. From the shelter of the trees, the river would begin a painstakingly slow, twisting, and gently rolling journey further south towards Henry's destination: the Port of Alehani City—the capital of the United Republics of Amaria's southernmost Republic.

The Port-City was rather famously known as "Sunset City" for the vibrant red hues that painted the skies during twilight. The place to be at sundown was the Sunset Bridge overlooking the Alehani River as it rolled into the bay—a romantic place that tourists even from the northern republics came to propose to their would-be spouses and young local couples dared to be bold enough to steal a kiss.

He couldn't help but feel a smile climb to his lips. In a past life, he had promised a young girl that he would take her there someday. Though that was before he knew he had the Gift and been whisked away to the capital.

Now he was making the journey alone. Even from the rocking train, Henry had to admit that the skyline had the making of something to inspire and admire— though he was still far from his destination.

A solitary cloud, thundering and pouring fury on the distant horizon of the flooded grassland offered a brief reprieve from the sun's glare, and Henry blinked as he seemed to immediately lock eyes on a wild pig. He barely had time to register the strange sight—a patient pig waiting like a carriage for the train to pass at a road crossing. Before he could confirm that it hadn't been his imagination, it was gone from his line of sight and there was no one in the car to ask if they had also seen it.

The vision of the pig stuck in his mind for more than a few moments. There was almost something familiar about it.

Shaking his head, Henry flicked the remains of his cigarillo through the window and slid it closed as the train pulled back into the cypress forest. Putting his back to the window, he pulled the previously sealed envelope into his gloved hands, considering the contents in his mind for several moments before another

jolt in the train urged him to action.

As gingerly as could be, he reached in and pulled out a well-maintained collection of official looking documents, his orders from the Magisteria.

This was to be his first position after being officially appointed to the rank of Conciliator, and his future success was riding on the next five years of his life. Alehani City had not been his first choice of places to go, however, and the warm lands of the southern reaches of the Republic were as foreign of a place to be posted as possible.

His first orders had seemed almost deliberately vague to him, to the point of some measure of suspicion on his part. Beneath the usual fanfare and official letterhead, a simple two bullets had been stamped out by typewriter:

1. *Assume post of Conciliator for Alehani District of United Republics of Amaria. (Per Title 5, Section 2304 of URA Law Code 662, Designated Republic Sector 12)*
2. *Document and report all findings per standard procedure (MD 1-2 Rev H)*

The other items were less vague but of equal importance. A deed for a house within the city proper that presumably came with his appointment, alongside a personal invitation from the Prelate for the city to visit the Twilight Cathedral and another personal invitation from the Alehani Assembly to visit the Republic's local house of governance. There was something else amongst the letters that had given him pause, however.

His eyes drifted over the now-familiar cursive script of his predecessor written on a yellowed piece of parchment paper.

*To whom it may concern,*

*I am writing to you, my replacement, to inform you of a grave oversight on my part. I have left unfinished business in Blackwater Township—well within the jurisdiction of your new station. You will find this town small, rural, rustic, and likely*

*not to your taste or predilections. There is a man named Gustavo Barlow that you must speak with before continuing to Alehani City. All will be made clear by him. He is well-known within the Township, and you will have no issue finding him.*

*Best regards,  
Roger Vrakas*

Henry remembered receiving a sour stomach the first time he had read the note, the irritation of unfinished business a painful reminder that not all his compatriots were as steadfast in their service as he deigned think of himself. Compelled by a sense of duty alone, he would make the stop at Blackwater Station and find Gustavo Barlow.

In truth though, he feared that this might be some sort of unavoidable loyalty test by the Magisteria. It was unusual for a Conciliator to leave unfinished business at their post before exiting, though perhaps time had not allowed for a quick resolution.

There was strange talk in the Capital before he had received his orders, as well as something almost impersonal about how he had received them. Rumors that the Unified Republic Assembly had passed some sort of resolution demanding the creation of a new judicial body had been spreading—a direct challenge to the authority of the Magisteria.

Perhaps that was why his predecessor had been replaced quickly and abruptly by a young greenhorn? Politics often necessitated experienced men.

*Justice has a price.*

Henry considered the first tenet of his post carefully in his head. A great responsibility was awaiting him, and it was growing closer with every blackened railroad tie added to his rearview. He was a Conciliator now, not an initiate, and that meant there was no room for mistakes or oversights. Life and death would be in his hands on more than one occasion.

In the past, it had been said that the Spark of Creation had been passed by God to the First Men, who used it to forge the

first Republic and the established the Magisteria. The Conciliators were supposed to be the primary bearers of that spark—the branch that ensured justice was honest, fair and well thought out. Not so long ago, the men of his station were considered honorable and trustworthy to a fault. However, recent times had forced the Magisteria and the Conciliators to change.

On more occasions than one during his training, he had felt more like an enforcer or a glorified hitman than a dispenser of “justice.” He hoped now that this was a chance to set himself apart and back on the path that he knew to be correct. The same path that had inspired and made him proud of his heritage. Perhaps a path that would restore a bit of honor and good name to his station.

Fortunately, he understood this was to be an uphill battle and had prepared extensively to try and hold his moral fortitude and avoid the Darkening of his soul at any cost.

Unfortunately for him, he had been assigned to an area that he had no affinity or familiarity with. The foreign city sprawl built out of the vast and flat swamplands of the Alehani river represented a place just about as far from his home as possible.

He slid the documents back into the envelope as the steam engine whistled out a cloud of pale white smoke to alert some unknown crossing ahead.

Henry reached into his pocket and checked his watch, mindful that the summer days were slowly ticking away one by one. Though one could hardly judge by the daylight still left, it was nearly 7PM and his stomach groaned in hungry protest.

It wouldn't be much further to the station at Blackwater, he thought.

From there he would hopefully be able to get a warm meal and a bed for the night before meeting Gus Barlow—though his initial expectations were bound to be thoroughly trampled if the tone of his predecessor was to be taken seriously.

## II

Gustavo Barlow cut a striking appearance perched in his comfortable chair on the other side of a fine oak desk that formed the center piece of his home office. The weathered lines of his face, engrained on the well-tanned skin of a southern native, stood in stark contrast to his sharp blue eyes and snow-white hair. He kept it short, cleanly managed, and parted neatly towards his left side. This was a style typical in the southern reaches of the Republic where heat and humidity were ubiquitous. Such a style was almost a necessity alongside a freshly shaven face. He wore some combination of his station's uniformed jacket's upper half and a day laborer's trousers—perhaps a privilege that had been extended to his more rural office, but more than likely a deliberate gesture.

Despite this more rustic and relaxed look on the older gentleman, Henry couldn't help but think that his manner of dressing seemed more immaculate than his own dress uniform locked away in a trunk at the bed and breakfast closest to the rail station. There wasn't a spec of dirt, dust, or crumb anywhere near him. The man on the other side of the desk was clearly of the blood of the First Men, the Republic's founding stock, but was like most of the other denizens of Blackwater Township as far as Henry could tell. The First Men of the south were almost a distinct group to themselves, and the man's name given name seemed to hint at some distant mixed heritage with the Alehani natives.

Henry couldn't help but feel somewhat underdressed and underprepared as the man promptly shoved the morning paper to a corner of his spartanly decorated desk and stood up to shake his hand, very firmly. There was hardly a break in his movements, any sign of advancing age held only in his wrinkles and hair. A smile eagerly spread across the stranger's face and Henry couldn't help himself from reflecting it back.

"Sheriff Barlow at your service, Conciliator. I've been expecting you. Please, I'd be rightly insulted if you didn't take a seat and make yourself comfortable." The Sheriff drawled in a dialect dis-

tinct to the southlands of the Republic, but Henry followed his words easily enough.

“Thank you, Sheriff. As you seem to already know, I am the new Conciliator for this district, Henry Goodal. I am honored to meet your acquaintance, sir,” Henry managed as he settled into one of the chairs in front of him. The level of comfort in the cushion took him by surprise for a moment, before he remembered himself. “I must admit though, I am here on business.”

“That can wait! You’ve had breakfast, right? Can either my wife or I get you something to drink or eat? Anything at all. My house is your house. It isn’t every day that a Conciliator comes and stops in at Blackwater, after all. I can’t have any of you young Capital boys thinking we have no hospitality out here.”

“N-no, sir, I’ve eaten. It’s no trouble,” Henry stumbled as his stomach seemed to let out a quiet protest.

“You’re sure?” The Sheriff considered him carefully for a long moment.

Henry nodded affirmation that he was fine.

“Very well, Conciliator, y’know y’self best, I’m sure,” the beaming Sheriff, still the picture of kindness and gracious rural authority, settled back into his chair. The careful and well-practiced gaze of the man looked him over slowly. “Why’ve you come to Blackwater if it isn’t to partake in our hospitality, Conciliator?”

“Well, Sheriff, it’s something of a complication.” Henry reached into the side pocket of his coat, unfurling the yellowed parchment paper of the previous Conciliator gently. His eyes watched the Sheriff closely as he explained the note. “My predecessor, Roger Vrakas, left me a message saying that he regretfully left unfinished business with you here in Blackwater Township. I’m afraid that he didn’t describe what that business actually entailed.”

Barlow seemed to notice his probing gaze, but if he cared that Henry was trying to analyze his reaction, he didn’t show any sign of caring beyond amusement. Indeed, if anything, his infectious smile grew somewhat impossibly wider.



“Ol’ Roger said we had unfinished, did he? Hah!”

“I take it that you know what he’s referring to, then?”

“Oh yes, I know exactly what ol’ Roger has cooked up.” Barlow’s smile grew sly as he leaned forward across the desk, his own eyes probing back at Henry for his reaction to his next words. “You’re not going to like it though.” The Sheriff’s smile seemed to fade away as instantly as he had conjured it as his tone became gravely serious. “I’ll tell you about this unfinished business, but if ye’ don’t mind I’ll ask y’some questions of my own.”

Henry considered a moment, reflecting Barlow’s suddenly change in demeanor back at him. His mind raced as he contemplated the meaning. It seemed that both men knew that they were now engaged in something else entirely. It was all but confirmed to Henry at this point, this was certainly some sort of test as he had suspected. Though this test was likely not one that the Magisteria had constructed, but one that Conciliator Vrakas had cooked up with Barlow before leaving.

His mind raced—that meant a few things. First, Barlow knew something that would likely impact his ability to do his job. What that was, he could only guess at. Only time would tell. Second, Vrakas had obviously considered the Sheriff to be trustworthy to perform this task. That meant the older gentleman might prove to be a valuable ally to Henry, though he would likely be relaying and reporting his actions on to his predecessor via letter. Of course, he would need to pass the man’s test before any of these revelations would even start to matter. He considered his next words carefully.

“Do you mind if I smoke, Sheriff?”

Barlow pursed his lips, shaking his head as he pushed a glass ash tray towards Henry.

“I’ll answer any questions you might have, Sheriff. Of course, I’ll have some questions of my own for you, if you don’t mind.” Henry procured a thin cigarillo from his case, and Barlow politely shifted a matchbook across the desk towards him without looking away.

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Conciliator. We're to be working together iff'n' you've got business in Blackwater Township that ain't this business besides."

Henry struck a match, rousing the cigarillo to life with a nod as he looked Barlow in the eyes. "Ask away."

Barlow's smile returned, but it was now sly. "What kind of man would you say you are, Conciliator?"

Henry frowned at the opening salvo, and quickly corrected his expression too little too late. "Bit of a loaded question, don't you think?"

Barlow continued to eye him slyly.

"I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to consider that. A few of my good friends in the capital would probably just answer immediately what comes to mind, but I suppose I'm more the sort to ramble on for a few moments instead."

"I take no offense, Conciliator. My wife tells me I'm a bit of a rambler myself," the Sheriff chuckled in a good-natured fashion. "I assume that ain't your answer, though."

"Indeed not, Sheriff. The appointment to Conciliator has always been a great responsibility—take no insult by this, but you're certainly quite a bit older than I am, and perhaps things are different down here—I am sure you can remember a time when it seemed like justice was an honest and honorable affair. I'd like to think that I'm the sort of man who wishes to see that again. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to be a Conciliator, and what it means to be a servant of the Republic, so I suppose I'm also the sort of man who also does that. You'll pardon me, but I don't actually know if that answers your question or not."

"Y'say you've thought about it a lot, but have you thought about what it takes to make that happen?"

"What do you mean?" Henry blinked at Barlow.

"Well, you're a Conciliator now, Conciliator—not some enforcer or soldier just following orders. Do you know what you're going to do to restore justice to be an' honest and honorable affair?" Barlow looked over him in some measure of sympathy.

“Ah—I don’t mean to be hard on ya’, but I’ve noticed something about y’young folk—and don’t take no insult to this. I see it all the time in the boys in town, in the work groups, and even in the young bloods gathering at Church. Y’all have good ideas and want to do lots of good things, things that sound nice in your heads. They’re usually mighty fine ideas, but at the end of the day you don’t know what actions you will take to make them good things happen.”

Henry felt somewhat dumbfounded as he puffed on his cigarillo, considering the Sheriff’s words for a few long moments. “I—...Well, I suppose if I’m being honest with you Sheriff, I guess I hadn’t thought too hard on the specifics, I haven’t actually taken the office yet.”

“Don’t feel bad, Conciliator. I’ve lived my whole life in Blackwater, seen more than ten Conciliators. Most of them don’t think about it. Fortunately for you, you’ve got a long time to figure that part out—longer than I’ve got left on this world anyway! So, consider this. You’re going to be taking office and I’m sure you’ll have lots of things to be thinking about. Make sure you put some thought into what you’ll be doing to make things more honest and honorable first. Then, you know, do them!

It’s plenty good to have thoughts and ideas, but if you don’t do anything then they don’t amount to much.” Barlow gave a hearty chuckle. “Of course, maybe ol’ Roger rubbed off on me a bit, I don’t usually go out and give words like these to just anyone. I haven’t decided if you’ve got a good head on your shoulders yet though and I haven’t quite finished my questions either.”

Henry rubbed at his face slowly, feeling a bit sobered as he took another puff from his cigarillo. Barlow’s words certainly stung a bit more than he was expecting, and a nagging fear was now tugging at his stomach.

“I’ll take your advice to heart, Sheriff, and I appreciate it. You’ll forgive me if I say that I hope your next question isn’t quite so thought-provoking, though?”

“Afraid I can forgive you, but that won’t change my next question.” Barlow smiled warmly once more, his eyes shining with

mischief. “How many other folks were on that train with you, Conciliator?”

Henry was relieved at a seemingly more mundane question and mused for a few moments as he took stock, “my train car was empty but there were a few families here and there that got on and off the other cars, at least one other man got off with me here.”

Barlow nodded a few times, warm smile still present “And ye’ didn’t think there was anything...odd about that?”

“Well, no, not really.”

“You know what they do down here in Alehani, right?”

“Imports and exports, mining, agriculture. At least, that’s what I remember from the newspapers.”

“Not wrong, Conciliator. Not wrong. Those are all jobs that require a certain amount of folks though, the right kind of folks. Do you know how many citizens are in the Alehani District you’re be overseeing?”

“About two million or so?”

The Sheriff gave another hearty chuckle. “That’s folks like you or me. Two million of the First Men, proper Republic Citizens. Hard working folk. The population of your city you’ll be overseeing is two million, but that city isn’t the whole district. You’ll be having a lot of other types of folks there.”

“What do you mean, other types of folks?” Henry’s brow furrowed in partial confusion. “I know there are the natives, but I thought most of them had died out or been granted citizenship?”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you, you’ll have to see for yourself. I will say this though, they aren’t citizens, and they definitely aren’t folks like you or I.” Barlow looked at him with a measure of sympathy.

Henry couldn’t help but shake his head, wondering what the suddenly forlorn Barlow could possibly mean. “Just what sort of a situation are they sending me into, Sheriff?”

“I’m not going to lie to you, son. It’s not great. Alehani isn’t the city it was fifty years ago. Heck, it ain’t the city it was ten years ago anymore. There are some...” Barlow tongued his cheek,

searching for the correct words. “Different folk in Alehani Assembly, and they have a great deal of power with the Governor proper. Like I said, you’re going to have to see for yourself. Once you do, you can come on back here and I’ll tell you more.”

More questions than answers shook through Henry’s mind, things had seemed so simple just a few hours before. Now, things seemed different, more muddled. It seemed that he had gained an ally in Sheriff Barlow, but it was clear to him that the situation that he was about to enter was so different than what he expected that there would be no amount of preparation that would help. He took a long drag off his cigarillo before tapping ash from the end into the Sheriff’s desk tray.

“I knew that Alehani was a bit of a frontier town compared to the Capitol, but you say that there are different folk in charge of this Republic’s Assembly and that they wield power over the Governor. How am I supposed to interpret this as anything but treason?” Henry pondered aloud as he took another long puff of his cigarillo. Something particularly dark suddenly dawned on him. “The Magisteria already knows. That’s why Vrakas didn’t express this through the proper channels.”

“They know, all right,” Barlow nodded sympathetically.

Henry could read between the lines plainly enough. Vrakas had been removed from his position because he knew too much about what was going on. However, that couldn’t be all the story—surely the Magisteria wouldn’t be so corrupt as that. The thought was as insulting as it was blasphemous. Bags were already forming beneath Henry’s eyes as he considered the dark ramifications.

Barlow nodded sympathetically. “You see why I asked you what you were planning on doing, son? This region isn’t just some backwater. Alehani is the largest port in the southlands, the rail lines here run all the way back to the Capitol. They end here, in the swamp lands on the Bay. Important things happen here. I’ve been watching it my whole life. This is where decisions on the future of the Republic are made, not in some capitol building or in a big city—but here, on the edge of civilization. You

could venture to all ends of this Earth, but not find yourself in a more important place to shape the future of the Nation. Our future, son." Barlow's sharp blue eyes stared at him full of promise and expectation.

Henry rubbed at his face, considering what the future might hold for him. Conspiracy, plotting, intrigue, and perhaps worse all loomed in the foreground of his mind as he pushed the butt of the cigarillo into the ashtray. His face became gravely serious, though he felt as though he might have aged ten years in the span of the conversation. Yet something was working through him, invigorating him. Beyond fear, doubt, and confusion something else was stirring within him. He looked Barlow directly in the eye, a fire igniting in his belly.

"If the Nation and the People's future is at stake, then there's no turning back now, is there?"

\* \* \*

Henry watched the lanky cypress trees sliding by the window as a cold rain beat against the train's windows. Thick heavy drops almost gave the impression of hail impacting on the metal roof, filling his ears with a thunderous din. Outside, lightning flashed but was lost in the hazy white, and thunder seemed to rattle the train just as hard as an unforgiving rail bend. It was a perfect reflection of Henry's mind as he mused on his conversation with the Sheriff.

Alehani City was less than an hour's ride to go, and more questions than answers darted through his thoughts. Still, at least he had seemingly gained an ally in his unpredictable future and gotten a decent night's rest in a rural township. From now on though, he was bound to the rail lines. There was literally only one direction to go from here, forward towards Alehani City.

A burst of thunder shook the train once more alongside a blast of fresh air as the door between train cars flew open. Henry looked over in time to see a woman, half-soaked from the storm outside, barreling across the length of the train car as quick as

she could. He caught clear sight of her face, soaked black hair tossing back and forth against the dark blue uniform of the military proper. He barely had a moment to consider her cute, let alone give the look of fear on her face credence before the sound of lightning and thunder, much louder and closer, sent shockwaves through the passenger car.

He had even less time to realize that the sound and color of the flash didn't match the blue-white colors of a thunderstorm as the train seemed to groan harshly in abrupt protest.

Henry felt himself being flung forward into the hard wood of the seat of the next row, where his head bounced neatly and predictably painfully against it.

The sound of screeching metal on metal, brakes clamping down hard, and a noise suspiciously like a tin-can being crushed filled his ears as he fell to the floor between seats. All was suddenly very dim and quiet...

# The Wolf

*by Anonymous*

The air smelled of grass and rain. The stars shined above me, but the great fire showered The Thicket with a marvelous silvery light. Despite the delightful atmosphere of a summer night, I knew without even seeing or hearing that it was moving between the trees. The Snake hissed with displeasure and the The Tiger disappeared. It was hunting for me. I knew it was better to not look, and even less to think of it. If you acknowledge it, it will smell you. It will see you. It was searching for me and now I just couldn't return to The Barren to leave. I had to press on through the Thicket and hope to escape if I flung myself into The Craggs or find The Tall Cairn and pray for a escape. I had two chances that I better take and I began to move forward. Slow but without pause like a snake in the grass. My movements were steady and my senses keen. I would not let it catch me.

My movements were small every time, but always taken with caution. I went from tree to tree, wary of absolutely everything that might move nearby. I sometimes moved behind a boulder or on top of a tree, expecting to catch a glimpse of the damn thing in the distance only for it to be right around the corner next time. Damn...Stop thinking about it! Focus on moving and staying out of sight. I kept advancing, keeping my mind steady and visualizing my objective. I knew the way and I knew I would find the exit. I just needed a bit more to arrive. Then...the sudden snapping of a branch took my thoughts off track and I stopped immediately. No, it couldn't be this close! I resisted the urge to turn my head to look what might have caused the disturbance and I kept on moving with my neck stiff. My heart begun to race and I picked up the pace a little bit. I needed to hurry and get out of here quickly!



As my steps increased in speed, my thoughts became more frantic. I looked above at the stars hoping to get my bearings, but I saw I was still trapped in The Thicket and way off my destination. And even if this was supposed to be a setback, I was not ready to give up and stop to become easy prey. I only saw it once, but I knew very well what it could do. That single moment struck fear in me every time I remembered it...but it was enough to spur me into action. But now I had to focus. Run to The Crag and fling yourself over. Once that's done, you will escape it and the night will be over.

The air changed and I could smell it. The crisp scent of fresh ice floated in the air. It was getting close and a sudden chill crept up my spine like the hand of winter filling my body with cold. The confidence in my plan was beginning to crumble and I had to move immediately. It was terribly close and right now it was a do or die situation. My legs started to move without thinking and carried me off like a fleeting gale. I didn't have to look, and I mustn't look. Right now I knew that The Wolf was terribly close. I could almost feel its ravenous nonexistent gaze on me. I could picture its fangs glistening like fresh blades eager for murder. My heart raced and my soul quivered. I felt as if my heart, despite beating savagely into my chest, sunk into icy waters.

The grass yielded before me and the wind caressed my cheeks. I jumped, I raced, I cursed when I fell and I got up once more. But no matter what...I felt it getting close. The frigid smell of frost. The odd, barely perceptible whisper in my ears. The furtive figure in the corner of my eye. The tingling in the back of my neck. I was not going to fall and I kept pressing on against all hope. And soon, I saw a glimmer between the trees...The Light of the Horizon was there! The Crag was just a bit further away and I would escape it! That sight fired up my spirit and I made a mad dash for it. I moved swiftly, reacting quickly to whatever obstacle that I could find in my path. But as my objective was in sight, my hopes were quickly dashed.

My legs began to grow horribly numb and I began to lose my speed, moving in a clumsy manner as much as I could before

coming to an abrupt stop. The horrible cold began to grow. I felt how it crept up my flesh with ferny fingers like it grows on a window on winter. I could barely move my arms or even resist now. It was right there, in front of me...But I was too foolish and slow to get there. Now I could only hope that the gods would spare me the worst. I didn't dare look once I sensed something around me, but I knew that night has come for me. And unfortunately, it was going to devour me.

I woke up. A sudden jolt of lightning bringing me back to the waking world. My breath was ragged and labored. My throat felt parched and strained. The cold sweat on my back was a thin layer of ice and my heart raged like a blast furnace in my icy chest. I shivered with the fright, still present in my mind, and I felt the urge to get out of bed. But the cold forced me to huddle among the lukewarm blankets as my body ached for warmth. The rain outside led a merciless assault against the roof of the house and the drops crashed constantly against the windows. The candle by the table filled the room with queasy light, casting timid shadows over the walls. I knew what happened despite how hard I tried to push it out of my mind. The memories were like a fresh wound, still bleeding and aching. But one that, hopefully, time would heal. The Wolf has sunk its fangs in me and even now I could feel it gnawing at the back of my mind, tearing apart my thoughts. Black bile began to rise in my soul, bubbling tar that poisoned my thoughts one drip at a time.

Even now, the Wolf that ravages minds was here. In the dark corners of the room, its fiery eyes and jagged teeth showed an evil smile that mocked me. And it wasn't going to let me go.

# Barrow

by Eotyrannus

## I

Somewhere in Scotland a man was running away from his town and up, into the forested hills. Robert Kirk, 28 years old, a bachelor, diagnosed schizophrenic, ran for the joy of it every morning: he was on an uphill path he had neglected until now, usually preferring other directions in the arterial branching of disused, narrow trails. He had always felt some instinctive aversion to this path, but this time boredom of the other routes had won out.

His feet pounded the dirt, feeling through his shoes the shape of the soil and rocks underneath. Early dawn afforded him just enough light: trees loomed forward in the mist, the dark gaps between them resolving into human forms, then dissolving again into random tangles of branches. His breath came hard, but was rhythmic and controlled. Late October air bit coldly at his bare face and arms. His legs were starting to tire on the slope, but he felt good.

It was a tough climb that had been stopped short by an unexpected fence. Panting, he needed several minutes to control his breathing enough to read the laminated A4 zip-wired to the padlocked gate: a council notice of construction. New housing, necessary for a growing imported population. There were no buildings yet, but behind the fence trees had been cleared, and a large dirt road was being formed.

He was at first only upset by the obstacle, the fence that had stopped his run. Then the realization came to him that this was

not just a fence, but soon a paved road, concrete housing, workmen, noise, people, strangers—in whom he always saw hatred and violent thoughts borne towards him. He was angry, unbearably so. This was no delusional persecution: he had run to escape the town, but the town had not allowed this. It had chased him here and reminded him there was no escape from its filth and violence.

Then, he had been interrupted by a strange noise: whistling. It at first sounded like that of a man, but was not a song or call. The pitch swooped bizarrely, putting his hairs on end, and stopped suddenly to be followed by a sequence of loud clicks. The noise had some unnatural quality, and he froze—rigid, barely breathing, flooded with a new course of adrenaline. He listened intently for a source, like an animal hearing a twig snap beneath a hunter's foot. Staring into the darkness between the trees, his eyes fixated on a figure: pale, elongate, too tall, staring at him. He stared back, trying to make out more detail, unsure if he was looking at a person, or the illusion of a chance overlap of branches, or something else entirely. Then the whistling began again, this time from the opposite direction. He realized there was more than one of them, whatever they were, and ran.

This was not the kind of run by which he had come there. It was panicked flight, driven by overwhelming fear, terror that wiped out every other thought in his head. The noises were chasing him, from behind and to either side, and he pressed faster. With the instinctive thoughts of hunted prey, he knew that there were not just two things chasing him, but many. His breath came in a frantic stridor, and a sharp pain stabbed through his diaphragm with each gasp. His legs felt numb and moved faster than he could coordinate, making him stumble. Pale figures flitted in the shadows of his peripheral vision, and as his head spun frantically from one side to the other, trying to see what was chasing him, he thought he saw more of the too-tall figures matching his pace between the trees, leaping forward with unnatural agility.

He was nearing the edge of the forest when something

dashed out in front of him, and leapt back into the trees before he could make out any detail. Shouting with fear, he stumbled and fell. The forest floor was soft, and the adrenaline helped him to roll and quickly right himself, using the inertia of the fall to fly forwards in a new sprint. Breaking out of the trees, he did not stop running. Despite his hatred of the town, relief spread through him as he entered it and began to run down sidewalks illuminated by streetlamps. The concrete and artificial light seemed to banish away the supernatural, he was sure they were hostile to the things from the forest chasing him. Although calmer, his flight only really ended after he threw himself back into his flat, slamming shut the door and ramming a chair beneath the handle in a weak barricade. There, gasping for breath, choking and spluttering on water, he forced several anti-psychotic tablets down and huddled under his blankets until the drugs sent him to sleep.

## II

“I could hear them while I was running.”

Robert stared at the floor as he said this, uncomfortable at the admission.

The office was cold, bare: four plain white walls, warped chipboard desk, a mess of wires splaying from a computer, a few uncomfortable chairs. It had been built quickly, cheaply, and carelessly. The psychiatrist leaned forward; he was used to reticence from his patients.

“Could you understand what they were saying?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then what did you hear?”

“Uh, they were talking. They were chasing me.”

The psychiatrist leaned backwards again in annoyance. Robert didn't know his name, it was someone different each time he attended clinic. Inevitably they took on a similar expression

of exasperation when they didn't hear what they wanted, or perhaps didn't hear anything that made sense to them. They understood schizophrenia from an academic perspective. It was still frustrating trying to disentangle the strange ideas and bizarre, magical thoughts originating from an obscure, internal logic.

"How did you know they were talking, then?"

"Uh...it meant something. I don't know what. They—"

"Okay, alright. Were they telling you to do anything?"

"Uh, no."

"Did they want you to hurt yourself, or someo—"

"No."

The usual line of questioning. The psychiatrist looked entirely bored now, giving up on hearing anything that interested him. He grimaced at the monitor, which displayed lists of medication.

"You're taking the olanzapine every day?"

"Uh, yes."

"You don't ever miss a day? Feel like you don't need it? Or does it make you feel ill?"

"Uh, y—no. Yes. Uh—"

"We've had a chat about the depot anti-psychotic, do you remember? The monthly injections. I think it's something we should really consider, now."

When it was over Robert left the office, glancing at the other patients in the waiting room. There were three, sitting under yellow fluorescence: A very slim man, almost skeletal, twitching and glaring, daring anyone to question his presence. A fat, sallow woman staring forward at nothing with an empty gaze, very still. A black who looked around Robert's age, and was somehow familiar to him in mannerisms—shy, cowed, afraid of something the others couldn't see or hear.

The building he emerged from blended into the others, built only a few decades ago out of concrete that was already stained and warping. The clinic was demarcated by a blue and white NHS SCOTLAND sign stamped into the building by screws trailing

rust. The street itself was filthy with litter and spilled garbage, and the smell made him catch his breath.

Walking home, he watched other pedestrians. Lone figures, eyes fixed straight ahead or glaring suspiciously at others. An elderly couple, ill at ease in the ugliness and loneliness of the town, uncomprehending of what had brought this change or why. The town centre was more rotting concrete, garish convenience stores; shopfronts of chains, bolts, and shutters. There were dirty bus shelters decorated with bright posters of smiling interracial couples advertising high-interest loans. On the other side of the street, one of the thin, jittery addicts who were now commonplace was stumbling, shaking, and yelling. Passers-by were pretending he wasn't there.

Having returned, finally, to the reassuring familiarity of his flat, he examined the new boxes of medication. More anti-psychotics, which, of course, he had not been taking with any regularity. They made him feel ill and induced a dull stupor. Still, from a small insight in the back of his mind he knew things were getting worse. He had never, and could never, function in society with or without the medication, and that thought combined with the misery of the town he had just walked through sent him into a sudden black paroxysm of despair. He collapsed into bed and slept without dreaming.

### III

Now, running for the first time since the incident, Robert was climbing the same hill. With the medication, he should not see or hear anything to scare him. Nevertheless, he had deliberately started his run late so that the sun brightly illuminated the forest. Darkness could play tricks on his vision, and his mind was more likely than most to perceive strange things where there were none. The day was cold, bright, and clear, and soon he had reached the fence.

The gate was open, and in full daylight the hill appeared different enough that he was not afraid of it. He wandered into the artificial clearing ahead and rested for a moment on a stump. There were several construction vehicles there now, empty, and he saw the litter of a workman's lunch had been scattered nearby. He felt rage growing in him at people's inability, even in the smallest of actions, to respect nature. If an action didn't directly hurt them, then it was permitted. It was as if, he felt, these people had lost the ability to see anything but their own small, petty lives.

As he sat there, growing angrier, he knew, by sudden insight, that this hill had held importance for hundreds of years, thousands. Long ago, when Man first came to this land, they had fought another people, and here one of that other species had been buried. His ancestors had known to avoid the barrow. Death did not mean the same for the Aos Sìth as it did for Man.

Starting up, the line of thought was broken. His anger was replaced by guilt. He was not supposed to have these thoughts, knowledge that came into his head unbidden, although he knew, instinctively each time, that they were deep and undeniable truths. Delusional thinking, a burden of his illness. Perhaps if he took the medication regularly, he would not be troubled by this. Robert turned back to the gate, trying to bring his mind again to the vacant peace of the anti-psychotics. Walking back, he saw something he had missed on entering the clearing: a body slumped against the inside of the fence.

It was a construction worker: high-visibility jacket, utility belt, hard hat and workboots. The body was partially covered by dead leaves, hiding it somewhat, and was coated in dirt. Cautiously, he approached, and the body remained unmoving. Closer, he could see the limbs were splayed at odd angles, but there was no obvious external injury, and no blood to be seen. It possessed the characteristic strangeness of real corpses, so unlike in movies—empty and still, dirty, awkwardly posed. The expression was one of pain: filmy eyes rolled upwards, jaw clenched and teeth bared.



When he fled this time, there were no strange noises. All he heard were the pulls and gasps of his breathing, and the thuds of his panicked footsteps.

## IV

The psychiatrist, and this time a nurse, too, were staring at Robert. Their gazes bore down and penetrated his skull, and with this he felt their hatred and disgust. He tried to smile apologetically, but his face only twitched. His head ached, and his body felt light and alien beneath him. They were talking again, but their speech seemed meaningless. Their hatred took form, and although their words tried to disguise it, it burrowed into him. He tried nodding, hoping it would bring them closer to letting him leave.

“Are you listening, Robert?”

Flinching, he nodded more vigorously.

“What you’re telling us makes me think your illness is getting worse. It sounds as if the hallucinations are visual, too, now, and it seems like they’re upsetting you.”

The psychiatrist was talking about the injection, which would help him. The depot anti-psychotic. He wouldn’t need to worry about pills, remembering to take them, deciding whether he should or not. It would be easy, and it would cure him. The nurse agreed with the psychiatrist. She said the injection would make him better. Cowering farther into himself, Robert muttered agreement. It was too confusing, and he wanted to leave. It had all become so tiresome.

He was back in the street now, where it was dark. Robert couldn’t remember if the appointment had ended, or if he had simply walked out. He couldn’t feel the injury of a needlestick anywhere: if he had agreed to the injections, they hadn’t given him one yet. The night was cold, and it was odd that it was night, as his appointment had been in late afternoon. The shopfronts

were closed, lights off except for streetlamps, and the street was empty. This relieved him, and he relaxed somewhat. Checking his watch, it was late evening, October 30th. Tomorrow was Halloween, which had once been called Samhain. A time of proximity between worlds.

Before dawn, he was walking up the hill. He had not slept, and felt too exhausted to run. At this time of year, it would not be light for hours, and even at this slow pace he struggled to see enough of the path in front of him so as not to trip. Moonlight reached between the trees, and the silver illumination was just enough to see by. His body still felt too light, weak and uncoordinated, and he realized he had not eaten anything in days. The light became stronger as he approached the top, and now it looked to him as if the forest was glowing. Today was Samhain, he knew, and something had drawn him back to the hill.

Robert reached the fence, and passed through the open gate. Turning to look for the body, he saw it was still there, but now there were several more large, dark bundles lying beside it. Approaching, he could see they were more dead men, limbs twisted and bent. He sat on another stump, facing the bodies, and waited, listening.

He knew by another bestowed insight that long ago, hundreds of years, thousands, it had been men like him who had communed with the Aos Sìth. Ordinary men could not see or hear them, but had feared them greatly, and men like Robert were not outcasts, but revered. But just as the Aos Sìth were long gone from this land, any treaty that had existed between them and Man was long forgotten, and he was now a trespasser on the barrow, the burial mound of something ancient and inhuman, and death did not mean the same for the Aos Sìth as it did for Man.

When the noises came, it was all at once: whistles rising into shrieks, and staccato trains of frenzied clicking. This time, he could see them clearly: thin, pale, elongate figures between the trees. One had stepped into the clearing. It was tall, at least two metres, thin and gracile, naked but covered in tattooed patterns

and runes. The skull was narrow, very white skin pulled taut around a strange, cruel face. It had no hair, and slit-like eyes. The arms were disproportionately long, like that of a gibbon, and it was grasping something in its hand, he could not see what. There was enough similarity to Man to suggest common lineage, but simultaneously the inhumanity and unfamiliar physiology of another world. The sight filled him with terror—it was a sight that the human mind had evolved to recognize and immediately return one overriding thought: flee.

This time, though, Robert could not run. The town was Hell, and if he ran to safety there he would be swallowed up by the same disease that was killing it and its people. The misery that afflicted all of them, the filth and hopelessness reminding them of their place as slaves, would eat him too. He would not go down as easily as the rest, but the injection would wipe his mind of resistance, wipe his mind of any thoughts at all. He hated them, he hated the town, and when he had run from it, the town had followed him to poison the woods, too. He did not feel any courage, but the thought of returning to that black despair was too much, and he could only stand as the pale thing approached and spread its enormous arms.

## V

Pseudohistories of Scotland and Ireland tell of the Aos Sí, or Aos Síth, or sometimes Aes Sídhé who inhabited these lands before Man ever came. Man fought and defeated them, but it is said they retreated under the hills, and for centuries there were grave warnings against offending them. Now the stories are gone, and what has replaced them is nearer to mockery. Still, an open and credible ear can hear local tales of strange happenings in the hills, and you may find a small town in Scotland to hear one such tale. The town is decayed and ruined, rotting concrete and filth where once were pastures and forests, and slaves where once

were a proud people. This ruin is not the doings of the Fair Folk, but rather the designs of another tribe of Man. Still, you may hear a tale of elves in the forest beside the town. They say there were homes to be built there, but there are no homes to be seen amongst the trees. They say that deep in the forest, in just the right dawn light, you may catch sight of elves dancing to the tune of their strange music. And dancing with them is a man—naked, bearded, insane, and his eyes aglow with joy.

# Beacon

by Karl Dahl

Inzali Allen jerks awake, freezing, tangled in soaking wet 400-count thread Egyptian cotton sheets. Not again, she thinks. She reaches over to her bedside table and taps the screen of her iPhone 13 Pro Max, which pulses with alerts from work. 4:17AM—almost two hours until she needs to wake up, but she knows she won't be able to get back to sleep, not with Them waiting.

*You are the entity Joe Biden?*

It's the same dream again—no, not the same, as it changes, intensifies and constantly re-expresses itself through horrors unimagined. Inzali crawls out of bed, disgusted with herself. She rips the sheets off, wads them into a ball and carries them to the stacked washer/dryer in her Georgetown one bedroom's utility closet. When the dreams began, two weeks ago, she learned to use these machines, proud of herself for a lifetime first. The staff would never know, would they? Open door, stuff in the sheets, pillowcases, duvet cover and mattress cover, strip off pajamas and toss them in. She slams the door shut, adds liquid detergent in the little drawer, sets the washer to Bulky Items > Hot > Soiled, and holds down Start. Bing-bong—tssssssss—rumble rumble rumble.

Inzali sighs and steps naked into the kitchen to wash the traces of urine from her hands in the sink, then fills a glass with water and washes down her morning tab of Celexa. This time was so much worse than even the previous day's, the "day-dream," which had ended with her sedation by White House psychiatric staff members in white suits, white masks and face shields, who shot Esketamine, a new fast-acting disassociative antidepressant, directly into her neck. She could see the brute

who did it lick his lips under his mask as she whimpered and collapsed.

*These neuropathways are a beacon, Joe Biden.*

She leaps back from the sink and drops her glass, which shatters on the epoxy-sealed hardwood salvage floor, sending jagged shards God only knows where in the dark. She can't. She can't even. She can't do it. Inzali runs for the dim light of her bathroom nightlight, dreading a shard of glass being driven through the sole of her foot, but it doesn't happen. In the bathroom she turns on the overhead light, the mirror light, the fan with its extra light, and cranks up the shower hot, hot; she plants her bare ass against the cold white-tiled bathroom wall and looks left and right, up to the corners of the room, but no, they're not like that. They're not voices here, but somewhere else; not in her head, but out there, somewhere. They're angry.

She can't shower, dress in her new Field suit with the skirt cut half an inch shorter than creepy-ass Jaime allows—he'll leer, and inspect her manually—she knows it. It's not worth it. It's only been a month and a half in that stupid job. The excitement faded on day two, when she finally understood what "social media associate" meant.

"Look at what we sacrificed to get you that job," they'll say. "You're ungrateful. You let us down, again. You're a phony." After Jim and Christy divorced when she was in seventh grade, her therapeutic team had put her on antidepressants, which made her feel less of everything. She had drifted through school, often not understanding the lessons, but had nonetheless been inundated with scholarship and internship offers. "It wasn't easy stepping in and becoming your parents." Christy's callous words from those many years ago ring in her head as they so often do. Inzali knows that she was always just an accessory to the Allens—what was hipper, pre-trans-kid, than an LGBTQP biracial Burmese/African-American child of her "father's" underling from the Army? As far as she has been able to find out, that line was probably just PR, though she had never met her biological father and asked. Her mother had died under mysteri-

ous circumstances when Inzali was an infant, right when her father disappeared, so the up and coming son of Washington insiders Jim Allen and his billionaire heiress wife had adopted her. “Adopted” meant that she took their name and appeared in newspaper articles and puff pieces on the TeeVee, but was raised by a succession of nannies and boarding school staff, including those who had introduced her to the sapphic arts as a young teen. College had come next, with staff taking care of her daily needs almost invisibly, as was the standard for her caste, while she became Credentialed—a Bachelor’s in Communications from Amherst and a Masters in Human Rights Studies from Columbia, though she’s not entirely sure what that actually means, beyond the elevator pitch she’s memorized.

The shower’s steam filling the bathroom gets her back on track—she clicks open the glass shower door and steps in, turns the water temperature down a bit to keep from being scalded, and stands under the stream, letting the water cascade down her face and back.

*There’s only One Thing that can wash The Stain from you, Joe Biden.*

Inzali’s commute into work feels even more oppressive than usual—as though she is worming her way through a dark, wet, wriggling tunnel to a certain doom. She opts for public transportation rather than the usual Uber, as much to avoid the dread of being alone as for her social credit score. She doesn’t get as many double-takes on the 33 as was typical in the pre-Pandemic era, perhaps due to the dehumanizing shield of the Marine Serre face cover she wears. So exotic!, the progressive white women sitting next to her would proclaim via their deranged eyes. I can’t wait to tell Twitter about my commitment to diversity! Disgorging at H and Madison, she clears security and enters the Green Zone, then walks down Jackson to the West Wing of the White House, always a slow and torturous process. Lenny, a bald, sal-low fifty-something senior executive of great power and even greater anonymity, approaches her at the door and leers at her from behind his mask like the buzzards he so closely resembles. She shudders as he places his hand on her lower back. A flood of

remote and disassociated pains and cries, barely on the edge of memory, accompany his touch.

*Joe Biden. 9/11.*

Inzali breaks away from Lenny's grasp and sprints into the nearest trans-inclusive restroom where she vomits profusely, mostly into the toilet, though the seat, floor and tank get a good coating. The former contents of her stomach writhe, and she hears the cries of small children, including some that she knows came from her own lungs. She heaves, and weeps, coughs, then crawls to the sink and washes up. The janitorial staff at the White House is apparently intimately familiar with such scenes, as a blank-faced, uniformed woman of apparent Congolese stock wheels in a mop cart as Inzali exits.

*You did not get it out, Joe Biden. Speak to us.* The voice is louder, booming in her head, more insistent than ever.

"Inzali! Hey, giiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrrrrr!" Her boss, Rachel, Special Sub-Deputy Assistant to the Deputy Director of Digital Communications, materializes from nowhere and embraces her, pats her back and strokes her hair, then holds her at arms length, grinning beneath her Chanukah-themed mask. "I loooooove what you've doooooone with it!" Rachel is obsessed with her hair, constantly trying to touch it and asking about her hair-care routine, as Rachel's hair is nearly as frizzy and kinky.

"Hi, Rachel," Inzali says weakly. "Anything I should do before our nine o'clock?"

Rachel gives her a knowing look. "We have to get in front of the latest, you know, thing from last night's appearance on Anderson Cooper. Get me two or three clips from the footage where Joe looks tough and smart, and we'll all pick the best one and tweet it out. Need anything from the kitchen?"

Inzali thinks for a moment. "Cappuccino with extra cinnamon and foam, please, extra hot. Thanks." She turns and walks to her desk in the communications office, leaving Rachel in the hallway, muttering.

She sits at her Mac and unlocks it, her stomach burning a hole in itself as she braces for the inevitable impact. Her email



contains the pieces Rachel had queued up for her, so she goes to her Powerpoint tweet template and begins to type. “Joe Biden cares about black and brown families,” the screen says, next to a portrait of the stuttering retard president’s death grin. Memories that aren’t hers, but mirror some of her own, assail her, children screaming, the blood covering tiny limbs, dead, bruised eyes staring up at her from unspeakable ritual spaces. Inzali raises her head to the ceiling, eyes bulging out of her skull, and screams.

*SPEAK TO US, JOE BIDEN. SPEAK!*

She opens a window and frantically hammers out a twenty character, all caps message and clicks SEND TWEET, then leaps to her feet and charges headfirst into the triple pane laminate bulletproof glass window, dropping to the floor, her neck askew and a starburst of red on her forehead. She rises and charges, again and again, until something snaps.

TWITTER APOLOGIZES TO WHITE HOUSE FOR @JOE-BIDEN HACK

“JOE BIDEN DOES NOT RAPE KIDS,” JACK DORSEY EXPLAINS

The next morning, Special Sub-Deputy Assistant to the Deputy Director of Digital Communications Rachel Rukhefirin guides twenty-four year old Émilie Diarra, a tall, French Jewish-Malian girl with prominent cheekbones and dazzling black eyes, to her desk in the White House’s West Wing after an emergency Zoom interview the afternoon before. Émilie gazes about in wonder, amazed at the diversity, equity and inclusion on display, feeling truly excited to begin healing the world at her first job. After meeting her team and firing off her first team-tailored tweet to the cheers of her coworkers, she sits at her keyboard, fingers poised, when something strange happens.

*Joe Biden.*

# An Audience with the Anti-God

*by Anonymous*

The witching hour drew near on All-Hallow's eve. In the autumn chill of a moonless night, in a land forsaken by God, all was silent but the crying of the wolf and the howling of the wind. Only a tiny handful of leaves remained on the trees, which could barely be seen adorning the branches if looked at from a distance. Within the depths of a swamp stood a building of stone, jutting defiantly from the murk, slightly overgrown and weathered from years of age. T'was a holy place, an old chapel built to Saint Reinhardt, a place where the beast-races which had overrun the once-hospitable country dared not to tread.

Within the building on that dark night, Victor Redthorne, Warlock of Vril, and his accomplice and Medium, Morgan Vain, had prepared the ritual of remote viewing, to make contact with beings beyond the black abyss of space and time, to speak directly with God himself. Blasphemy, put simply, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Indeed, these were the worst of days, for the prophecy inscribed long ago had begun to come true: "When the man-beast and the chimera and the loathsome parasite wander the land, when they feast upon human flesh and wade through the entrails of the innocents, when they turn the green fields red with the blood of children, shall God return to crush the monsters and bring peace to the land..."

However, the bloodshed after the invasion had continued unopposed for three long years, and the Warlock thought it unwise to sit back as their world bled to death.

"Are you certain this will work?" Morgan queried, her voice sounding exacerbated, "It would be a shame for this preparation

to be for naught.”

“I haven’t any clue,” answered Redthorne, “but what other choice have we got?”

“We could just stay here, and forget about the world. To hell with those fools, they’re just two-legged cattle, all of them. They don’t deserve our help. Why take the risk?”

Victor turned to her, a look of stern determination on his face, “If you care so little, why come this far? Just help me, then you can go and get drunk on wine and forget all of this.”

Morgan shrugged, “Very well, let’s get this over with.”

It is well known that, on the night of All-Hallow’s eve, the spirit world is closest with the physical world, and perhaps, with enough luck, this could allow them to succeed at their mission, and bring an end to the carnage.

It was a risky endeavor, which could result in the Warlock’s physical and spiritual death. Remote viewing is achieved by separating the spirit from the body while the body continues to live, and requires someone in the physical world to act as a beacon to guide the spirit back. Morgan would act as the Medium, and Redthorne would be the viewer.

By the light of fourteen black candles, Victor focused his Vril and, with one final glance at Morgan, entered a deep trance, his spirit detaching from it’s home of flesh and blood. As he watched the earth sink down beneath him, he knew there was no turning back.

\* \* \*

Across the astral sea his spirit flew, at the speed of light and beyond. Around him the tides of madness and pure energy swirled and crashed, rays of Vril arced through his spirit-body, searing him to his core. His sight became smell, smell became hearing, hearing became touch, touch became taste, taste became sight, only for them all to reverse an instant later. A normal person would be driven mad by such shock, but the strength of determination can help one overcome what would seem impossible.

Suddenly everything was still and black, and in the darkness, Victor saw what looked like a humanoid moving toward him. Dressed in a White robe, a tall man stood in the abyss, meeting his gaze, albeit in a rather peculiar fashion. Where a human head should have been were three interlocking rings of flesh, each with many eyes lining the outsides, and within the center was a flame, burning brightly. From the descriptions of ancient texts, the Warlock recognized it as a holy angel. He was awestruck at the sight of this aberration.

The angel spoke, "I know why you have come, Warlock. You seek an audience with God, to have him do your bidding. At one time, it would have been blasphemy to commit such an act, but now it is simply foolhardy." The supreme being paused, then continued, "However, I shall grant your request. Behold, look upon what little remains of your God!"

An opening appeared in the void, and through the spectral window was the gold and silver throne of God himself, but stained and tarnished such that it shined no more. Upon the seat was a withered carcass, its eyes sunken, its skin grey, its hair wispy and thin, its robes dusty and old. On its head, it wore a crown with seven rubies inlaid.

Victor's heart sank. This corpse, its appearance was exactly that of God's, according to the old texts! Could this really be the God who was going to save them?

"Would you like to see the God which took his place?" the angel asked.

Next to the vision of the old God, there opened another spectral window, and within it was a sight of pure horror. In a great lake of blood and entrails was a huge mountain of flesh, made of the mangled and twisted limbs and torsos of humans and animals. In the center was a gigantic head of a bull, but with a misshapen skull and eyes which were unevenly-set. From the lake of gore, the monstrosity plucked out human souls with its many limbs, and swallowed them whole while uttering otherworldly cries.

"This is your God now, Warlock! Perhaps not a God, but an

Anti-God, the God of consumption, of gluttony, of rot, the only God to whom the people of the physical realm still pray to. To fill your stomach until it is bursting, to drink until you vomit, to prey upon the defenseless, to engage in perverse acts, and to corrupt the child, these are its commandments.”

The Warlock found it nigh impossible to comprehend, “This useless, writhing mass of filth surely cannot be a God! This is a wretched, loathsome thing, the idol of an idiot!”

“It is indeed your God,” the angel answered, “for this is what the people place their faith in, and in this realm, faith makes law. Your old God is dead.”

Victor was stunned. Dumbstruck, he simply asked, “But...how?”

\* \* \*

Morgan had been concentrating for what seemed like centuries, determined not to allow her accomplice to become lost when returning to his body.

How much longer must I keep this up? She wondered to herself, growing exhausted from the strain that the spell was putting on her. At this rate, it will be morning by the time he comes back...

Just then, she felt herself being shaken, and Victor was there, conscious again, grasping her shoulders. He turned and poured himself a glass of wine from a bottle sitting nearby.

The Medium pried, “So? What happened? What of the prophecy? Did you even find anything out there?”

“God is not coming to save us,” the Warlock answered, “Nobody is coming to save us.”

He recounted to her what had happened; the vision of the old God, the Anti-God and his hellish dimension, and the grave message the angel gave him.

“There was a third vision he showed me,” Victor continued, “He showed me what the world will look like if the beast-folk wipe us out; a barren wasteland, devoid of intelligence and com-

pletely feral, as if ran by mere animals. They wish to consume us wholly, and they care not for the outcome!”

“Of course,” the Medium retorted, “Such is the way of wretched parasites like them, devouring all in their path until there is nothing left. Did you expect anything different?”

Victor continued, “There will be no trace of us, as if we were never here. There will be no one to mourn us, no graves to visit, no ruins to excavate...”

Redthorne felt a looming sense of dread, as well as the heavy weight of his own mortality bearing down on him. He wanted to drink the wine glass in one gulp, to try to drown his fear and sorrow, but he could not bring himself to do it. The final words of the angel kept echoing in his mind, “Men have only themselves to blame for their torment, they are their own jailors. The Anti-God was a creation of men, the men of the world who forsook their faith in their old God, and instead chose to worship their stomachs and their perversions. It is you humans who created this icon of gluttony, and it is your fault that he now preys upon your souls. So when you eat your fill and drink until you are intoxicated, rejoice! For your belching and wailing and gagging are like hymns to your lord! Remember, one day, he too shall sing you a song, as he feasts upon your soul!”

Morgan took the wine bottle from his hand, and instead of pouring a glass, drank straight from the bottle.

“Of course,” she sighed, “So it was all just a waste of time. Bah! Damn this world, damn every fool who got us into this mess, and damn me for bothering to try and help...”

A faint smile crossed her lips, but her sad eyes betrayed it as a gesture made in bad-faith. She slumped down in a nearby chair, and took another drink from the bottle.

Outside the building, the last of the autumn leaves had blown away in the cold winds, and even the wolf remained silent, at the witching hour of that hallowed night.

*To be continued?*

# The Man Behind the Door

by Shadowman311

## I

The clock tolled in an abrupt silence as the shadows closed in. In front of the clock sat the lobby of this once great facility, the first stop on the road between this world and its undoing. The shadows cast their horrific figures over the floor, playing like small children on a playground as the last lights slowly died. Yet one remained; a figure ran across the lobby floor, his long flowing robes as gray and featureless as the facility itself, his grim expression hidden behind hood. His one light, the magiphasic lantern attached to his waist, stretched the shadows into long jittering tendrils hissing from the anger wrought from their final conquest running from their grasp.

Nathan ran down the hallway and sharply turned into the staircase, a dark iron spiral stretching up to the enshaded floors above, walls sizzling as the light from his lantern burned away the wretched dark from the gray walls. Nathan rapidly ascended, the smell of his breath wafting back to his nose as it reflected off the thick cloth of his robe and back into the layers of his robe's hood, which softly clung to the top of his sweat covered head, his white hair matted to his scalp. The voice spoke again as his ascension continued, echoing through both the barren hallways and through the anxiety ridden passages of his deteriorating mind:

“Why...do you...toil so? Your order...my captors...are dead...including her...and him...” Nathan tried desperately to ignore it,

to push aside his lies, reciting an incantation as he felt the man's many fingers combing through his fraying mind.

"That spell grows...weaker," the man sneered, "My curse already taints your soul; you WILL be mine."

Nathan slammed open the door, pushing over the figure on its other end. It fell back, feet and hands still positioned to open the door as the rigid, unmoving figure hit the ground, the dark tendrils that encased its body shifted and roiled in annoyance, yet the stillness remained. Nathan walked down the corridor and opened the double doors to his right. Inside was the facility's chapel, the only place within still not touched by the man's influence. He set down the satchel he was carrying and began feverishly flipping through the books within. There had to be something, someone must have figured it out.

He wrote down spell after spell into his worn notebook, pages filled with the crossed out remnants of his many other attempts. One of these had to do something. Eventually his satchel sat empty, and the books lay discarded in the corner with every other tome he had retrieved from the archives. Nathan placed his notebook back in his satchel as he mentally prepared himself, taking a deep breath as he stepped out into the corridor from the double doors from whence he came. The return of the man's presence was sudden and overwhelming. Nathans body buckled as he fell to the ground, hands instinctively grasping at the spot of searing pain on his lower back, touching it he felt the writhing shadow that had dug itself into his back.

It was bigger than before; the curse was spreading. He slowly got to his feet and turned a corner, meeting what he felt were the eyes of a shadowy figure at the halls far end and feeling a faint chuckle from the back of his mind. The man was mocking him. He walked down the corridor, carefully avoiding any apparitions or the writhing mass covered bodies of his stilled coworkers, passing dark junction after dark junction, each splitting off into their own featureless gray hallways. The House of the End was intentionally built like a maze, and its æthereal nature meant that it did not have any reason to abide by natural



laws or the bounds of reality. It had been constructed this way as a stop gap, to try and slow the man down should he ever escape beyond the door so that help could be called for before the final contingency was issued.

That was the idea anyways. In practice the man understood, almost implicitly, what this facility was intended to do and worked quickly to nullify whatever they could do to slow him down. There had once been a large group of survivors, people like Nathan who were working tirelessly, despite what had happened to try and contain the man once again. But eventually the reality of the final contingency set in, as did many of the survivors' attachments to those afflicted by the man's influence. What was once a united resistance to the man became a frenzy of competing interests. Some still wanted to contain him, others merely wanted to rescue their friends and loved ones, others just wanted out. They fell apart and their numbers rapidly dwindled until Nathan was the only one left, a single, dimming light against the unrelenting darkness.

Nathan came up on the entrance to the sepulcher, pressing on the touchpad of the lift and feeling it lurch to life a moment later as it slowly descended towards the center of the complex, the diagonal shaft was dark and its walls made of brown blasted stone, the grey walls of the rest of the facility were almost entirely absent here, this being the oldest part of the House, combined with its extreme importance made renovations from its original haphazard design almost impossible. The elevator stopped with a sudden jolt and its gate opened, Nathan could hear the clicks from the facilities built-in lights as they tried to automatically engage, but were stopped by the shadows currently coating them.

Nathan stepped forward down the hallway, passing by several empty security offices and a breakroom, stopping at each one as he felt the piercing sensation of eyes watching him. There wasn't a single thing he did that the man wasn't aware of, even, he suspected, within the chapel itself. His vision there was just a little blurry. Nathan entered the sepulcher's antechamber, walk-

ing through the empty security checkpoint and its several layers of detectors, the last one quietly beeping as he walked through it, even in low power mode it could still detect the corruption. He really was fucked.

Nathan sighed and stepped through the double doors and into the sepulcher and was immediately basked with the doors dull whitish-blue light. It was massive, standing at hundreds of feet tall in the center of the huge excavation that made up the sepulcher's main floor. It was surrounded immediately by ruins matching it in both appearance and apparent age, and was surrounded even further out by the same blasted brown rock that made up the rest of the natural parts of the inner part of the House of the End.

Nathan stood on the far side of the room just in front of the double doors, in front of him and to his right stood the laboratories, their black and grey metal box-like exteriors jutting out from the brown rock walls and stretching almost as high up as the door itself, one for members of the House of the End and one for members of the other mage houses, though that had been empty for many years now and was largely used as overflow and storage for the first. Nathan walked closer to the door, trying to avert his eyes from the figure at its base. Its massive stone exterior was lit by the flowing magical energy that emanated from its edges.

Toward the center he could see the man, a dark shadowy figure as massive as the door itself, his body an inky black and his eyes a bright glowing white, hand reaching for the doorway as he slowly moved closer to it, his body barely contrasted from the endless void he floated in, and while his mouth couldn't be seen thanks to the contrast, Nathan could sense his cruel smile staring down at him. He walked closer to the door, stopping as close as he was willing to get to the figure at its base as he set his satchel down on a metal table that was set up nearby.

"How do you expect to save them if you can't even look at them?!" thundered the man as humanoid shadows began to appear throughout the ruins, "Is it regret? Guilt? Anger? All the

above? I suppose if I were a lowly mortal and I had done all that you have accomplished here I would feel the same way." The man sneered as the shadow figures crossed their arms in unison.

Nathan tried to ignore them, reciting spell after spell, stealing brief glances at the figure directly in front of him, getting progressively angrier and more desperate as each passing incantation refused to dispel or even move the shadows that enveloped the target of his obsession. Eventually Nathan reached the end of today's notes, crossing the last spell out angrily as he collapsed to the ground in despair.

"Look at them," the man barked. "LOOK AT THEM!" he barked again, rattling the sepulcher with his bellows. "Witness the consequences of your actions, witness what you have done in service of a lie."

Nathan meekly looked up from the ground at the figure in front of him, wiping the angry tears from his eyes, in spite of the shadows covering it. It was a uniquely female figure, facing directly towards the door, its arms raised up in front of itself, holding another enshadowed figure, an infant. Nathan exhaled heavily, trying to prevent his emotions from overtaking him.

"Elizabeth," he whimpered "what have I done?" Nathan sat down in the small metal chair in the corner of the sublevel 86's breakroom, legs spread on either side and back bent as he clasped his hands together, rubbing his open palm with his thumb. He had never wanted a family, he never really liked people and having grown up in an orphanage had almost no experience with families, aside from the ones that would come in and walk past him on the way to adopt other children. No one wanted some freaky antisocial white-haired kid with a scar and bright grey eyes.

That was until a recruiter from the House of the End came by, Archbishop Morgan. He sensed in the small freakish boy the capacity to wield a form of magic that few in the entire nation, or even the world could: the tomes of oblivion, the magic of the man. Immediately he was whisked away to the retreat, the House of the End's training compound, and the only remaining place

where the man's influence hadn't been obliterated by their order's founder during his crusade. There he learned all that it took to be an end mage, a fancy position, and a title both lauded and feared by the masses. Many stories were written about his order, most of them wrong. In all actuality his order were glorified prison guards, the fancy powers were a side effect of that duty. On top of learning his new powers, and his duties, he also made friends, the first true friends in his life.

One in particular caught his eye, Elizabeth, she had long flowing brown hair, piercing blue eyes and a contagious laugh. She was smart, funny, and one of the first women his age to not grimace at Nathan's appearance, a new experience for him. They became very close friends, encouraging each other through the many rigorous trials the retreat had to offer. After several years they both graduated the retreat and were sent off to their first tour in the facility.

The tour system was how the House managed the man's influence. Every end mage spent one year or so on a tour within the facility itself, and then few years outside of it, with early leaves only given for the most extreme of circumstances. It was in this first tour that his and Elizabeth's relationship blossomed further, beginning as dates on the facility's entertainment level to more intimate affairs. Nathan, having never expected this to happen to him, had wanted to take things slowly, trying to comb through his limited knowledge of romance movies as he looked for smaller bungalows in the Republic controlled city of Raven-guard to the facility's north, or the legendary city of Darnia to the facility's southwest, envisioning a quiet life in his time between tours with a women he had come to love very much. That dream was shattered when Elizabeth walked into this very breakroom, sat down at the very chair he was sitting across from and handed him a small, gift-wrapped box with a beaming, ear to ear smile on her face.

He opened the box and found inside a pregnancy test. It was positive. He had sat there motionless, mind filling with shock and doubt as all the usual thoughts that such an announcement

would bring rushed into his head, he was blindsided, snapped back into reality by Elizabeth leaping into his arms, hugging him tightly as she giggled and glowed with joy from every inch of her body, in that moment, all his doubt went away and he was happy, they both were.

*If only they had known*, Nathan thought to himself, as he looked around the darkened breakroom, trying to figure out what he could possibly do. It had been three days since he went back into the Sepulcher. He figured after several months of rapid firing spells he needed a new tactic, but had yet to find one. He would have loved to simply wait for help from the remaining end mages or from any number of regional, or global powers, but command had panicked at the last minute and engaged the final contingency, erasing the House of the End not just from all records, but from the minds of the non-end mage public as well, along with locking down the facility.

There were people who this spell didn't affect of course, The House of Light with their direct connection to God Himself certainly knew, or at least some of them did, but the man scared them, more so than almost anything else, so he doubted help would come from them. That left only one man who could possibly remember them, the Monzat, the unending ruler of Darnia and the man responsible for his order's creation. But at the moment he lay dead, Darnia back under the control of a republic endorsed puppet government, and his cycle of rebirth seemingly still in its between phase. He doubted any help would come.

The Monzat's mention did help him recall an old legend he heard back at the retreat, one that stated that the very tools he originally used to contain the man were still somewhere within the facility, locked behind some magical door. He had used those tools to completely wipe out the man's presence in the world, so there had to be something, if it's even true the deep archives would be a good place to start. Seeing no other option, Nathan slowly lifted himself off the chair and walked towards the door, stopping to ride out the searing pain of his affliction, which had spread further on his back and even onto his forearm.

The man was getting impatient. Nathan opened the door and exited at the end of the hall, clipping his lantern onto his belt as he started to descend to the archives, hearing a faint chuckle echo through the facility.

“Chasing legends, are we? You really are getting desperate, just give in, and maybe I’ll let you see them again!” the man said.

Nathan continued towards the archives, ignoring the man as he picked up the pace on his way down the stairs, hearing something beginning to descend after him from above.

“Oh well, I’ll have you soon anyways, plus, I am curious if this particular legend is real. It would be quite the nostalgia trip to see that desert dwelling demigod’s infernal little toys once again before I crush them into pieces.” Nathan got off on the archives level and sprinted towards the door.

Slamming it open, he ran down another flight of stairs, dodging falling bookcases and jumping at the sounds of running figures from across the hallway before finally reaching the door to the deep archives, a large vault-like door that had been left ajar when the seal had been broken. Above it sat the roof of the deep archives, basking in the blue light of the magic that flowed through. Nathan slid between the door and its doorway and continued downward, reaching the small rotunda at its base, running through a security checkpoint and into the deep archives themselves.

It was a large round structure styled after Roman architecture of old, it opened up in the center to a grand golden statue to The Monzat of Darnia, holding his hands up on either side of his body, palms extended to the sky, face obscured by his hood and metal helmet. Between his open hands flowed the magic that illuminated the main archives, a steady blue stream that flowed up past the hole in the ceiling of the deep archives, and into the ceiling of the main archives, where its energy was then distributed around the facility to power most of the tech contained within. Towards the outer walls stood the second floor, its ornate golden handrails glinting in the blue light, Nathan placed down his satchel and began his search.

Ten hours had passed. The once orderly deep archives now lay a mess of discarded books and scrolls, Nathan sat leaning against a bookshelf on the first floor, holding his head as he drowned his sorrows. Nothing, there was nothing, staring between his fingers, through fits of rage and despair he saw a figure, he let his hands drop to the floor, it was a woman, Elizabeth.

“Just give up Nathan,” the figure said in an even tone, “Let the shadows embrace you, and you can join me and Peter in the darkness. It’s not bad here, just dark. The man allows us to exist in his shadow, which shall soon encompass the whole world, so we’ll have a looooot of friends,” it said, bending down to his level and running its cold appendages across his face as the faint sound of an infant crying began in the distance. “And you can see him again, hold him, he’s happy, healthy, just like you wanted, just like what you tried to do that day soooo many months ago...” it said with a smile.

Nathan shook his head, meekly hiding his face with both hands as he leaned back into the pile of books he laid against, his heart beating through his chest. “You’re not her, that’s not him,” he sobbed as the crying got louder, “You aren’t real!” he shouted.

The figure chuckled, its voice slowly shifting from that of Elizabeth’s to something darker. “I am as real as the sin you committed in my name, or have you forgotten what you did?”

Nathan shuddered on the ground, eyes closed and overcome with emotion as his memories consumed him.

## II

Nathan walked through the security checkpoint, metal detector beeping as he went through. A guard put his hand up to him, telling him to go through again. Nathan stood there in a haze, the sleep deprivation and worry slowly eating away at what was left of his sanity.

“I just want to get let through, for God’s sake I work here.”

“It’s standard procedure sir, can’t have you sneaking any un-sanctioned weapons or items into the medical wing,” the guard replied.

“Please, I just...” Nathan was interrupted by the checkpoint officer as he walked up to the guard.

“Cecil, you know who this is?” the officer said.

“Some guy,” the guard replied.

“He’s the kid’s father, let him through.”

The guard looked at Nathan, eyes full of sympathy as he stepped back.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience sir,” the officer said grimly as he waved Nathan through.

Nathan took a right as he walked past one row of medical rooms after another. The medical wing was built inside of a large cave near the top of the facility. It served as a triage center during the Monzat’s great descent towards the door following his crusade against the man and remained as the house of the ends sole medical facility in the entire sprawling subterranean campus. It contained rows of freestanding metal rooms with windows on either side and a skylight on the top. Medical personnel scurried about, their grey robes intermixed with red crosses and white trim to distinguish them from the normal end mages throughout the facility. Nathan stopped at the fifth row of rooms and began to walk down, until he reached the third room on his right. Inside he saw Elizabeth, his wife. They had gotten married a few weeks after she announced her pregnancy. She sat in a stiff metal chair, looking into a crib in the center of the room. Nathan stepped in, Elizabeth turned around in her chair to look at him, her hair a filthy mess of unkempt locks. Exhaustion etched in every inch of her face.

“How is he?” Nathan asked.

“He only had three seizures today, doctors said the meds are working so he’s in less pain, but they haven’t slowed down.”

Nathan looked in the crib at his son, his blue eyes covered by his eyelids as he slept, face curled into a small smile.

“He seems happy at least.”



“For now, when his veins turn black and he starts shaking later he won’t be,” Elizabeth said as she rested her head in both hands, desperately trying to stay awake.

“When was the last time you slept or had a shower?” Nathan asked, softly grabbing onto his wife’s shoulder as he looked her in the eyes.

“Three days ago I think, maybe I passed out for a little while, I don’t really remember, as for a shower I have no idea,” Elizabeth replied, mumbling to herself.

“Honey you need to sleep, this isn’t good for you, you need to take care of yourself,” Nathan pleaded.

“And who would look after Peter when I’m off doing that? You? The council only gave one of us time off, you’re still working,” Elizabeth said with a mixture of annoyance and desperation.

“I’m an officer now, I could get someone to watch over him, a friend, an underling, someth—”

“I’M NOT LETTING SOMEONE I DON’T KNOW WATCH OVER OUR SON,” Elizabeth shouted, body shaking from the exertion.

Behind her, Peter started to cry.

“Oh I’m sorry, I’m so sorry honey!” Elizabeth said rushing over to him as she picked him up and tried to calm him down.

“Elizabeth, I’m sorry,” Nathan said, reaching towards his wife.

“Go talk to the doctor, he’s outside,” Elizabeth said coldly, avoiding Nathan’s gaze.

Nathan stepped outside to meet the doctor, a young man with short brown hair and green eyes.

“Where are the healers from the House of Light? You said they’d be here two weeks ago,” Nathan yelled.

The doctor paused for a moment, choosing his words carefully before speaking.

“It’s a mess out there, the civil war has stretched to every corner of the republic. Last I heard, they were headed through the

midlands. All the kingdoms there all split off to one side or another, some just split. It's like a kaleidoscope of political boundaries and its shifting every hour, so they are going to be delayed. There's also—"

"Cut the politics doc, my son is in there in agony because you PEOPLE don't know what's wrong with him. You say they do and now you're saying you don't know when they'll get here? Are you serious?" Nathan yelled.

"Yes that's ummm...That's yeah," the doctor stammered. "Look," he said with a sigh. "I can't imagine what you two are going through right now, I pray I never will, and yes, while his condition hasn't gotten better, it's not gotten worse. We can keep him stable until they arrive, you just need to be patient for a little longer. I know it's hard, I know he's in a lot of pain, and if it's any concession—and I know it's a small one—seeing an infant in the state he's in hasn't been easy on us either, and we're all praying to God that he gets better."

Nathan sighed, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so rude."

"You don't need to apologize sir," the doctor responded shaking his head. "Now is there anything else you two need?"

"Yeah, my wife refuses to leave our son's bedside, says she hasn't slept in three days, and can't remember the last time she bathed, says she wants someone she knows to come in and watch over Peter or else she won't leave, and I'm completely swamped with work. Can you see if you can help with that?" Nathan asked.

The doctor rubbed his chin for a moment, thinking, "One of the nurses mentioned she was friends with Elizabeth back at the retreat and I saw them talking after she gave birth, maybe that would work?"

"Maybe, just do something, God knows I already..." Nathan paused, trying to put the sentence together. "I can't have something happen to her as well alright?"

"I'll work something out," the doctor responded. Nathan nodded his head and took a deep breath. Looking into the room again, he saw Elizabeth cradling Peter in her arms with a tired smile on her face as his tiny hands reached up to her. Nathan

smiled as well, walking back into the room to spend some time with his family before returning to his office. Nathan began to feel off as he sat alone in his office in a way that couldn't really be explained by sickness alone. He was the duty officer in Laboratory One within the sepulcher. Under normal circumstances, he was supposed to report such feelings to the Department of Containment and immediately undergo a cleansing ritual; however, given his diminished state, he chalked it up to sleep deprivation and stress and went on with his day. As it proceeded, he began to see shadowy figures in the corner of his eye. He felt as if he was being watched from empty corners and darkened rooms as he roamed around the laboratory, checking up on teams' progress and going to meeting after meeting.

Eventually he stopped in the bathroom. As he exited the stall, he felt an impending feeling of dread and his heart began to race. He had to get out of this bathroom. He sprinted to the exit, only to find it locked.

"Now why would you run when I have such an incredible offer to give you?" said a voice.

Turning around Nathan saw a man standing in the restroom who wasn't there before. He was an older man with a receding hairline, gaunt with recessed hazel eyes and thin black hair, wearing a fancy overcoat and suit.

"Who are you?" Nathan asked.

"I think you know who I am," he said with a smile. "The one prisoner to which you are one of my many guards."

"God damnit, I should have gotten cleansed hours ago," Nathan chided himself.

"But if you did that, you couldn't hear my offer, it involves your...handsome little son," the man said.

"Speak," Nathan said with a glare.

"I know the disease that afflicts him—the one that if left untreated will quite painfully kill him. It is a remnant from my side: a curse. Your House of Light can cure it yes, but they're weeks out, and poor little Peter doesn't have that much...time. I can remove it...for a price."

Nathan knew he shouldn't do this, knew he should cast whatever cleansing spell he knew and rush to the Department of Containment. Ten months ago, he would have gladly done just that. But, his duty to the House of the End was no longer his only, or most important one.

"What is your price," Nathan responded.

"My freedom of course! Break the seal that binds me and suppresses my reach and I shall cure your son."

Nathan was wracked with doubt, pacing around the bathroom as the man's avatar looked on with boredom.

"I can see you're conflicted. You're wondering how you know I'll keep my word. You wonder if I am telling the truth, and while it's true that I may not be telling you everything, the fact that your son's curse will eventually kill him is a truth as self-evident as the color of the sky. So yes, I may betray you, and I may in fact kill him. But, as I see it, one way his death is guaranteed, the other it is merely a possibility. So what is your choice?"

Nathan continued to pace, before shaking his head and looking directly at the man.

"No, there has to be another way, I love him more than anything but to let you out? To end the world? No, there's another way out of this there must be."

The man chuckled. "Ah so that's your answer, won't be your final one, but I suppose it'll do for now, have a great day," he said as the bathroom door swung open. "We will speak again."

With that ominous last sentence Nathan shuddered, fearing whatever that meant. He weighed his options on whether to get cleansed and have to admit his gross negligence to the Department of Containment, to risk his job, or to just go to his next meeting like nothing happened. Realizing that losing his job or getting demoted with the current state of his life wasn't really an option, he simply continued onto his last meeting. It was a long one and he hoped it wasn't too boring. He needed something to take his mind off of everything. It had been an hour into this meeting and it was as boring as he had hoped it wouldn't be. The minutes stretched on and on as he tried to keep his mind off

what just happened. He felt like his soul needed a shower. A few minutes later his boss barged in.

“I’m sorry everyone, Nathan, I need to talk to you right now.”

Nathan got up, his heart beginning to race as he saw the worry and fear in his boss’s eyes. They went into a side hallway as his boss looked him in the eye.

“You need to get to the medical wing right now.”

“What happened is he...is he,” Nathan hyperventilated.

Shaking his head with horror, his boss placed both hands firmly on his shoulders.

“Your son is alive, but you need to get there right now. Go.”

Nathan had never run so fast in his life. Sprinting at full speed through the security checkpoint out of the sepulcher and up the stairs, reaching the medical wing, he was let through the checkpoint by the guard and found his wife out in the lobby sobbing into her hands. He walked up to her.

“Honey what’s going on? What happened?” Nathan asked with audible panic.

“I...I was holding him and suddenly he started to have a seizure again and then he...he...he stopped moving. They said his heart stopped. They were able to get it going again but now they won’t let me inside and...and...and they said that if it happens again, they might not be able to save him and...”

She broke down into incoherent crying and babbling as Nathan grabbed her and gave her a hug to try and comfort her as she continued to sob, tears welling up in his eyes as well. As he hugged her closer, he noticed something in the corner of his eye: a shadowy figure at the edge of the lobby. Its body was indistinguishable from the shadows around it, but its face was clearly visible. It stared directly at him; its mouth glowed and pulsed with light, etched into a cruel smile.

“Hello? Nathan?” said a voice as Nathan jolted awake.

In front of him stood a woman in a red and black robe styled loosely after eastern attire. Her face was completely obscured by a bronze mask with two darkened eyeholes and a black indented line down its middle. Her long black hair flowed in front of her

as she bent down to the man holding a card with his name and face on it.

“Are you Nathan?”

Nathan sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

“You’re really getting this desperate now? Or is it boredom? My wife was one thing, but I don’t even know this woman!” he yelled, sighing as he looked down at woman with a glare.

She stepped back, as if taken aback by his statement.

“I’m not the man, or one of his illusions,” she said, touching his hand with hers.

Nathan jumped back as he felt the first warm hand aside from his own in many months.

“You’re, an actual person? So I wasn’t alone in here? Who are you? Where have you been? What are you doing here?!” Nathan said jumping up from where he was sitting, eyeing the woman with suspicion.

“I was in there, with my master, like I always am,” she said gesturing to the blue beam of energy emanating from the statues center.

“Your ma...lady, that’s the entrance to a fucking ley line. It’s a giant geode shaped like a nerve vein that transports magic. There’s nothing down there aside from crystals and a very hot death,” Nathan said as he followed her down a small flight of stairs.

He continued to follow her underneath the statue to a viewing level from which the ley line was visible from the glass floor below.

“Ah, but ye have no faith,” she said stepping over the hand railing. “Come, he is waiting for you—and he’s not the kind of man who likes to do that,” she said as she let her hands go of the railing and fell back into the energy, disappearing in its bright glowing flow.

Nathan stood at the edge, conflicted for a moment as to whether he should follow her, before realizing that he was out of options. He stepped over the railing, took a deep breath, and jumped in. His face slammed against the hard stone surface as

he sat there motionless, eyes adjusting to the sudden bright light that flowed in through everything around him. He rolled on his back and saw that he was in a large open-air pavilion. Its many pillars, trellises, and gazebos were all made out of sandstone. The ground itself was made out of reddish sandstone tiles intermixed with greenery—both in the form of curated plant beds and from moss growing between the cracks. In front of him stretched the seemingly endless garden. Behind him sat a railing at the edge of a steep cliff with a massive canyon beyond it. The plants in the garden were unusual. Despite clearly being in a scorching desert, there were plants from every corner of the world, all growing as if they were within their natural environment. The temperature itself was also unnaturally cool, despite the direct sunlight and visible heatwaves ahead of him. Nathan wandered around the garden for several minutes, admiring the architecture and looking for anyone or any sign of someone else within. But, it was empty—at least until he heard a loud creaking. Turning around, he saw a large stone door that had been flung open on a blank wall on the far side that was not there before. Nathan walked through the door which entered into a large promenade that was covered with sandstone trellises in the shape of massive arches. The trellises were filled with elaborate vines bespeckled with small red flowers and tied off pieces of red fabric which blew in the soft afternoon wind. Small metal encrusted lanterns dangled from the trellises and flecks of gold glinted in their light.

At the far end sat two thrones with a massive red and gold carpet stretching between the door and them. Behind the thrones sat an open balcony with the view of a seemingly endless metropolis stretching far out into the desert beyond. In one throne, the woman from earlier sat at attention. In the other, sat a man wearing a suit of armor covered by a large leather overcoat with matching coattails. This overcoat was then covered by various loose pieces of fabric and belts. His face was completely covered by a steel helmet that matched the rest of his armor. The helmet was covered in ornate etched patterns and symbols. In its center sat a large cross also inlaid with ornate carvings. All

the helmet's carvings and etchings pulsed with an orange light that looked like breathing. The man was slumped in his chair with head in his right hand as he let out a deep sigh.

"So Mr...Nathan" he said. His voice teeming with a mixture of boredom and an undercurrent of disgust. "I suppose you're wondering who I am."

"I think I can guess. Desert scenery, glowing orange mask, a woman who I can now see is clearly dressed as your concubine—you're the Monzat aren't you?" Nathan replied.

"Yes, though for clarity's sake, she really isn't any singular concubine, or wife, or romantic interest," the Monzat replied as the woman turned to the Monzat crossed her arms and huffed.

"She's the amalgamation of all of the ones I've had over the years. Thousands of lifetimes of arguments—and good times I suppose—all tucked away into one person. And while I sit waiting for my time to return to the corporeal realm from this boundless aether, she is my only sentient companion. So while it may not seem like it, I am glad to have another man here, though I know you have no intention of staying," the Monzat said, standing up and walking to the circular tiled floor in front of the stairs leading up to his throne.

"You are after my artifacts, to right your wrong. But, before you get them, I must ask for the remainder of your story."

"What do you mean?" Nathan asked.

"I saw your dream. I've seen all of them. And your mind for the little time out of the day where you were out of the man's influence long enough for me to sneak in. But I don't know how you got a screaming, seizing infant from the ICU roughly a mile down below the surface into the Sepulcher without anyone noticing. And I am quite curious as to what happened with that, and what happened next."

Nathan sighed with both uneasiness and confusion.

"We, ugh, we used a sleeping spell that they taught my wife in family class back at the retreat. After that, she hid him in her robes, and we snuck through the security checkpoints and into the Sepulcher."



The Monzat shook his head.

“A sleeping spell? From ‘family class’? What, are you people too bougie for milk and alcohol?” The Monzat cleared his throat, “I’m sorry, go on, I’m getting distracted.”

“Well there isn’t much more to tell after that. I snuck into the seal’s anti-chamber and shattered it,” Nathan said as he noticed the Monzat visibly grimace. “And then...then...” Nathan sighed as he held his head, as the image began to replay itself over and over.

“And then what Nathan? To face this demon head on, and see your family again, you must overcome your own. This is important,” The Monzat said, urging him on.

“I turned around and saw the shadows overtake them. They lunged at her like hungry snakes, her screams were, I...I can’t get them out of my head.”

The Monzat slowly paced around the rotunda, holding his chin in his hand. “And what of your son’s illness? You now know what caused that right?”

“Yeah, the man did this to another family about two centuries ago. That time the father only managed to crack the seal instead of shattering it. They cured the child that time by simply bringing her outside of the facility,” Nathan replied.

“And why didn’t you or the medical staff know of this particular incident?” The Monzat said with an air of condescension.

“Some filing clerk misfiled the incident report in with yearly financial records. I found it a few weeks ago by accident.”

“GAAAH,” The Monzat turned away and yelled with anger, his body tensing up as he did. “One of my greatest conquests undone because some intern couldn’t do his job! God DAMNIT!”

With this, his wife came over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Honey, you need to calm down.”

“Unhand me woman,” the Monzat said, shrugging his shoulder and moving away from her as he angrily pointed at her. “Allow me my rage.”

He paced around for a few more minutes, trying to calm himself down.

“Why did you make me recall what happened in specificity? Why is that important to rescuing my family?” Nathan asked.

“Because, the man works with fear and grief. During my crusade and the great descent, my men reported visions of loved ones long since lost to them returning from the dead, only to be brutally butchered in front of them while screaming their name. At home children became sick and died, their wives suffered miscarriages and leapt off buildings. In the time before the man was contained, the world was his playground, and agony and loss were his toys. What he did to you was just a small taste of his potential.” The Monzat continued, “I asked you to tell your entire story, to confess every moment, since your internalization of such agony and grief acts as an anchor for him. That negativity feeds him—it’s why that patch of shadows on your back continues to grow, and why he has continued to subject you to greater and greater levels of torment as your time within that doomed facility has increased. He’s sucking you for all that you are worth. As a result of the remaining seals containing him within the facility, and your other coworkers being enshadowed, you are his only remaining power source; a battery of misery that he intends to draw from for as long as it takes him to escape the House of the End.”

As The Monzat concluded his speech, the door on the far end of the trellis covered pavilion opened and a series of automations entered. They were very thin, and made of bronze with sharp blade-like appendages for legs and blank rounded trapezoidal prisms for chests. They had thin, almost human arms and hands, and blank oval shaped heads and small neck parts that curved out from the small of their heads and into the top of their spines—which themselves glowed from the heat vents that ran down their backs. The ones on the outside of the formation were bigger and carried Tvarken Scepters. These were curved spears with crescent blades at their tops with one side being much longer than the other. They were used to quickly decap-

itate enemies and to fire condensed magical energy from their hollowed edges. Towards the inside of the procession walked a series of smaller automatons. The foremost three were covered with gold inlays and were followed by an entourage of normal automatons behind them. These three were carrying three small wooden boxes encrusted with gold. The procession stopped about halfway between them and the door. The three advanced, placing the wooden boxes a yard or so in front of Nathan and The Monzat. They gently opened them before backing up to their brethren.

“That is his plan anyways,” the Monzat continued his speech from earlier. “You are going to break him of such delusions, you and your wife and son are going to escape, with my help and with the help of my artifacts,” the Monzat said. He walked over to the boxes and gestured to Nathan to follow. “The first is a Darnian Sapphire. It will protect your family from reinfection upon freeing them, and will prevent yours from spreading further,” he said, placing the warm blue stone in Nathans hand. “The second is a spell book with the page marked containing the two spells needed to free your family from their bindings—and you from your sickness. Of note, the latter can only be used by someone devoid of it, so your wife will have to do it upon your escape,” he said gesturing to a bookmark towards the top of the book before handing it to Nathan. Nathan promptly began reading the spells to try and memorize them. “The third,” the Monzat said, pulling an ornate silver sword out of the largest box, “is the Blade of Altara, made from a metal older than time, which—in lieu of my magics—is the only thing that can penetrate the man’s wickedness.” The Monzat admired the sword for a moment before handing it to Nathan. “Be careful with this one, I very much enjoy it and would love to see it returned.”

“So these relics, this sword will help me fight him?” Nathan asked.

“It’ll help you fend him off while you and your family runs,” the Monzat replied.

“But didn’t you use these artifacts to contain him? Couldn’t I

now do that?" Nathan asked, eliciting an uproarious laugh from the Monzat which faintly reverberated through his metal helmet.

"You misunderstand the power of these relics, and what I accomplished. They helped me contain him yes, as did millions of my best mages and warriors—on top of all three of the Master Spinweavers—and even with all that help, it was a struggle. You are but one man sick with an affliction, two when you free your wife. You stand no chance. No, there are some battles you must fight, and others you must run from. For you this is the latter"

"But I can do something at least right? I mean to let this, this evil continue it's..." Nathan said.

"It is what it is. As long as you are gone, he cannot build more power. He will be trapped there. Run and save your family. Leave the task of his containment to greater men." The sky suddenly turned black, and afternoon became night. The Monzat looked around with a knowing gaze. "It is time for you to return," he said placing his armored hand on Nathans shoulder. "When you return he will know you spoke to me and that I gave these artifacts to you. He will throw everything he has at you. You must fight through it with every ounce of strength you have! Your wife and son are depending on you. I will help where I am able, but the legwork comes to you."

"And how will I escape once I have them?" Nathan asked.

"Return to where my wife led you, fall through the ley line as before and you will be out—good luck!" The Monzat said to Nathan as the world went dark around him.

### III

Nathan felt as if he was falling, the world black around him. He hit the floor of the deep archives and was immediately hit by a guttural scream. Turning to his right, he saw an end mage enshadowed by the man's influence sprinting towards

him. Nathan side stepped the shambling puppet and swung his blade, cleaving the poor man in two, his entrails splattering across the archives floor with a loud slapping noise. Nathan rapidly ascended the stairs from the observation post, turning to his right at the sound of another guttural scream. Nathan sprinted at another mage, charging with all his might, goring him with his blade before turning and running towards the entrance's rotunda. He moved up the stairs and past the large door, encountering three more thralls, all holding swords. Nathan deflected the sword swing of one, ducking underneath the blade and cutting its stomach open as it made a loud gasp and collapsed to the ground.

Still crouching, he lunged at the thrall in front of him, stabbing his blade through it as he rotated around it, cutting it open around its chest. The third hit Nathan in his still-uncursed part of his back. Nathan cried out, rolling around to see his adversary charging at him once again, snarling as it did. It slashed down at Nathan, who quickly rolled to the side and cut its arm, causing it to make a disturbingly human scream as it stumbled back. Nathan ran up to it and slashed its neck as it fell to the ground dead.

He sprinted up the stairs to his right and down the hallway, out of the archives, stumbling back as yet another thrall jumped him from the shadows and pushed him towards the railing. It grabbed at Nathan and tried to dig out his eyes as it pushed with all its might to force him over the edge. Nathan desperately punched the thrall, momentarily disorienting it as he slashed it three times near the neck, falling over dead. He ran up the stairs and out the door into the security checkpoint but stopped after feeling a projectile whiz past his head.

In the middle of the room he saw a thrall guard pointing a pistol at him. Nathan ducked behind an overturned table and took a deep breath as he jumped over it, casting an impact spell that made the thrall stumble backwards. Nathan ran up to him, cutting off the arm he was holding the pistol with before flipping the sword around in his hand and shoving it through the lower

part of the man's jaw. Nathan ran out of the archives and into the hall, feeling angry eyes from all around him.

The man was being silent, and it made Nathan uncomfortable. He turned to his left and dashed up the stairs, running into another thrall halfway up, Nathan slammed its head against the wall and then tossed it down the center of the spiral staircase, hearing it hit the floor far below with a pained yell. Nathan slammed the door open onto the 90th floor and turned to his right as he ran past the chapel and into the long hallway leading to the Sepulcher's elevator. Jumping over another thrall as he slashed his throat open and ran to the elevator, slamming his hand on the button as it slowly descended.

"WHY ARENT YOU DEEAAAAAAD," shrieked the man, rattling the complex and knocking loose rocks off the elevator's walls. Nathan staggered out of their way to avoid getting hit by the falling debris as his ears rung.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAH KILL HIM KILL HIM KILL HIM," the man said as more thralls fell onto the elevator from above. Nathan charged at one, knocking it off before it could right itself. Another jumped on Nathan's back and began to slash at his neck. He backed into the moving jagged rock wall of the elevator shaft and slammed into it, hearing the thrall scream as it got impaled on a rock before sliding off and hitting the edge of the elevator with its head, finally falling down the shaft.

The remaining two charged at Nathan at once. He rolled out of the way, taking both their arms off in one clean upward slash before decapitating one and goring another.

"You know what you just did?" thundered the man, "Those people were still alive, they could see what you were doing, you killed them!"

"SHUT UP," Nathan screamed, waving his sword in the air, "You're not going to sink your filthy claws into me again".

The elevator neared the bottom. Nathan leaped off and began a dead sprint through the walkway, the shadows around him shrieking in a mixture of agony and rage as the light from his lantern burned them off the walls. He ran through the large an-

techamber and leapt through the security checkpoint and into the Sepulcher.

“KILL HIM!” the man shouted, as the hundreds of enshad-owed people within the Sepulcher, Elizabeth among them, began to slowly shamble towards him.

“No...” Nathan muttered, trying to figure out what he was going to do.

“I told you, you will be mine.” The man said with relief.

“No, he will not,” said another voice as the enshad-owed thralls stopped moving. From behind, Nathan darted a large orange light, within its center floated a translucent orange figure, the Monzat in æthereal form.

“Get your wife, and run,” the Monzat said before hovering to the center of the room, facing the door.

Nathan sprinted over to where his wife was standing, now facing him. Mid-step, Peter still firmly in her hands, Nathan pulled out the spell book he had been given and began to recite the marked spell, tears briefly welling in his eyes as the shadowy tendrils began to fall off his wife and son with faint hisses. She collapsed to the ground and Peter began to cry.

“Whe-where are we?” she said clasping the crying infant closer to her chest as she tried to get up.

“We are in the sepulcher we need to move, now!” Nathan said as the thralls around them started to move. Nathan grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and pulled her off the ground, grabbing her hand as they sprinted to the door, hearing the thralls break out into a full sprint behind them. The two ran through the security check-point, through the antechamber and into the entry hall, sprinting onto the elevator as Elizabeth slammed the button. The elevator began to slowly ascend, and the horde got closer

“Nathan!” Elizabeth shouted with fear in her voice.

“I know,” Nathan said back, focusing his energy as he summoned another impact spell on the rocks above the door, blasting them into a landslide that covered the entrance. Nathan grabbed his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

“What just happened?” Elizabeth asked him.

“There’s a way out in the deep archives, it’s near the ley line observation point,” Nathan responded

“The deep archives? Can’t we just use the front door or, oh wait...” She shook her head, remembering what had happened. “They engaged the final contingency didn’t they?” Nathan nodded his head.

“Who told you about this exit in the deep archives?” Elizabeth asked.

“The Monzat, that’s what that orange light in the sepulcher was as well,” Nathan responded.

“The voice that yelled at us? That was him? Crap, you’ve had a busy...” she looked around confused, “How long has it been?”

“The longest six months of my life,” Nathan replied with a sigh.

“Oh honey,” Elizabeth replied, walking over to her husband but stopped when the elevator hit the top of the shaft.

“We have to get going, no way the man is going to stop now.” Nathan grabbed her hand once again as they ran through the junction filled corridor, hearing thralls running behind them, sharply turning the corner and running past the chapel and into the spiral stairs. Above them the couple heard the sound of the horde of thralls making their descent, some sliding down the stairs and getting trampled under the feet of others.

Peter cried as Elizabeth held him to her chest, trying to calm the infant down while also keeping pace with her husband, they slammed open the door to the 80th floor and ran into the archives, Nathan stopped them as he heard the sound of metal clanking against metal.

“Get behind me,” Nathan said, looking ahead he saw two thralled guards holding automatic rifles. Nathan pulled out his sword and threw his hand forward in front of him, casting a ward to deflect the oncoming bullets. Sprinting up to them he stabbed one through the chest while punching the other, flipping his sword around and stabbing the punched one in the neck.

“Let’s go now,” Elizabeth followed him, making sure to cover their sons face to hide the corpses from him as she quickly



stepped over them and onto the marble staircase leading down from the entryway towards the deep archives.

The couple entered the lobby and past the large vault door. They made it to about halfway down the stairs before they heard an inhuman roar from the top of the stairs. They both looked up long enough to see the massive vault door get ripped off its hinges and thrown into the metal and glass wall behind it.

In the now empty doorway stood a massive creature, hundreds of thralls smushed into the shape of one very large humanoid figure. It roared again, all of the thralls screams in unison.

“Run!” Nathan yelled as they sprinted down the remainder of the steps at a faster pace, turning the corner into the deep archives and sprinting towards the observation point. Nathan stopped at the stairs.

“Nathan what are you doing!” Elizabeth pleaded.

“One second,” He said, watching as the massive figure lumbered towards them. Nathan focused all his energy on the massive statue behind him. “Come on, come on...” he mumbled, “just a little closer...”

The giant lunged at him and Nathan psionically pulled with all his strength, dislodging the statue from its base and slamming it down on the wretched amalgam of flesh and shadow. Its many bones and flesh caving in with a series of audibly wet cracks. Nathan shouted at the ceiling, hearing a faint but enraged yell in return. Nathan could see the surviving thralls dislodging themselves from the mass. They had to leave now. He walked towards his wife as she asked where the exit was. Without speaking, he bear hugged both his wife and young son, and with the two firmly in hand, leapt into the ley lines magical steam.

Elizabeth opened her eyes last, shocked at the grass and dirt below her. Nathan had already stood up and began to remove his robe and shirt.

“Nathan what are you doing...oh my god!” She said, seeing the writhing shadowy mass on her husbands back, illuminated

by the twilight before the dawn. He handed her the spell book and pointed to the spell.

“Get this thing off me,” The two sat lying against a tree with a small fire to their right, covered by both of their robes. Nathan had wedged his shirt between the tree and his gnarled back. The curse had left what looked like second or third-degree burns, nothing a good healer couldn’t fix but they were not there yet.

Nathan knew where they were though; they were 50 miles south of the facility at the southern edge of the Udathi mountain range, ahead of them by about 2 miles stood the town of Edwards Rest, a small trading post built around a transport hub consisting of a train station and a couple aerial landing pads. They could walk to it but both of them were completely exhausted from the turmoil they had experienced within the facility. Peter was fighting sleep with every ounce of his being. Nathan hugged both Elizabeth and Peter closer. He had his first sunrise to see.

# Can't Choose to be Blind

by Spader Volsung

## I

The summer heat felt like a hand on her throat.

She was hardly dressed for the sweltering weather bearing down on the whole of the city, but then, it was hard to wear anything that would not be soaked by the time you had spent an hour outside. The pavement, broken though it was, only reflected the heat right back onto anyone walking by. *I don't even have a car.*

She turned, and stopped before a large building with a spire protruding out of the top of it. There were large laminated banners which read, 'All persons welcome, Evangelical Lutheran Crutch of America'. She ascended the few steps to the oak doors. *It's so...like home.* Her hand trembled slightly. She tried the doors, and to her surprise they gave way.

A cold blast of air greeted her lungs, flushing the heat out and acting like a cool drink. She stepped inside, conscious of the dull clap her shoes made on the brick interior. It was as she imagined—candles and stained glass windows illuminating the otherwise dark and open space, pews flanking a podium down at the end. *A pulpit.* Wood pillars flanked the center row of pews, reaching up to a wood ceiling. It was like being transported back in time, before...before everything. She blinked.

*But where is he?* She began to feel the hot feeling on her neck return, and felt her hands shaking again. She tried to press them against her sundress but to not avail. Her resolve, shaky when she determined to seek it out, was waning fast.

She would have missed him completely, having heard nothing, if not for her desperate glances all over the sanctuary. But her glistening green eyes caught movement in the corner, near what must have been the church office. Her heart skipped a beat. He had clearly noticed her, and his eyes met hers with a terrible resolve. She let out a slight breath.

He was unlike any priest she ever remembered seeing, certainly nothing like her uncle. He had fierce grey eyes, furrowed black brows, and long, straight blonde hair. It was longer than the hair of many girls she saw everyday. His vestments were comically big for him. His face softened holding her gaze, and something passed over it she could not divine.

"I..." It was barely a whimper. "I've...I've come for confession." The word felt dirty in her mouth and she wished she could take it back.

No more passed over his face. She noticed for the first time a backpack slung over his shoulder. Her face fell and she said in that same lily soft voice, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." She broke, collapsing on a pew next to her. She fought back the tears that were coming, but they still managed to break through slowly.

She never noticed him walk up beside her, and kneel. His warm hand touched her cold one, and she felt something pass between. It felt good, so very good, warmth she hadn't felt since...

"My child," he felt sick saying it. "I am not ordained, I cannot offer you absolution." *No man can offer absolution, certainly not a pastor*, he thought angrily. *Seminaries are nothing but the domain of weak nerds*. "But it would be my pleasure to hear your confession."

She stood up. "I..." she trailed off, realizing her left hand was shaking again, while he held her right steady. He let go, and shifted back. *What sort of priest says my pleasure*, he kicked himself mentally. *Really, what sort of insane LARPing are you doing?*

She looked up into his eyes, hers still wet. "Can...can I come back tomorrow?"

*Get it done, get out. Wasting time as is, making yourself a target. How stupid are you?* "Of course, I'll be here at the same time." **WHAT ARE YOU SAYING YOU MORON?**

She offered a wan smile. "Same time then." He could barely hear her say it, but in the solitude of the sanctuary it was easier.

She turned, softly, and he heard the small clap of her shoes on the brick as she left. He watched her go, feeling rage well up again. *It's done. You owe no one anything. Debts are paid, get the fuck out of dodge.* But he knew the rage wasn't purely at himself. *You know what you saw.*

*Maybe others don't have the balls to see it, don't have the stomach to see it. You see it. That's a gift you are commanded to use.*

*Not this again. You owe her nothing.*

*That's right, you don't. You owe it to yourself.*

He slung the backpack over his shoulder, and marched to the doors. As his hands grasped the handle, he let them go, and turned back toward the altar. "Qui diligitis Dominum, odite malum."

He flung the doors open.

\* \* \*

She hadn't gotten far, he determined after doubling back in his car. It was a 2009 Honda Civic, the same car he drove everywhere. It was shitty opsec but the Honda Civic was what he grew up on and he was loath to change. In any case it wasn't like he had the money for a new car. She continued to walk the sun baked streets a block ahead of him, her golden blonde hair making her an easy mark. *Which is probably why...*

There were needles lying all over, as well as just general trash. *What a shithole.* Homeless people wandered the streets, with tents occasionally coming into view wherever there was a park or some shade. *Fucking pathetic.* Seeing one particular sign he broke into laughter.

'Starving, anything helps'. *The five of you all have BMIs over thirty and you want me to believe you're starving, holy shit, how stupid can you be.*

He watched her slowly walk past all these mystery meat sapiens without raising her head. She walked into the parking lot of

a cheap sandwich chain, and instead of walking inside...

"Fucking hell." *Still time to walk away.* He sped up, and parked his car in the adjacent parking lot. Turning it off, he opened the door, and dropped a small paper bag in a stormdrain next to his parking spot, pulled off his gloves, tossed them back in the car, and marched towards the back of the sandwich parking lot.

*Apparently I'm not the only one who noticed she's going fucking dumpster diving,* he thought savagely, seeing an obese woman amble out of the store toward the dumpster. He quickened his pace to intercept her.

"Listen ma'am I'm so sorry, I don't know what gets into her." The sandwich shop employee stopped waddling, to turn and regard him. He made his face as apologetic as he could manage. "I'm sorry you have to deal with all the crazies."

She put her hands on her hips and sighed. "You ain't got no idea, just ax' her not to do 'dat again."

Promising that he would, he advanced rapidly on the dumpster. He saw bits of mud on her dress as she tried to pull something out that must have been stuck under some disgusting brown boxes. He pulled her away, harder than he meant to.

She drew breath sharply as he pulled her out. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He saw confusion pass over her face. He made a mental note to try and swear less, it undermined the priest bit. *Granted that bit is getting burned one way or another if I keep this up.* "What are you looking for in there?"

"Food." If her voice wasn't so angelic he reasoned he would probably have called her an idiot. *I still might.*

"Listen, that's no place for you to be. They'll call the cops on you." *That at least got a reaction from her.* She looked like she had been hit. *So I was right. Pigs are, as usual, working for the other fucking team.* Not knowing what to say, he said, "I'll take you somewhere to get some food."

She felt fear pulse through her veins. She studied his face intently, looking hard into those crystal blue eyes. *They look so cold, and lonely.* "I will go with you."

She followed him back to the car. He got in, and tossed his gym bags in the backseat. She opened the door, and got in, her tall, slender frame taking up about half the actual seat. Turning the keys, he threw it in reverse and sped out of the parking lot.

The car was cooler than the outside by at least ten degrees, and the air conditioning blew out very crisp. *Where to go, where to go, where to go.* He was started out of his thoughts.

“You’re not wearing a seatbelt.” It wasn’t accusatory, it was in that same melodic voice she used for everything. It was sweet, like a whiff of vanilla.

A few retorts sprung to his mind immediately, but instead he reached over with one hand and dragged the seat belt across his frame. Given his earlier performance, he reasoned, best not to answer any questions you don’t have to.

“What’s your name?”

“Rosemund.” *Lying. Not that I blame her exactly.*

“Mine is Elias Bader.”

*He’s lying, she thought. But he had no way of knowing I knew that. That’s not a name you hear around here.* “You’re not a priest, are you?”

He felt something hot under his collar. “We’ll talk about it at dinner.” *She knows. Should have known better than to pick the name from a fucking book I own.*

The rest of the car ride was silent, except for the soft music he always had playing in the background. Her suspicion of what it was when she heard music she hadn’t heard since watching some film about the American war in Vietnam, vaguely rock ‘n’ roll but without lyrics. Memories of home were coming back more and more now, and like a scab torn off, they hurt. She hated crying in front of this stranger, but couldn’t help it. She cried in silence, wondering if he even noticed. Suddenly, the car stopped.

“We’re here,” he said.

Here was a small strip mall, with a bank, a chiropractor, a karate club, and an Italian restaurant nestled in the corner. They got out, and walked in. She realized Elias, not a priest, was still carrying his backpack with him.

“Booth for two please.” The waitress was very pregnant, which he thought was a little bizarre, but then it wasn’t like he’d been here before. They sat down, and they ordered sodas.

“You’re not a priest.” It was not a question.

“Rosemund, you are deeply troubled. Maybe it would be better if we left our identities and their baggage to themselves.”

She studied him, and nodded. Her face was beautiful, naturally beautiful. He knew why they’d taken her. It made his blood boil.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

*Might as well bite the bullet.* “No passport?”

Her face turned ashen. “How did you...?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I’m not...but you’re not...” her voice was failing.

“No. Nothing like that. But some of us can’t turn away, can’t choose to be blind.” He wasn’t sure why he said it, why he was telling her things he wouldn’t tell his own kin. *Hell, I’m not sure why I bothered with her at all.* But he knew that was a lie. The second those green eyes had held his gaze...what was meant to be was meant to be. *Before the foundations of the earth, I knew you.*

“All too well,” he murmured. Seeing her expression he added, “Just talking to myself. Where are you from?”

“Canada.”

The waitress, having returned, took their orders, and predictably she ate everything in front of her, and some of his spaghetti and meatballs. *Not bad, and not sacrificed to corn demons unlike the rest of the slop in this hellhole.*

It was dark outside, and as they left together he felt his nerves start to go on edge. *Something is hunting.* Turning to her, he could tell she felt it too. Or maybe she was just cold. Or maybe she was just scared. *It’s not like you were ever a master at reading women.*

Driving a bit more carefully, they left the plaza, and turned north. *Only a few hours delay. Not the end of the world.*



## II

The highway was strangely deserted, like an old video game. The sky was completely black, as though a fog hunt just beyond the orange streetlights, unable to be pierced.

“I miss the stars.”

Her voice surprised him, still light, but unexpected. Some of the tension was dissipating but he felt the grime his hands had made sweating on the steering wheel like an uncomfortable bug. *Not out of the woods yet.* He closed his eyes briefly, and sighed.

“Me too.”

The car raced along the highway. He was no longer sweating but despite the late hour and pleasant humm of the engine he was as alert as before. *Moreso, really. If I had been properly alert before none of this would have happened.* He expected she would fall asleep soon, most do. But stealing a glance over he saw her green eyes looking at him, *studying* him.

“He sent you, didn’t he?” Her voice, already quiet and soft, was now positively subservient.

“No one sent me.” He realized his voice carried more edge than he intended. “I’m not one who is sent. I go where I please.”

She was still looking at him, trying to divine what was behind the non answers she was receiving. “I don’t have a passport.”

*Yeah, I suspected as much. If she’s telling me then she probably trusts me, or else just wants to see my reaction.* He carried on this line a little further but let it go. *She seems guileless.* Well *that* couldn’t be true, he reasoned. “I wasn’t there for you.”

“You’re not a priest.” It was probably the third time she said it. He had never given an answer and wasn’t about to now.

It had started to rain in earnest, slowly at first and then in great torrents. His mind was slowly starting to unwind. The desert rarely had rain like this, he couldn’t help but see it as an omen. “I know what happened to you.”

He stole a glance at her, and though there was fear in her face there was also genuine curiosity and hope. *They never really broke*

her. Despite himself something he had not felt in years stirred within him. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere safe." He hated saying it. It felt like a lie rolling off his tongue and if she was smart she'd know it was too. There was nowhere safe for people like her. "Did you have family back home?"

She slowly shook her head. He felt rage well up within him, the same rage that had driven him through the desert in the first place. *Of course you didn't. That's why they chose you.* But it was driven from his mind.

"Do you have family?" Her voice was so faint he suspected she was finally dozing off as he'd hoped she would. *Not that I mind the diversion exactly.*

He said nothing. He hadn't exactly planned to go back, but it was the only choice now. He hadn't exactly planned to make it out of the city in the first place. *It was all so easy, like nature itself reclaiming in months what had been industrial for decades.*

Suddenly he jerked the steering wheel, sending the car spinning on the flooded asphalt. The tires screeched, trying to regain control. In an instant he was back there. He held the wheel with an iron grip as the car finally came to a stop, some way into the desert shoulder.

He swore violently. He knew what he'd seen.

A red jeep was just a bit ahead of them, neatly positioned to block their reentry. "Wait here," he said, opening the door into the pouring rain.

A man in a raincoat was walking briskly towards him from the jeep. He had moppy hair, curly after a fashion, with a hooked nose and long black hair. "Hey partner, sorry about that."

"Step the fuck back." He hadn't even consciously thought about drawing his Glock but it was in his hand, pointed directly at the stranger.

She looked out the window, squinting through the rain rolling down off it. The stranger had nothing threatening, just a raincoat, and a lanyard saying "Bob". *What is he doing?*

He felt his grip on the automatic tighten. The stranger, instead of putting his hands up and backing off, spoke. "There's nothing to worry about William, I just want to—"

The Glock barked twice, and the stranger fell to the ground. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins, doubt and certainty running like race horses beside each other. He yanked the car door open, got in, and closed it.

"What...?"

His foot hit the accelerator like a brick. The wheels screamed as they tried to grip the ground.

*5000 rpm...6000 rpm...7000 rpm...finally the wheels caught and the car blazed by the red Jeep.*

"Fucking hell I knew it." His voice was steeled, she realized. He hadn't made the shot in anger.

*Is he... "They're sending someone after you."*

"They can't know I'm gone yet!" She protested, her voice already higher than his.

"Jesus Christ, give me patience with women." He turned, looking her dead in the eye again. "Did you really imagine you could simply leave and there wouldn't be entities sent out after you?"

She wanted to retort but stopped. "Entities?"

"You went to a church, you tell me. Do you really imagine the material is all there is?" His hands were sweating profusely, and he was stealing glances in the rearview mirror rather than at her. "You are trying to escape a portal to darkness that should never be opened, consecrated by acts that should never be committed. Do you really imagine it's so easy to slip away from that?"

He could tell she was genuinely losing it now, tears were welling up in her eyes. "Then why did you try!?"

"Damned if I know." He sighed. "Look, whoever you were, whatever you did, that person is dead now. You understand me? They died and whatever I just shot killed them." She looked confused.

"But..."

“I was there because of my sister. She’s in the ground now, but you can become her, at least as far as NWO is concerned. That’s where I’m taking you.”

She wondered if any of it was real. It had all felt like a dream, ever since she entered that church. Maybe she was going to wake up any minute, and be back there, back in that shitty town-home...

“I want to hear you say it.”

She looked at him, her mind racing and terribly confused. It didn’t make sense, it was all disjointed and out of place. She knew she must wake up soon, bringing it all crashing down, but maybe if she...

“What is your sister’s name?” She saw the pain cross his face.

“Liesle.”

“The old me is dead. Liesle lives.”

She saw some small measure of relief cross his face. “Good, then all we have is to get you home.”

*I hope she understands the risk I’m taking,* He thought. Then he laughed inwardly. *Of course she doesn’t. And that’s why I took it.*

\* \* \*

He saw she had finally fallen asleep, much to his relief. *At least her mind has some peace for now, sure as hell mine isn’t going to get any.* He was playing it over in his mind, before it faded. *He was coming straight for me, on the wrong side of the highway. How the fuck does that even happen. There’s a giant divider on the highway. No Jeep is getting through it. Not without some other aid.* It didn’t make sense. His reactions, at least, were something that didn’t trouble him.

*Glad it has new tires.*

But tied in with the first question was the second. *Did I judge him properly? He could have been a complete stranger. Shedding innocent blood is no virtue.*

*Innocent blood? Trust your instincts, you saw what he was immediately. Not that it will help. She still thinks you’re a psycho.*

*So? She still trusts me. Chicks dig psychos, and in any case it's not like she's the judge of whether he deserved it or not. Assuming he's actually dead.*

It was very rare for non law enforcement officers to wear body armor, but he reflected that his shots would all have been stopped by anything halfway decent under that raincoat. *Law enforcement officer?*

*Seriously doubt that, what are the chances he is one and doesn't use it to try and get a white guy to suck him and his buddies off with muh thin blue line. Fucking pigs, no, he wasn't a cop.*

*Fed maybe? That was more likely, feds are far more cagey. And complete idiots half the time too, but not the type you want to be mixed up in.* He reflected if it was a fed he was completely and utterly fucked and they'd have helicopters on him eventually. *Nah, if it was a fed they would have taken my plate first unless they were completely stupid.*

Which, granted, also possible. But unlikely. *No, the original guess, as much of a leap as it is, still fits the shoe best.* It was nonetheless a leap. To the bugman, maybe. *The forces we struggle with are always far older than we imagine.*

A road sign informed him he was entering an Indian reservation, which would probably have meant more to her than it meant to him.

"Never enter Indian country without a guide, paleface," he quoted. It sounded more glib than he intended, and he stole glances to his left and right.

Several miles into the reservation he spotted one of the only gas stations. The neon stood out like a stain on a white dress. *Might as well do it now, and I can get all the way without stopping again.* The rain had stopped, but the car still looked like it had been freshly washed. As he pulled into the station, she stirred. He debated just using the card. But he had the cash necessary, and he wanted no trace.

The inside of the gas station was just as offensive as the exterior to the senses. What was alleged to be sushi, hot dogs, and burrito wraps for the same price as could buy a hearty meal of real food back home.

*Home.* He hadn't really allowed himself to consider what it would be like, that he would ever see it again. But it all came flooding back, and he yearned for the warmth of the hearth, the old armchairs, a cool glass of milk.

The clerk was a subcontinental, which was interesting. *So even the red man cannot escape the rising tide of color.* "How much gas?"

"Station 14." He set the twin twenty dollar bills on the counter. *Funny how we call them Indians, and now India Indians have made it to their homelands, and to ours.*

And then, without hearing the door open, two red men shoved rifles at the clerk. They were retro, still adorned with wood furniture. One was clearly older, but both seemed to be on their game. *Hop to it gentlemen, not my quarrel.* He produced his wallet, happy to hand it over.

"Well gentlemen I'll be on my way." He said, grabbing a water bottle as he left. They nodded as he pushed the door open.

And then he turned, and blinked hard. The red men were completely gone. *Did I just imagine that?* The clerk was on his phone, still playing some game. He walked out of the station, back to the car, and pumped the gas.

As he got back in the car, she looked up at him, smiling, warmth he had never seen in her eyes. "Its not a dream, is it?"

He chuckled, after the daydream he had just had. "Just a few hours more."

\* \* \*

The sun was just cresting over the horizon, as the cold of night began to turn into the cool of morning. She was still sleeping, he knew, hearing her steady breathing beside him.

Driving at this time of the morning was very relaxing, he reflected. It had been a long day, and a long night. He knew he was only a few miles away. He felt his eyes close briefly, then reopen, looking back at the asphalt surrounded by brushland. *After all, it isn't far..*

He woke up with a sudden jolt. He realized his face was against the steering wheel, and she was awake now. *Fuck fuck fuck.* Suddenly there was a rap on his window. Still groggy, he rolled down the window.

“Well you had a little tumble.” The voice was foreign, but he couldn’t place where. “Sorry officer, fell asleep, been a long drive.”

“Step out of the car.” *Now I’m in for it.* He noticed it was a state trooper, and another state trooper was pulling toward them. He looked back at her, and saw the fear in her eyes. He was roughly bent over the hood of the car, as the officer searched his pockets, pulling out the wallet he had dreamed he’d given to the gas station thieves.

And then he saw the face behind the second car.

He kicked the officer hard in the knee, twisting around and drawing his switchblade in one fluid motion. The officer put up a hand to shield himself but the knife found its target, as one body drove the other to the ground. *No flak jacket saving your buddy this time.* He turned, ready to face the real threat, but he heard glass break and felt something red hot punch him in the chest. He looked up, and felt a second punch, falling to the ground.

*I’m bleeding.* The warm liquid covering his chest was unmistakable. *I’m gonna die.* He looked up, and there the darkness was, standing over him, grinning.

In a raspy voice that sounded like death, he heard “Did you really imagine you could escape?” He saw the 1911 level at his head.

And then glass broke again.

He opened his eyes, and saw the man had fallen as well. Struggling to stand up as blood pumped out of him, he saw what had done it. His enemy had taken a direct shot to the face.

She was sitting there, holding his Glock, tears rolling down her face. The window only had a hole in it.

Stumbling towards the car, he got in, and pulled it out of park, once again pushing the accelerator to the floor. He felt the cold coming.

“I’m going to die.” He’d meant to think it rather than say it. He saw the fear in her eyes, but couldn’t manage a lie. “Listen to me,” he growled, over the engine’s roar. “Tell them who you are. Tell them what I told you to say.” He coughed. “They’re good...Christian folk...”

He stopped talking, blinking, holding onto consciousness. *Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Two more turns. The sagebrush was barely visible to him, as he swung onto the dirt road. One more turn.

He knew he was done. And yet he reflected, he wouldn’t have changed anything. *I hope...in the end...he can say...well done.*

The car turned sharply, and a farmhouse stood in the distance. The car began to slow, and stopped about halfway onto the long driveway. She was crying in earnest now, as she felt his neck and knew he was gone.

And she saw two old people, unmistakably husband and wife, run out towards the car, crying themselves.

She was sure he was gone. But she swore she heard someone say ‘It was worth it’.



# Becoming August

by Victor Emmanuel

## I

“...And so my fellow graduates, this is the conclusion of a chapter in our lives. But it is not the last, nay, I say it is the first chapter. We have finally finished our introduction. Now comes the hard part: following through. I congratulate you all, class of 2012. May your success in life reflect your academic success.”

“What the hell was that bullshit?” said Baron.

Knowing both the voice, and that it was directed at him, August turned to his friend, cake in hand. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Baron punched his friend in the shoulder nearly causing him to drop his paper plate. “The speech, retard. The one you gave me was great. When did the word ‘chapter’ get put in there? You know how cliché that is.”

August sighed. “The Principal didn’t like the first one and made me rewrite it. She said it was too provocative and that I shouldn’t denigrate the education system.”

“What a load of shit. It’s your speech, she shouldn’t have messed with it.”

“You seem a lot more mad about this than I am.”

“Well I just didn’t want my last memory of you to be so lame.”

“Last memory? I’m not dying, I’m just going to a different college than you.”

“May as well be the same thing. We won’t see each other anymore.”

“We’ve been friends since kindergarten. We can see each other on breaks and talk online. We’ll still interact, it’ll just take more effort.” August saw that his friend wasn’t so convinced. He placed a hand on Baron’s shoulder. “Listen, I promise you there isn’t a thing the world could do separate us.”

Baron smiled, but said: “Don’t be so fucking gay, man.”

August woke with a start. His first sensation was a headache. He closed his eyes and gradually it dulled but didn’t go away. He opened his eyes again. The room was dim, but in the way of an early dawn. As his eyes adjusted, he realized he was in a hospital bed. There was a sleeping woman in a chair to his right who he didn’t recognize. Sitting in a chair next to the door was a sleeping man he did recognize: it was Baron. August tried getting out of the bed, but the movement caused a wave of nausea. He tried to think of a way to wake Baron without waking the woman. August remembered that childish skill he had developed back in elementary school, where he could use the gap in his front teeth to spit accurately and at distance. He did so now and Baron woke startled and confused. Then he saw August. Tears began to well up and he opened his mouth wide.

In response August put his finger to his lips. He didn’t think he would be able to handle loud noises at the moment. Baron obediently shut his mouth so fast that it surprised August. He then gestured for his friend to come to his side. Baron did so, quietly.

“What happened. Why am I in a hospital?” August whispered.

“There was an assassination attempt. You were shot in the head. I don’t know how you survived,” answered Baron mimicking August’s whisper.

“Assassination? Why would...” August’s question was cut off by the now clear sight of his friend. Baron was much older, by perhaps twenty years, and his face had scars August had never seen before. “Why are you so old?”

“Old? I didn’t think stress would affect me that much.”

“You look to be in your forties.”

"I am in my forties." Baron's confusion was then replaced with concern. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"My valedictorian speech."

Baron's confusion was then replaced by panic. He fought to keep his voice low and level. "Please tell me the concussion gave you a sick sense of humor."

August shook his head. "I genuinely don't know what's going on Baron."

"The year is 2038."

"Wow, I've been in a coma for twenty-six years?"

"No it's only been a month. You just don't remember the last twenty-six years."

"Well that's bad."

"You have no idea," Baron said handing August a newspaper. The date was November 14, 2038. The headline read: *Doctors say The Emperor's condition has stabilized; The Imperial Guard continue their hunt for the assassin.*

"The Emperor's condition?" asked August

"That would be you, August. You are Emperor of America."

"How is that possible?"

"Your experience at college radicalized you. You gradually lost faith in the democratic process. When you found what was known as the dissident right at the time, they were a fractured mess, but you managed to unify them. Then in 2029 you lead a revolt against the previous regime. The war lasted three years. So, you've been the supreme ruler of America for six years now. I have followed you all that time."

"Wow, that is a lot to take in."

"I don't think you understand how bad the situation is right now."

"Have there been riots against me or something?"

"No, in fact there has been peace and the people are quite happy with your rule."

"I don't get what the problem is then."

"Damn, I'm not sure how to explain this. The problem is I never had the same grasp of 'power politics' as you did. I'm a bad

student trying to teach his master...the one part of power that I was able understand from you was that showing weakness is bad.”

“I’m sure I’ll recover from this concussion soon enough. I don’t feel particularly weak other than that.”

“You don’t get it. It would be better if you were paralyzed instead. Then you could at least give coherent orders. But with amnesia, You don’t know how to rule. In fact, you might hate the system you’ve made. When people find out you don’t remember the past twenty years your time on this earth is numbered, everyone you know and trust will be gunning for your position.”

“Then we need to keep my condition a secret.”

“And how can we do that? And for how long can we keep up the act? Not to mention the assassin is still out there.”

“We don’t need to hide it forever, just long enough for me to relearn how to be emperor.”

“That will be one hell of a task, but then again you are the man who defeated the greatest military in history with an army of rednecks armed with AR-15s.”

“The first thing on our agenda should be to figure out who we can trust.”

“August!?” said the woman sitting next to him.

## II

The woman sitting next to August leaped from her seat and embraced him with all her strength. As she cried into his chest August looked to Baron expectantly. Baron rolled his eyes and mouthed “*Your wife, Catherine.*”

“Praise the Lord, you’re awake.” Catherine loosened her embrace enough so she could look at her husband through tear flooded eyes. Behind her Baron mouthed “*Cathy.*”

At first August didn’t understand, but then he realized that “Cathy” must have been the pet name he used.

“It’s alright, Cathy, I am awake, and I am alive.” said August.

“Oh, Auggie. I was so...I don’t have the words for it...when you were shot, then you wouldn’t wake up and I was so scared. Baron here told me that I would need to choose a successor.” Catherine’s speech was shaky from trying and failing to hold back tears.

August turned to look at Baron.

“Listen man, this is what happens when you don’t have succession planned out in advance. I was just trying to avoid another civil war.” said Baron giving August the info he needed.

After a moment of thinking how an Emperor would respond August said, “I wasn’t planning on dying so soon. I had thought that assassination wasn’t possible, but I suppose I should have determined succession sooner. As events have shown, that was clearly a miscalculation.”

“How long were you two talking before I woke?” asked Catherine. “I don’t think I will be able to forgive you for not speaking to your own wife first.” Despite her words she was smiling.

“I was awake at the time, and it wasn’t long. Just enough to tell him about the assassination and it’s been a month.” explained Baron.

Catherine furrowed her eyebrows. “What do you mean ‘tell him about the assassination,’ he was there.”

Baron began to panic but managed to hide all evidence of it.

“I don’t remember the assassination.” said August covering Baron’s blunder. “One minute I’m signing an order the next I’m waking up in a hospital bed.”

“Ah.” said Catherine. “I had hoped that if you had woken up you could tell us what the assassin looked like.”

Outside August’s room a nurse was walking by and saw through the gap made by the window and Imperial Guards to see that the emperor was upright and speaking. She shouted, “Emperor August is awake!”

Immediately Hospital staff began a stampede to the emperor’s room. This caught the Guards flat footed, as they had

turned to see if the nurse's exclamation was true. Baron, who heard the noise, came to the door, and spoke with authority. "None are to pass through without my say so." Immediately the guards regrouped and pushed the medical personnel back with the threat of their rifles.

From the crowd of nurses and doctors an admonishment came. "You have no right to deny the emperor medical treatment."

Baron answered, "As Master of Security I very much do." Baron then scanned the crowd and found the doctor he was looking for. He ushered him forward and before shutting the door on the rest, "I suggest you disperse."

"I believe I have some calls to make," said Catherine stepping outside. While the doctor got to performing his examinations on August, Baron got to thinking. He had to get August caught up on the development of political thought from the past twenty-six years. August, as of now, was running on neoliberalism. Baron remembered August saying that *The Prince* should be the starting point for anyone interested in politics. August had also told him that *The Doctrine of Fascism* had radically altered the way he saw the world. Baron then began to think of a good excuse to get those two books into August's room, when he realized there was a bigger problem. Right now, August believed in the [1940s event]. It had taken years for August to rid himself of that mental shackle. If it remained, then August would surely destroy everything he had dedicated his life to building.

"Alright my Emperor. Be sure to get plenty of sleep," said the doctor, "Avoid physical or mental exertion."

"I'm not sure I can promise no mental exertion. My job requires a lot of thinking," said August.

"You will not be doing your job in here," said the doctor.

"He's been out for a month, doc. The nation needs him," argued Baron.

"Well, he needs to recover. Just because he's awake doesn't mean he isn't still injured," responded the doctor.

“Speaking of, how long until the amnesia goes away,” asked Baron.

“Hard to say. It may never come back. I’m sorry, Master of Security, but you may have to catch your culprit without your primary witness,” answered the doctor getting up to leave. “I’m not joking about the sleep.” Then closed the door behind him.

“Ok, before Catherine gets back, I need you request three materials are sent to your room. *The Prince*, *The Doctrine of Fascism*, and *The Greatest Lie Ever Told*.”

“The *Doctrine of Fascism*? Why would I want to read that?” August asked a little scared about what the answer would be.

“Before you were shot you were a fascist and had established a fascist state. You need to understand how fascism works in order to rule properly.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to oppress people.”

“...If you from a month ago were here, he would know how to respond to that. It is necessary for your survival, if you start acting like a liberal, I can guarantee you will die. I could be the greatest bodyguard in history, and you would still have a knife in your back.”

The door opened and Catherine stepped into the room. Baron looked at his friend with pleading eyes. August hesitated. This was all to surreal for him. How is it that he had come to adopt an evil ideology? How had he become so obsessed with power? He looked at his friend again. If nothing else, he could trust that Baron wanted to keep him alive. Perhaps he could become a more just ruler instead of the tyrant he had become. But to do that he would need to understand the system he had made.

August sighed and spoke to his wife, “Dear, could have some things brought up to my room?” Baron relaxed the tension in his shoulders that he didn’t know was there.

“Sure honey, what do want?”

“*The Prince*, *The Doctrine of Fascism*, and *The Greatest Lie Ever Told*.”

“Sure, but why?”

For a moment August thought using his authority to shut-down the question, then he realized that might not work on his wife. "I just want some light reading while I'm resting."

"Ok, and what's the movie for?"

"Hmm?"

"The movie, *The Greatest Lie Ever Told*, what's it for?"

Baron stepped in, "To remind him what he's fighting for."

After some waiting for about half an hour there was a knock on the door. Baron opened it only for the man to barge in. He was carrying a laptop and bag.

"Nathaniel, what are you doing here?" Asked Baron

"The request for reading material came before the news that the emperor was awake. So..." Nathaniel brought the requested items out of bag and set them on a table, "I decided to kill two birds with one stone by playing both delivery boy and messenger."

Nathaniel then gave a small bow to both August and Catherine. "My Emperor. My Empress."

Catherine gave a small nod in return "Head Secretary Fernández."

"If you will permit me to give you a report on the past month, I..." Nathaniel was cut off by Baron.

"Absolutely not. He hasn't even been awake an hour yet."

"I believe that is his decision to make," snapped Nathaniel.

August looked at his friend who was giving that same pleading look. August knew why Baron didn't want him to hear the report. It would be so easy to make a mistake. But he needed the information, may as well get it now.

"If the whole country is on fire, I don't want to hear it," said August "Otherwise tell me what's happened."

"Based," Nathaniel sat down on the hospital bed and opened his laptop. "So Foreign or Domestic?"

August wondered if America was the only country to turn fascist or if others had as well. "Foreign," said August



“Master of Propaganda Eren Hitter has been beating the war drum so hard it would make the old neocons blush,” said Nathaniel looking up to see August’s horrified expression.

“Oh, do not worry,” said Nathaniel, “He isn’t actually trying to start a war. It’s just a show of strength to deter the Liberal powers from declaring war on us. It would have been disastrous if ZOG declared war on us without you to lead. Here, look at this.”

Nathaniel turned the laptop so August could see the screen. On it was an image. It was of a rabid wolf with its leg caught in the jaws of a bear trap. Its teeth were bloody and its eyes wild. On the wolf itself was text that simply read “America”.

“I told Eren that it was bad optics to associate us with a mad beast,” explained Nathaniel, “But propaganda is his job, so he had this one and several variants made and sent them to our guys living under Liberalism. They then spread it, and now more than ever the Liberal powers fear us. Whether that’s good or bad is up to you.”

“Better to be seen as strong than weak,” said August.

“As you say. Moving on,” continued Nathaniel, “There have been quite a few prayers around the world for your recovery. President Assad and The Supreme Leader of Iran have lead prayers for to wake. Assad even went so far to say, *‘Neither Allah nor Christ would allow for his earthly servant, Slayer of the Great Satan, to leave this life with work unfinished’* ...you seem surprised.”

“I just...I never,” said August unsure how to respond.

“You never expected the Aryan-Arab axis to be this strong?” interjected Baron.

“Yeah, this is exceeding my expectations. I’ll have to send him a thank you,” said August, thankful for the save.

“Several Orthodox Patriarchs and Catholic Bishops have led their own prayers for the same outcome, although the Pope has remained silent on the issue,” exoposited Nathaniel.

“Why has the Pope remained silent?” asked Augustus.

“Well, several Bishops have lead prayer for your death. So, I think he is trying to avoid a Schism.”

“Seems like a small thing to cause a schism over.”

“On the surface whether a specific leader should live or die isn’t something that should cause a split, but the reason for why you should live or die are. Is racism a sin? Is God a nationalist? Is it bad to persecute sinners? Is tolerance a Christian virtue? Things like that. Your rule in general, and near death in particular, has brought a lot of hidden disagreements to the surface.”

“So, what have the Protestants been doing?” asked August.

“An even more mixed bag than the Catholics. I think they are in a contest to see who has the hottest take.”

“Anything else happen in wider world this past month?”

“No that about covers anything of relevance, except of course the fact that no one has come forward claiming credit for your attempted murder. Moving to the domestic sphere, your approval rating hasn’t really budged still sitting at 71%. What has happened is that your already fanatic supporters have become even more fanatic. Some have even sent in requests to donate their organs and blood to you, not that it would have helped, but this had led to some of them instigating violence against your critics. This has in turn inflamed their hatred of you.”

Nathaniel then saw the disappointed look on August’s face. “I know you thought that forgiveness should be given those who weren’t directly responsible for conditions of the previous order, but that has had its consequences.”

“Give me the details later.”

“Very well, moving on to the military. The Modern Infantry Combat Armor finished its development and Master of the Military Timothy Russell approved its production. I know you want to witness the tests firsthand, but Russell decided that it couldn’t wait and approved it anyway.”

“That was the correct thing to do.”

“As you say. The MICA has been shown to consistently withstand a .50 caliber armor piercing round from a M107 at 100 feet. Although the join areas aren’t guaranteed to provide such protection. I can have Timothy send you the exact test results.”

August nodded his head.

“Very well. By now this is out of date, but we have produced around a thousand MICA units. You didn’t specify who should get priority.”

August thought for a moment. “First will be Spec Ops, then commanding officers in the field, then front line infantry, the rest by lottery.”

“As you say. Last, we have Master of the Economy Mark Powell’s report. Sales of pregnancy tests are down by 22% which is disappointing, but not unexpected. GDP has dropped by 5%, but Mark has managed to keep real wages from dropping.”

“Have there been any bank runs?” asked August

Before, when August had made a mistake Baron had been able to keep his emotions under the surface, he failed to do so now. The look on Baron’s face was of absolute terror.

Nathaniel blinked twice in confusion. “What do you mean ‘bank runs’? Bank runs haven’t been possible since you nationalized all of them. A bank run now would mean we have collapsed which we clearly haven’t.”

Baron reached for his knife.

# Guardians

by Robert Donelson

An army of hopeful fortune-seekers shielded their eyes from the midday sun as they trudged forward begrudgingly on unsteady legs, unaware that their destiny lay so close before them. For days they had fermented in a mutinous mood, their patience stretched thin and their wills bent to the point of breaking by empty promises and tasteless rations. The treasure that had inspired so many reckless quests for adventure beckoned to them unseen from behind an enormous glass wall; the precious possessions were protected by the reflection of the sun's glare from its surface. With the risk of desertion on the horizon, a fateful and fortuitously-timed cumulus covered the sun and revealed the wonder—now naked and exposed like a beautiful woman in a brightly-lit bedroom overlooking a boys' dormitory.

The disintegrating ranks of tired soldiers faltered like a dry engine and shuddered to a halt as they looked upon the prize with awe. Its glistening spark ignited a fire in their minds, coalescing an uncertain trickle of desperate travellers into an unstoppable tide that ebbed ever closer toward the final barrier between bleak drudgery and prefabricated paradise. They came upon the wall in a wave of unrestrained excitement like the aftermath of a tremor beneath an expansive ocean and crashed against the glass; grubby hands grabbed greedily, fledgling fingers searched frantically, and stubby legs stomped impatiently as the great wall stood stoically like a sheet of ice concealing an ancient mystery.

At last, they had arrived.

Suddenly and silently, the wall cracked and split at its centre, retreating left and right and willingly exposing its nectar to the buzzing hordes. The hordes, surprised by this unexpected

turn of events, paused briefly and then filed through the emergent gap in a somewhat orderly manner followed by their reluctant parents. The glass jaws closed swiftly behind them and resumed the posture of innocuous gateway to the largest ‘recreation and early learning establishment’\* (or ‘toy store’ as it was known during the prehistorical period) in existence. The family-friendly façade had sprung its honey trap and Jane entered a world shaped by imagination.

His eyes glazed as luminous colours radiating from stacks of plastic packages drew his pre-pubescent attention in several directions at once: to the right, a gleaming, white, red-striped rocket ship blasted into the air with a thunderous boom before slowly descending to the earth; to the left, a merry band of costumed bears played wholesome tunes while armed infantry skirmished around them firing laser beams haphazardly. But it was clear that these were mere sideshows as the children marched breathlessly toward the huge wax figure of MS Space—the world’s greatest and most popular superhero. A global icon and role model for children everywhere, MS Space balanced the demands of a high-powered corporate executive role and single motherhood with the fight for rights and the war against wrongs. Possessing super-strength and alienating levels of purported independence from a repressive structure of cultural norms, her mission was to educate the minds of children in the ways of tolerance and empower them to destroy opposition to peace in the multi-verse. The children crowded intensely around their burly champion, whose wrathful expression matched the sound of her strident battle-cry. She commanded an army of high-priced cloned miniatures, each clad in green spandex complete with golden boots and gloves. MS Space and her clones each clutched a golden laser gun, drawn and ready to dispatch the known enemies of goodness and virtue in the

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\*Variously contended to be the happiest place on earth, the most jubilant spot in the universe, and the “funnest thing ever!” (a questionable claim that may have pushed the case too far).

world (and any others they might make along the way). Invariably, this involved the appearance of her arch-nemesis Joe—an incorrigible reprobate and faithful punching bag who acted as a proxy for dissenters who dared defy the popular consensus.

“MS Space!” whispered Jane with reverence as he rushed to meet his hero, warily edging past the scowling green face of Joe, who had been crafted with a menacing stare that left no doubt of his generally evil intent.

The more immediate danger, however, was the collateral damage to be inflicted upon the mesmerised children if either colossal figure were to topple in their direction. The caricature that was the evil Joe carried a large, menacing steel blade and wore dark black sunglasses, a grubby checked shirt, and a hairstyle reminiscent of the worst fashion *faux pas* of the late prehistoric period. His arrogant smirk appeared more defiant than confident, which perhaps reflected the moment the ill-equipped and under-nourished man had made a realistic assessment of his chances against the intimidating combination of inhuman muscularity, coiled rage, passive-aggressive bitterness, untethered arrogance, and wilful delusion of MS Space who carried a large handbag over her shoulder filled with an extensive and impressive array of weaponry (plus a space phone for interstellar communications stuffed somewhere near the bottom).

It would not have seemed to the objective observer a fair fight, but this, perhaps, was not the point. The worn and battered Joe stood alone, his real fight to remain standing against the angry and cathartic blows of loyal children who had learned at a young age that the Joes were unquestionably the Bad Guys. The blatant and regular damage to store property didn't seem to bother the brightly-coloured sales assistants who hurried about the store projecting an irrepressible enthusiasm sustainable only in short bursts.

Jane's mother watched the children bounce like excited pinballs between unending rows of mass-produced playfulness: Zarba the oversized lion ruled as king of the jungle over his stuffed animal subjects and produced a powerful roar when

prodded in his mighty lion chest. Militaristic toy robots stood at attention in plastic cases, ready to fight to the death once freed by anxious and eager children. Large square bins housed thousands of faceless, grey, and unremarkable rubber dolls—inert and malleable figures largely neglected by otherwise curious fingers. The piercing racket of excited children was exceeded only by the store’s energetic soundtrack: dissonant harmonies clashed jarringly with a cacophony of squeaks, shouts, and incomprehensible pre-recorded speech that rose from the sprawling forest of electronic toys being harassed by inquisitive digits. Jane scurried between the attractions, struggling to choose a favourite.

After careful deliberation he rushed toward his mother and thrust an object resembling a snow globe into her hands. It was a glass sphere half-filled with water containing what appeared to be a human brain.

“Ooh, what’s this, Jane?” said the mother.

“It’s the CogSphere,” said Jane.

The mother examined the toy, unsure what to make of it.

“What does it do?”

“I think—”

An eager young sales assistant with impeccable timing stopped to admire Jane’s choice.

“I see you’ve found the CogSphere! Excellent choice—it’s our most popular toy and a must-have for this coming holiday season. In fact, we’ve nearly sold out,” said the sales assistant, who spoke to them through a disconcerting fixed smile that contrasted with the dullness in her eyes.

Similar scenes played out in the background as flashing lights and suggestive marketing took their toll on the resistance of the young minds as their hands grasped part of the human anatomy with vigour not to be repeated for at least several more years.

“Really? How does it work?” said the mother, cautiously turning the brain over in her hands before holding it up to her ear as though it were a sea shell.

“It’s the most advanced gaming experience ever! There’s nothing else quite like it; with a fully-customisable game environment and real-time non-linear immersive gameplay, it’s the ultimate entertainment experience. Ever wanted to play in the world championship, fly a jet, shoot bad guys in a war zone, or build an army and conquer the world? Well, now you can!”

“Oh, that—”

“‘Well, of *course* I can,’ I hear you say, ‘I’ve done all of those things before on the iScreen so why are you wasting my time are you not aware of phase 3x technology headsets that allow for 5D next-gen reality absorption?’”

“I don’t—”

“Yes! I totally was aware! But this is no ordinary game system. This is truly the future of..”

Jane and his mother watched with fascination and concern as the girl argued both sides of what turned out to be a rather one-sided debate, anticipating and refuting each possible objection until it was established that the CogSphere was indeed the superior gaming experience. She stepped closer, conspicuously checked that no one was within earshot, and then spoke in a low, conspiratorial whisper.

“The CogSphere has the most realistic graphics and sound ever created—you’ve never experienced *anything* like *this* before—”

She hesitated.

“I mean, you’ve experienced things *exactly* like this before, but you’ve never experienced the things you’ve experienced before like *this*, because once you join the Brain Network, it’s no longer a game; it’s *real*. You see, the CogSphere uses the most powerful processor commercially available—the human brain!”

“Wow!” said Jane, engrossed by the performance.

“Processing speeds vary between users; please check minimum requirements for compatibility,” disclaimed the sales assistant.

“I don’t understand. The game is real?” said the mother.



The sales assistant sighed faintly, drew a long breath, and then began a well-rehearsed sales pitch at the speed of one forced to explain that which was clearly self-explanatory.

“Brain Limited’s Inter-Cranial Perforation™ procedure draws on the latest research into subcutaneous synthetics to fit your device with an upgrade that’ll enhance your performance and allow you to experience the next level of virtual reality: *reality*. The entirely harmless and non-invasive procedure melds the living tissue of your cerebral cortex with a microchip so small you’ll never even realise it’s there. Once the installation is complete the patented Psychological Realism Engine is activated by a 27G wireless signal from inside your head and you’re all set! Unbreakable sensor bands, created from our unique CHAIN™ technology and guaranteed for one lifetime’s usage, are fitted securely to your wrists, ankles, and neck so you can control the action and a mandatory Safety Cord is attached to your brain socket to allow for routine maintenance during periods of inactivity; purely for essential updates and dream prevention, of course. You should hear some of the stories about users dreaming while connected to the Brain. More like nightmares!”

The sales assistant chuckled as she recounted numerous documented cases where users had combined lucid dreams with the perceived reality of the Brain and suffered severe shock as a result. Reports had described costly disconnections, data loss, and brain damage. Further testing had shown that in most cases the human brain can only process one reality at a time; the presence of an incompatible idea or concept from a secondary data source is interpreted by the brain as a threat to the primary data source (or ‘perceived reality’) and could cause automatic shut-down to commence. Where damage to test subjects had occurred, some had responded well to lengthy re-constructions in the form of repetition and coercion, while others had been written off as defective and excluded from further participation.

“But that’s all in the past. With 24/7 technical help and a focus on user safety, you’re protected from all possible harm.”

*It’s a game. Boys like games.*

The mother's face betrayed quiet alarm at this explanation, causing the sales assistant's eyes to flash with mild irritation at the apparent lack of shared enthusiasm, though her intense smile refused to budge. She inhaled deeply and continued.

"Did you ever watch a film that made you feel as though you were really there? As if the characters were talking to you, personally? As though for ninety minutes you lived in their world and were part of their story? You *felt* you were, and who's to say you *weren't*? Not me. Inside the Brain Network, what you perceive to be real is real. The CogSphere uses pan-geographic technology, so you can play wherever you go—on the bus, at home, on the beach, in the shower—and all the action of real world simply becomes part of the game. In fact, we guarantee a completely uninterrupted experience! Best of all, because the Brain is powered by the human body you can say goodbye to cables and power bills! Isn't that fantastic? While permanently connected to the mainframe you can interact with millions of others around the world and enjoy an illusion of meaningful social interaction. Plus, lucky customers are free to purchase everything they could ever need online from the Jungle store or iStuff," said the sales assistant, exhaling. "Any questions?"

The wary mother paused to process the rapid-fire statement as the assistant reloaded.

"Did you mention an implant in the brain?" said the mother.

"Oh yes, but it's nothing to worry about, and afterwards the world is so much better."

A brochure materialised in the hands of the sales assistant and was placed into those of the dubious parent. It was filled with photographs of happy, smiling citizens who had an apparent tendency to congregate by placid lakesides, sandy beaches, and romantic sunsets.

"You see? Everyone's doing it. You don't want to be left out, do you?"

*You see?*

"You mentioned shopping?" said the mother, managing to temporarily set aside intensifying safety and ethical concerns.

“Absolutely! This is not some simple toy, but a fully integrated lifestyle tool including apps like *Shopping Mall*. At any of world’s leading outlets, you can buy jewellery, try on the latest fashions, and receive suggestions for items on sale so you’ll never miss a bargain! Your urge to splurge is limited only by your own self-control; you’ll find everything you never wanted, but must have!”

“That *does* sound very convenient,” said the mother.

*It is better this way.*

“Totally! Want to take the perfect travel snap or shoot a flawless selfie? Switch on the camera app and the image will be downloaded in high-resolution to the memory in your brain, *from* your brain. With a capacity of up to ten billion pixels, you’ll always look your best. Don’t trust other people? With Brain technology there’s no need to use second-hand information ever again. Want to know the best part?”

The sales assistant waited expectantly.

“Uh...”

“You can do it all from the comfort of your own mind!”

“That—”

“Perhaps you look back on your past with sadness and regret? Maybe you’d like to turn back the clock and correct all the terrible decisions you’ve made? Possibly you’re desperate to somehow improve your wretched existence as foreboding images of a miserable future unfold before you? No problem! We’ve got you covered with our BrainWipe erasure tool, so that you can forget the past and replace those tears with golden years. Who said memories have to be based on *real* events? Now, they can be whatever you choose! The future really is what you make it. Say, I bet your son has big dreams for the future?”

The mother glanced at Jane. He stared back blankly, mouth agape and dumbstruck by information overload; he appeared the type of child one might encourage to pursue more realistic life goals.

“Oh, yes,” said the mother encouragingly.

“Well, now he really *can* achieve those dreams—in his mind!”

“Worried about storage?” continued the sales assistant. “No citizen has yet reached maximum Brain capacity, so it’s practically unlimited. Heard of the cloud? You know what they say: when the weather gets bad your information pours out, ha ha...but not from the Brain! We estimate it would take at least two dedicated Administration Interrogation Units to extract private and confidential data.

“Please note that Brain Limited bears no responsibility for unauthorised use of the brain and recommends safe, Administration-approved thoughts and feelings to avoid interrogation, extraction, and erasure,” added the sales assistant with robotic and almost incomprehensible speed and precision. “Trust me ma’am, you’ll be using Brain power for all your information needs very soon.”

“Gosh, that sounds brilliant,” said the mother.

“You got that right,” said the sales assistant. “How would you feel if you never had to spend another day in that lifeless office building making tedious small-talk with dull co-workers or staring into a computer screen for hours on end?”

“That would be perfect.”

*Everything will be perfect now.*

“Well, when all your business is conducted exclusively within the Brain, you can be at work instantly by logging in with the Employee app and never even leave your home station. You can choose any career you like! In the comfort of your own mind you’ll have all the tools you need.”

“That’s terrific,” said the mother.

The sales assistant sensed victory and smiled just a little wider to the point of possible injury.

*Don’t be afraid. We’re almost there now. This won’t hurt, I promise...*

“How would you like to see it in action?”

“Yeah!” cried Jane.

“All right then! Follow me,” said the sales assistant, turning abruptly.

Jane and his mother hurried to keep pace as they trailed through a maze of aisles and flashing displays toward the dis-

tant rear wall of the store which they reached some considerable time later. They stopped and stood in front of a white door set within a grey concrete wall.

“This way please!” said the sales assistant, holding the door open.

Jane passed through the door and entered a dark emptiness. For a brief moment there was only a sense of isolation and a floating, detached calm.

*Sorry. Hold on...*

There was a whirring sound like an old motor coming to life and the world suddenly returned in the form of a room illuminated by artificial light reflected from hundreds of neon signs and flashing sensor bands attached to small children. They stood at the beginning of a carpeted walkway that led past game testing areas and sales display booths. The bright lights and loud noise distracted and unbalanced their senses. It was the type of place in which one could imagine otherwise sensible adults making impulsive and generally poor financial decisions; the ideal place for a keen sales assistant to close the deal.

“Where are we?” asked the mother.

“This is our showcase area, where customers can sample the latest games and experience life inside the Brain Network.”

Jane and his mother climbed aboard the rear seats of a waiting vehicle that resembled a golf cart. Hundreds of children, some as young as five or six, crowded into areas created for each of the most popular games. In the ‘*Olympics!*’ area a boy competed in the one hundred metre sprint, pulling vainly against a rubber cord attached to his waist and the wall behind him. Some sat struggling to control the speed of the fastest cars they could imagine with invisible steering wheels clenched in tight fists, while others aimed weapons at aliens or swung imaginary tennis racquets. The majority, however, simply sat motionless in oversized padded armchairs and stared impassively into the middle distance.

“That’s our shooter zone, that’s our underwater zone, and over there that’s our fighter zone,” said the sales assistant, point-

ing to several indistinct areas.

In the fighter zone a small boy threw his limbs in a frenzied attack while another struggled to block the ferocious assault with what appeared to be a mime routine. They watched as a group of children, apparently imagining a vertical climb up a steep cliff face, moved their arms and legs carefully and strategically while lying face down on a rubber mat.

The winding path ended at the rear of a long queue where both mothers and children presented the tell-tale signs of fatigue and distress common after a long day of shopping, hoping in vain for a quick escape. The customers inched their way toward a large room filled with rows of indistinguishable figures wearing corporate clothing who sat hunched in front of panels of computer monitors—windows into another world—while tapping at keyboards and speaking into microphones attached to headsets. Multi-directional yellow arrows lined the linoleum floor to indicate a safe path through rows of workstations for automated vehicles that ferried workers to and from their positions at precise intervals. Bright white and antiseptic, the room was part scientific laboratory, part airport security, and part modern factory floor. It was also the only way out.

“Who are they?” said Jane, pointing to the workers.

“Oh, those are our producers. They’re here to make sure your experience in the Brain is always fun, and, more importantly, *safe*. The Brain can be a scary place and it’s important to have the experts in charge. They’ll make sure you never see, hear, or think anything *bad* again. Isn’t that great?”

Hesitant children with imploring eyes were wrenched from their placated protectors with little difficulty and placed into booths behind blue curtains. Jane watched as, one after the other, the children emerged with blank faces and were hurried through portal scanners used to identify their consumer tracking tags. The machines beeped as the price of captivity—299.99 for a limited time only—was charged to their accounts. Jane cradled the CogSphere protectively as they waited at the rear of the queue.

“Well, that’s it folks. I hope you’ve enjoyed your time with us today! It’s been so much fun to meet you!” said the sales assistant. “Now, please step forward and join your fellow citizens in the Brain.”

“I don’t think—”

The vast emptiness returned, along with an intense, swirling headache.

\* \* \*

Anxious and confused, and with his body numbed intravenously, Jane was unable to move or speak. He lay motionless on a narrow, steel-framed bed. Its sharp metal springs dug painfully into his body through a worn, uneven mattress. Unwilling to open his eyes for fear of what he might see, or confirmation of what he imagined, he fought to contain a panic that rose from an awareness of unbearable isolation. It was cold, wherever he was.

An ancient concrete floor was covered in a thick layer of grime and dirt into which many decades of footsteps had worn distinct grooves. Military-green paint peeled from decaying walls. Small refrigerators with transparent glass doors containing cylinders of blue liquid and a supply of syringes hummed quietly beside each of four beds, three of which were unoccupied. Beside a doorway leading to a small bathroom a wooden chair was occupied by a squat old woman wearing a faded polyester uniform and a white nurses’ cap. A heavy steel door that could only be opened from the outside was an indication that Jane would be staying for some considerable time; perhaps all of it.

“What a wonderful memory,” droned the emotionless voice of the woman. It was a voice that told of resignation and disappointment; of one who had seen enough to develop empathy in place of common cynicism but knew enough to understand the way of things.

Jane lay still.

A worried look flashed across the woman’s face. She rose and

prodded him in the ribs with her finger as the harsh staccato of her heavily-accented syllables jabbed at his ears.

“Still there?”

Jane flinched and opened his eyes, squinting as an image formed of a hesitant but kindly expression. The woman relaxed and returned to her seat.

“I spent a lot of time on this, you know. They don’t pay me extra to make it nice. It’s for your own good, yes?” said the voice, with a tone that betrayed momentary doubt.

There was no answer.

“I think you understand. I’ve made it very clear for you. It is better now.”

Jane heard the woman rise from the creaking chair. After a few minutes, he felt a hand gently touch his shoulder.

“Yes, much better for you now.”

The woman knocked twice on the door. It opened in response and was then closed quietly, leaving Jane alone in the room for the first time.

Tired and afraid, he closed his eyes.

Jane was eighteen years of age and had been selected. He was now a citizen.

## I

### **Choose your own adventure**

“Press play to begin.”

The unfamiliar voice, female and almost motherly in a rehearsed and pre-recorded kind of way, intruded upon Jane’s inner monologue. He opened his eyes and stumbled forward grasping for tangible certainty, but was instead faced with empty unreality in all directions; a starless cyber space projection of an inner world. He paused and waited for his senses to adjust. A small green button in the shape of a ‘play’ icon hung in the space several metres in front of him. It pulsed with a faint,



seductive light. Still disorientated, he looked down at his hands which were present and in working condition. Further down were some familiar legs wearing familiar trousers. He made some experimental motions with his body, moving like a malfunctioning cyborg, and then walked into the empty space behind the button to investigate further. Or at least tried; no matter where he moved the button stared back at him. He turned his head left then right, though no matter which way he looked, it refused to budge.

“Press play to begin,” insisted the voice.

Jane eyed the button suspiciously; he was naturally reckless, but also untrusting and obstinate. He spun his body around, again and again, becoming dizzy as the button taunted him with its relentless presence.

“Press play to b—”

“Oh, all right then,” said Jane. There was a satisfying *click* as he pressed the button.

A room, circular and bright white, appeared surreptitiously. It was empty and silent. In the middle of the room Jane found his body reclined in a luxurious black leather armchair with a remote control attached by a cord to the right armrest. The resounding quiet was disturbed as the room became enveloped with what might have been the rhythmic buzzing of cutting-edge electronic music, or an issue with the wiring. After a few minutes of beta waves crashing into his senses, Jane lay back and relaxed into the remarkably well-padded chair. For some, the situation as described might be cause for alarm, even panic, but Jane displayed what one might interpret as the resilience and adaptability of youth, remaining entirely unperturbed. In fact, a general indifference to the world at large combined with a unique ability to accept the unexpected, consent to the curious, and partake in the peculiar were characteristics shared exclusively by inhabitants of the mega-cities, whose delicate young minds had endured chronic sensory overload—a low-level static that tuned out the details of life such as danger and fear—their entire lives. The products of these cities had from an early age

spent their days conversing with the world through the medium of the screen in one form or another; the pixelated gateways flashed random and disparate images of countries, cultures, languages and people, and transported their paralytic passengers on a jarring journey across the human experience. Their reality was both as large as the entire world and as small as a cramped apartment. The room made Jane feel calm and sleepy.

The music stopped and the voice re-entered his thoughts.

“Hello Jane, thank you for choosing to think with the Brain Network. My name is Afariius and I am here to help you plan your journey,” said the voice. “Do you have any questions before we begin?”

The chair jolted Jane into an upright position, knocking the breath out of him. Still unsure of the nature of his predicament, his mind helpfully came to the most likely conclusion based on a frame of reference drawn from entertainment media including true-crime television shows. He took a sharp in-breath and then hesitated.

“Is this, like, one of those child kidnapping incidents? Are you going to chop me up and feed me to rich people as a garnish? Am I going to become, you know, a delicacy?” said Jane. “I’m not sure how good I’d taste. I’ll warn you, you may be making a big mistake here.”

“Sensible questions, please,” replied Afariius.

“Sorry. Where am I, exactly?” said Jane.

“This is the main menu. You will have the chance to select your future life options from our extensive range.”

“Oh. How about approximately?” said Jane.

“This is your world, Jane. It can, and will be, whatever you choose. We at the Brain Network are here to guide your choices and help you to achieve the very best in life.”

“I can choose anything I want?” said Jane.

“We trust you’ll find something you like among our options,” said Afariius. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Uh—”

“Please select your location,” said Afariius.

“Location? I don’t—”

The room darkened suddenly, and after a brief pause Jane was reclining in comfort on the deserted beach of a tropical island. It was serene; the sky was clear and blue, the sand a pure white, and the leaves of green palm trees waved lazily in the breeze behind him. For someone who had never previously left the confines of a claustrophobic mega-city and its crowded, dirty super-beaches, this was a radical departure.

He breathed in the warm air and ran his hands through glistening clear particles, recalling vague memories of a family trip to a manufactured seaside that involved an arduous ritual of early morning packing, terse warnings about being late, long periods of silence interrupted by sporadic arguments, a few tiring hours of following his parents around, and then much the same in reverse.

He strolled along the empty beach and stood in the warm, transparent water. There was a lot about the crass, ugly, super-beaches that felt wrong, but...something here just wasn’t right; something bigger than the overweight men who had taken up nude bathing as a post-retirement pastime. Perhaps he had died and was having a vivid post-mortem hallucination? Perhaps this was the afterlife?

“I like it,” said Jane as he listened to the waves massage the shore.

“Welcome to Alternate Reality-24. In AR-24 you will live in uninterrupted peace and tranquillity. The island provides a pleasing aspect, abundant resources, and an escape from the hustle and bustle of city life. The island is perfect for a life of quiet meditation; you will be entirely alone with your own thoughts. We trust you will enjoy the destination.”

“Entirely alone?”

Jane had never had to provide for himself before and hadn’t planned on starting now. He considered the demands of existing alone in such a place; here was a life that required resilience, courage, self-sufficiency, and responsibility. He’d been told on occasion by apparently well-intentioned elders that what

a young man like him really needed was a good dose of responsibility. They'd also told him that taking on the challenge of leadership would build character, and that if it were up to them he'd be sent off somewhere uninviting and remote to get a good kick up the—they'd stopped at that point and left the rest to his imagination, but he'd grasped the general point. Regardless of the merits of such opinions, Jane couldn't help but understand them as barely concealed slights against his character—however lacking it might be—and had dismissed them out of hand.

He hesitated.

Making important life decisions with actual consequences was confronting for a young man who had only ever had to decide whether to change the channel. He recalled a recent Driftwood film that told the story of a man shipwrecked and stranded on a remote island who had survived for many years until being miraculously rescued by a military patrol vessel that had veered off course. The film depicted a triumph of the human will under conditions of extreme adversity, all purportedly based on a true story. However, it turned out that the writers had taken considerable creative license; in reality, the man had been found in a state of near-insanity after years of attacks from native dogs that had cost him a leg and his right eye and was immediately committed to years of mental health rehabilitation upon arrival at the nearest port. Jane was not confident he would fare much better.

"I'm not sure this is—"

"In AR-24 you will make all your own decisions, free from any outside influence. You must draw your own conclusions and develop an intimate understanding of the world around you to survive. You will prosper or decline by the strength of your resolve and the labour of your own two hands. You will be both master and slave," said Afariius.

Jane looked down at his soft, delicate hands and reflected carefully upon the proposition.

"Can I see something else, please?"

"Swipe to change your location."

Jane returned to his armchair and swiped through locations that took him from small villages to high-rise buildings. A thought occurred to him.

“What if I, um, took bits from different locations and combined them? I could, sort of, have the best of all worlds.”

“The locations are fully self-contained, Jane. There are many interdependent parts that involve great complexity, created by some of the brightest minds employed by the Brain Network. To replace any major part would create enormous instability. This is not recommended.”

“But what if we just try it for a while and if it doesn’t work I’ll create another one. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Afariius sighed.

It had not been an easy negotiation, but in the end Jane felt he had created a world unlike any other\*. Jane admired the completed work from his armchair. The resulting Alternate Reality-59 was an amusement park of worlds, where everything could be tried, enjoyed, and then discarded for the next attraction that was conveniently placed within a short commute.

“Now what?” said Jane.

“Please select your form.”

The room re-appeared and Jane scrolled through options that included human, animal, apparition, element, and other. An amorphous puddle dripped limply in front of him. He sat back and folded his arms in a thoughtful posture.

“What if I could, kind of, combine—”

“That is not possible,” said Afariius abruptly.

“Oh, all right then. Human.”

“Please select your team.”

A middle-aged woman, dressed in a black suit and white tie, stood in front of him. He swiped left, causing another similarly-dressed middle-aged woman to rotate into view, then another.

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\*In fact, just like the others but all mixed together like a pre-schooler’s jumbled collage of old magazine clippings.

The features of each different woman were almost indistinguishable; the only difference seemingly the colour of their ties.

“They all look the same. What’s the point?” said Jane.

“All human forms must join a team. It is very important for citizens to take a side so you will know who They are.”

“Who are They?”

“Precisely.”

“How do I find out which team is for me?”

“Listen to each captain carefully and choose the one that makes you feel special.”

“Someone once told me I’m very handsome and I knew it was a lie, but I still enjoyed the attention. Is it kind of like that?”

“Yes, this is very similar.”

Jane rose from his chair and approached the woman wearing a gold tie.

“Who are They?”

“They are mean, nasty, and unattractive. They will tell you lies and make you do things you don’t like,” said the gold tie.

“They don’t sound very nice,” concurred Jane.

He selected the brown tie.

“Who are They?”

“They are mean, nasty, and unattractive. They will tell you lies and make you do things you don’t like.”

Jane’s looked at the brown tie doubtfully.

“What do They look like?”

“Oh, They are hideous, disgusting creatures with beady eyes, uh, crooked teeth, and...poor personal hygiene,” said the brown tie.

Jane agreed this sounded unappealing. He tried the red tie.

“Why should I join *your* team?”

The red tie’s eyes flashed with righteous anger and an index finger was waved admonishingly in Jane’s direction like an orchestral conductor during a particularly dramatic section.

“The unhappy will be joyous and the cheerful depressed, the poor will be wealthy and the rich dispossessed! The weak will be

strong and the strong made weak, the bad will be good and the good will be meek—”

“Okay, okay, I get it. What else?”

“If you join us, we will change *everything*.”

“Everything? Why?”

“Everything must change. It is the only way to make things better,” said red tie.

“But I like *some* things. There was this place back home where you could eat as much as you liked for ten dollars; pizza and ice-cream and everything. That was great. Would that stay the same?”

“No. It must be better.”

“I don’t know...I never heard of better value than old Shifty’s Pizza. They were practically giving it away.”

“It must be different.”

“Why?”

“Because we know what is best.”

Jane had often heard his mother make similar statements, the usual result of which was being forced to do something that at first seemed like a bad idea and which inevitably turned out worse than expected. He remembered his first day of school at a time when money was hard to come by. His mother had made him wear his elder sister’s bright yellow cardigan with an embroidered brown teddy bear on the front—widely considered unfashionable even by her own peers and two sizes too big for him. It had not made a strong impression on the other children and Jane felt it had damaged his credibility among them for some time.

“But the yellow team are going to change everything too; *and* their team will give me *anything I like* if I join them,” said Jane, fast learning the fundamentals of political negotiation.

The red tie, panicked by the use of this apparent trump card, decided to offer the entire deck.

“Oh no, you mustn’t trust them. We can give you everything you like, *plus* more.”

“*More* than everything?”

“Oh, yes. And, if you join us, we’ll tell everyone that the yellow team are cruel to small, fluffy animals and steal from old ladies. We’ll tell everyone that the yellow team discriminates against us just because we wear red.”

“Are they really cruel to small, fluffy animals? That’s terrible.”

“Of course...I bet they do it all the time, you know what *they’re* like. Anyway, we have plenty of statistics that prove it’s almost certainly probable.”

The red tie winked at Jane in a way that made him feel uncomfortable. Frustrated, he swiped the woman away and slumped back into the armchair.

“This doesn’t seem right.”

“I do not understand. It is not correct?” said Afarius.

“It seems like...if I choose a team, won’t I become They to Them? Aren’t They really just *us*? We’ll all be stuck playing against each other.”

“This is a possibility.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if we stopped playing games?”

“No.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“It was discovered that if citizens are able to bludgeon each other with words then they are less likely to beat each other with fists; it releases the destructive impulse from their system. Also, if they are focused on scoring points against each other, they rarely notice when the referees shift the goal posts or even change the rules. Before they realise it, they’re playing snooker on an ice rink and all the cues are missing.”

Jane knew very little about sports or physical activity in general apart from how to avoid them, and so agreed this must be for the best.

He tried the orange team.

“Well?”

“Jane, you are *far* too intelligent to join one of the *other* teams. You’re too good for them and they know it. This is why they



promise you what they can't deliver: they're desperate. With the orange team you will become superior to your enemies—"

"Enemies? Isn't that a bit—"

"And you'll *always* be right, even when you're not. You don't have to listen to anyone else's opinion, because *you* know best. In fact, it's always best to ignore anyone who tells you something you don't want to hear, and even better to stop them from saying it. Although the orange team is run by a group of strangers to whom you have no connection and will likely never meet, you will trust us like you would your best friend and defend us like you would your own mother. You will become emotionally invested in the team, deriving your personal identity from the values of others. Once a member of the team, you will stubbornly defend any position we adopt regardless of its content or your knowledge of it, which will be superficial at best, while taking any criticism of the team as a personal insult. Most importantly, we have more members than the other teams and have won the championship three seasons in a row. As we say in the orange team, *'get on the winning side or stop playing'*."

"If it means you'll all go away, then that's good enough for me," said Jane flatly.

The orange tie grinned.

"What's next?" said Jane.

"Please select your occupation," said Afariius.

A scrolling menu appeared before Jane listing possible occupations. A short video depicting their respective merits played automatically: 'Gardener' planted a small potted tree in a finely kept European garden; 'Musician' sang a popular ballad to an adoring stadium crowd; 'Librarian' selected a book from a trolley and placed it on a shelf; 'Artist' painted from a nude model in a small studio while wearing a thick woollen scarf and bright yellow trousers; 'Athlete' ran, jumped, cycled, and threw. Jane scrolled through the extensive list; it contained just about every conceivable vocation one could hope to consider, were one considering.

“Hmm,” said Jane, pausing thoughtfully, “how about a truck driver? Good honest work, life on the road...”

“Unfortunately I don’t see a match with your capabilities.”

Jane continued to scroll through the list, the detail of which delved deep into the minutiae of productive pursuits. For someone who had never worked a day in his life, the smorgasbord of labour opportunities seemed a choice between amusing pastimes.

“Ornithologist? Is that a real job?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t see a match. Your profile indicates you would like a challenging role where you can make a difference to ordinary people.”

“Really? Like who? I’ve met ordinary people before. *Really* ordinary—I mean, like, nothing special. I don’t know if I’d want to go around helping *them*.”

Jane continued scrolling.

“Maybe I could become a doctor? I’d heal the sick and injure illness. Or a lawyer—I’d free the guilty, convict the innocent, and—”

“I do not think that’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“Yeah, me neither. Maybe an engineer—”

“I’m sorry Jane, those occupations are just not compatible with your profile,” said Afariius.

Jane continued to scroll.

“Glass blower; beekeeper; ladder climber; dungeon master; tattooist...astronaut?” said Jane. He began to tire of the exercise. “Bean-counter?”

“That occupation is not on the list.”

“All right then, what *should* I do? What exactly *does* match my capabilities?”

“Have you considered the Guardians? Becoming a Guardian will provide you with a strong purpose in life, instil discipline and focus, and allow you to help your fellow citizen. You’ll be challenged each day to become the best you can be.”

“Hmm. Do I have any other matches?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Nothing else I can do at all? I’ve even got experience climbing ladders.”

“No. I’m sorry, Jane. The capabilities listed here are quite limited.”

“Right. Well, I guess I’ll become a Guardian then.”

“Excellent choice. Please select your brain.”

“I already have one of those,” said Jane. The rare instance of wit languished unappreciated.

“What remains of your former consciousness will fade over time. The re-education process will re-populate your existing, defective brain with new thoughts and ideas and replace the ambiguity of memory with certainty of perception. Full immersion and transcendence will require long, arduous, and, most of all, *rigorous* study.”

Jane had never much enjoyed studying. Even the idea of it was enough to bring on a prolonged bout of procrastination. On the rare occasions he had attempted it he’d found the experience onerous, repetitive, and uninteresting. Along with many of his peers, he possessed a creative and free spirit; one he felt should not be constrained by the meanness of common or practical knowledge but should instead be focused on the progression of humanity through social causes. It hadn’t always been this way. Jane had gone from inquisitive child to curious student and, finally, to irritating pupil with an intense desire, not to mention difficulty, to understand. In response to repeated questioning a teacher had once attempted to explain the concept of understanding through an analogy, one which Jane still vividly recalled: our experience of the world is much like a shapeless baker’s dough cut into forms through which we process and condense complex phenomena into recognisable concepts that are much like novelty-shaped baked goods. The purpose of education, said the teacher, was to knead young minds into doughy, pliable mush that could be cut into useful forms and then slowly baked until the school had an army of gingerbread men that would one day enact its will. Jane did not understand any of this, but to the relief of his teacher stopped asking questions from that

day on.

It is sometimes said that one must know the rules before one can break them; that one must practice discipline before one may become undisciplined. The education system under which Jane had flourished had loosely adopted these philosophies by requiring strict obedience to basic principles that encouraged the breaking of rules, and after a short time at the school he had begun to feel as though the only thing of which he was certain was that he didn't know anything at all. However, what he lacked in academic ability he soon made up for in obedience: his obliviousness to the syllabus and a wistfully listless drift into ignorance were taken as a stand against orthodoxy and earned him the praise of his teachers and several academic awards.

In any case, the words 'long', 'arduous', or 'rigorous' sounded distinctly unappealing and he decided to quit while he was ahead.

"I don't like the sound of that if I'm completely honest with you. I'd prefer to learn on the job. Life's the best classroom, right?"

"The world is full of hidden dangers you never even knew existed; you must have the knowledge to be prepared. The world is a harsh, cruel, and unjust place," said Afariius.

"I knew a guy who used to talk like that. "There's danger everywhere, Jane". It really was everywhere—in the bushes, behind the curtains, around the corner, under the bed. I heard him talk to danger all the time when he thought he was alone. I think I'll take my chances."

"In that case, I suggest you attend the university: an institution where the less academically-able may pursue studies in highly recognised though vaguely understood degrees that focus on creating positive emotion through group activities that nurture your spirit by supplying you with praise, comfort, and encouragement. At the university, you will attain the minimal scholastic standard and receive maximal educational credentials from a degree which will test the limits of your credulity, provide you with a qualification of no practical value, and grant you an

open door to the elite ranks of Guardian management.”

Jane shrugged.

“Okay.”

“Most important of all, you must watch the daily BrainWave—the source for all news and current affairs in AR-59 and the foundation of re-education,” said Afariius.

“Take very long, does it?”

“Around thirty minutes.”

“All right then.”

The room vanished and Jane was again stranded inside a vast black emptiness.

“World construction is complete. We wish you all the best and hope you have a pleasant journey. Thank you once again for thinking with the Brain Network.”

“Hold on, what journey? Can someone please tell me what’s going on now?”

There was absolute silence in response, like a crowded late-night train carriage in the presence of a loud and potentially violent drunk.

“Hello?” said Jane hopefully. He waited for the melodramatic echo that would reinforce his feeling of complete solitude, but there was nothing.

A circle of blue light the size of a manhole appeared at his feet. He knelt and examined the shimmering opaque surface, and then the void surrounding him. A large arrow of pulsating red light pointed to the hole impatiently. Jane was now confronted by the choice between eternal nothingness and a likely fatal fall into what he could only assume was an endless abyss. Or, as his career advisor had once put it, accountancy versus insurance sales.

He felt a familiar sense of frustration and helplessness as an illusion of control belied a pre-determined existence. But Jane was not one to dwell on complex existential quandaries, and after reasoning that the path well-worn probably leads to somewhere better than where he was, he rose to survey the expansive nothingness, shrugged, and stepped forward.

*The heavy door opened. Two boys were guided to the beds where they would recover from their procedure. Jane did not have a chance to greet his new roommates, who, after moving in discreetly, had mostly kept to themselves.*

## II Re-education

“Press play to begin.”

From the ninety-fourth floor of Guardian University the vast city-scape of AR-59 appeared a patch-work quilt of post-historical planning—a sprawling mess of construction that had long ago been launched like a crusade to cover a once fertile land. Nature had finally been subdued beneath the concrete carpet of development; not a square inch had been spared in the mission to turn reality into a vision and shape the world into something resembling the grand ideals of the Administration. Many thousands of young minds gazed fixedly upon the vision, forced to appreciate the ideological work of art indefinitely. A transformation of thought into a post-modern masterpiece—a product of the philosophy of mind with the visual aesthetic of an age of agitation—the world bloomed unceasingly in the unwitting brains of its audience, the citizens, who believed the creation to be the model for human existence. AR-59 was a meticulous simulation of an ideal world, an environment in which each player traversed the levels of his particular game. It was a utopian exemplar of ultimate individualism where each man was an island; each his own continent in thought separated by inches in space but miles in mind from fellow citizens who served as background noise in his quest for conformity.

*Guardians* was a game described by its developers, who possessed little talent for marketing, as an ‘action-adventure training simulation in which players will be required to understand and respond to the challenges of a modern society within a con-

trolled open-world environment'. Recruits would learn to become courageous defenders of the realm through demanding and rigorous exercises. The aim for the player was to struggle against the intolerable injustice that filled the world like a bad smell in a poorly ventilated area; to hold their noses as they navigated a series of tests and trials before graduating as fully-qualified Guardians and helping the citizens breathe freely. Jane's customised *Guardians* world was everything one could reasonably expect from the mind of an ordinary young man whose sole guidance in life had been to follow his dreams\*. The world was colourful and energetic, playful and loud, and brimming with constant stimulation and perpetual movement. It was also inconsistent and poorly planned, chaotic but rigid, exhausting but exciting, and held together at the seams by apathy and unthinking compliance. The overall effect was like a drug; a cheap party drug that would either eventually wear off, leaving you confused and wondering where you left your pants, or cause permanent brain damage and trap you in a place you never wanted to leave. Stark contrast existed between residential zones known as sections, and bright murals deteriorated into scrawled graffiti within minutes. It was a matter of chance whether a new citizen would delight in the surrounds of an affluent address and spend his days in recreation, or fester with the din of iniquity in his ears as his being was slowly corroded by failure. Some speculated that one's destiny was merely a matter of biological competition, while others held that future success was limited only by one's dedication, or perhaps desperation. A few supposed that life was simply a jackpot where only the few can win and the many must lose.

Jane was awed by the scale of the city, though the most impressive sight of all remained unseen: the Administration District of Section One. Those with a lesser appreciation of post-historical architecture were prone to, unfairly and maliciously,

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\*Though this might be interpreted to mean maximising one's potential, he would later learn that sometimes it's best to take such advice literally.

assert a resemblance between the complex of buildings and a giant spaceship—the type to sail majestically through a black void of space occupying both peripherals of an observing eye—after crash-landing head-first into the earth and coming to rest several hundred metres below the surface. Also home to Guardian University, the Administration complex dominated the landscape and bullied rival erections with its imposing presence. Section One was the epicentre of AR-59; a bustling centre of citizenry where workers came to push and pull the levers of a machine that steered a marvel of social engineering.

The society of *Guardians* was a strict hierarchy. Three classes of citizen existed: administrator, Guardian, and ordinary citizen. Each class was known for its special qualities: the wise and learned administrator ruled, the brave and honourable Guardian maintained order, and the industrious and obedient ordinary citizen did as he was told. The official objective of the Guardians was to uphold law and order and fight for Justice. A problem had arisen, however, for while Justice certainly sounded a noble and worthwhile pursuit (after all, who could claim he did not favour a more just society?), the concept had proven to be a tricky one to pin down and remained undefined. After years of heated debate and speculation, the administrators had decided that, given the Guardians seemed motivated to work tirelessly for something at most vaguely understood and at best imprecisely articulated, it served their purposes to allow Justice to remain a nebulous ideal that everyone seemed to agree was something they needed more of. This had complicated the task for the eager Guardians, who had no way of locating injustice without its opposite number, so they were instead provided with the Joes as a proxy to keep them occupied.

Manual labour and essential services were mostly performed by androids. Once a primitive labour-saving device restricted to routine maintenance, the android had been transformed by successive breakthroughs in artificial intelligence before the course of society was changed forever after inventor Rita Hurft presented the Administration with the world's first functioning ar-



tificial brain. It was a giant leap forward for Progress: humans had created life. Rapid technological advances increased the speed and processing power of the brain until it exceeded even that of its creators. The brain was placed inside the first modern android body in November 2078, and within five years annual upgrades in shell quality had made the differences between human and robot almost imperceptible; the taller, smarter, and more attractive robots had become, in the words of Dr Hurft “more human than the humans”. The androids were hailed by the Administration as the “next step in the evolution of peoplekind” and celebrated publicly as a victory of technology over biology, upon which they had officially declared war some thirty years earlier. Each new release was highly anticipated by wealthy citizens who collected them as status-symbols, and within a few years a feudal army of robots marched largely undetected among the unwary citizens.

The rapid deployment of the android into society had been less popular with many workers who had found themselves unable to compete with its efficiency and low cost. They were soon replaced in almost all low-skilled occupations, prompting the launch of the *Scheme for Economic Equality 2041*, under which all were entitled to an equal allocation of bitnotes and unlimited credit. ‘Positive Messaging’ and ‘Integration Acceptance Communications’—intermittent and subliminal communiqués sent directly to each mind and used to wear down resistance to their new compatriots like low-gauge sandpaper on a splintered board—were also employed. The measures served to pacify the citizens who were generally content; or at least tended not to complain very often, and this was considered much the same thing. There was plenty of everything in AR-59; so much so that citizens spent most of their time amassing as much as they could afford, and even more that they couldn’t. Citizens no longer required sleep, no longer felt hunger or pain, and were free from all consequences so long as they remained obedient. Most continued to conform to biological norms purely out of habit.

Jane watched as shifting sands of bodies below flowed freely

through the narrow arteries of a bloated city that delivered life to the outer sections. Miles of multi-lane freeways wove their way among rising glass-panelled rectangles, spiralling cylinders, and other spectacular geometric anomalies jostling for prime real estate. He stumbled back from the only window in a corporate-style meeting room with a slight case of vertigo. Several rows of steel-framed plastic desks and uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs faced a wooden desk, whiteboard, and an A-Frame holding sheets of paper and coloured markers. The whiteboard read:

*“Guardian Induction”*

Cold, stale air from a ceiling vent wafted into Jane’s face. He took a seat and began to fidget awkwardly, a habit he had learned from his school days, of which he could now remember little else.

*Pop!*

A few desks to his right, a boy around the same age as Jane materialised. He opened his eyes and looked bewilderedly around the room, then at Jane. He had a round, chubby face topped with short, dark hair parted neatly to one side.

“What is this? Where am I?” said the portly boy anxiously.

Jane tried to offer some comfort.

“Well, at first I thought maybe I’d died and gone to heaven, but then I thought to myself ‘this place doesn’t look much like heaven, it looks like an office building’. Then you turn up and you don’t look dead either and I figure if I *was* dead I probably wouldn’t be wondering whether I *am* dead, I’d be enjoying the great beyond as some kind of unearthly, formless being. Or not, as the case may be,” said Jane in an unusually lucid and reflective chain of thought.

“Like a ghost,” said the boy.

“That’s right. Then I read the whiteboard,” said Jane, pointing to the front of the room.

“Oh,” said the boy, who re-commenced regular breathing. “But I don’t understand. One minute I was...well, I was somewhere else, and the next minute I’m...then I’m here...it doesn’t make any sense!”

"It's almost like someone's gone to a lot of effort to put us in a situation that we'll only escape after withstanding a series of entertaining events that lead to some kind of conflict and an ultimately satisfying conclusion. I don't know what to make of it to be honest," agreed Jane.

"You don't seem very worried," said the boy, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

He was right. Jane *did* feel unusually composed. In times of stress he *usually* felt like a rubber band being pulled; ready to snap at the mildest interruption to a brooding angst with curt, one-syllable responses.

"I'm sure someone will explain things sooner or later. That's what usually happens, right? What's your name, anyway?"

"Lucy," said Lucy.

"I'm Jane. You don't happen to remember anything before all this weird stuff started happening do you?"

"No, that's the thing; I've been trying to remember but it's all just...blank. Why is it so cold in here?"

*Pop!*

The seat to the immediate left of Lucy was filled with a tall young man wearing glasses. He had a long face and a look of dull incomprehension, but this was later confirmed to be his normal expression. He scanned the room slowly and suspiciously, paying particular attention to Jane and Lucy. He remained silent for a few moments, seemingly reluctant to question the strangeness of the situation in case everything was in fact completely normal and he had not been paying attention again. He examined his desk closely, watching the two other boys out of the corner of his eyes.

"You too, eh?" said Jane.

"Sorry?" said the awkward, sensibly-dressed young man.

"Infinite nothingness followed by some kind of intrusive marketing survey and air-conditioning turning your fingers to icicles?"

"Oh. Yeah."

"I'm Jane, this is Lucy."

The boy turned to Lucy, who waved nervously.

"I'm Paula," said Paula. "I don't suppose that everything is completely normal at all?"

"No, I'm pretty sure we took a wrong turn past normal a while ago," said Jane.

*Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!*

The sound continued at regular intervals until the desks were filled.

Jane surveyed the faces of the new arrivals. The room looked like a remedial class for those who had failed genetics, and in a rare moment he felt comparatively normal. A foreboding vision of a Darwinian cull entered his mind and he decided to focus on the view out of the window instead.

The door flew open and a middle-aged woman in a grey skirt and white blouse entered breathlessly and placed a small notebook on the table at the front of the room.

"Hello, everyone! How are we today?"

The woman had long blonde hair, was attractive for her age, and spoke with a loud, rasping voice.

There was silence.

"Welcome to AR-59, my name is Denise and this is your Guardian induction. I'm super-excited to be with you today! I bet you're all just bursting to get out there and begin!"

More silence.

"Well, before you do, there are some important guidelines we need to discuss and then you'll be handed over to your group trainers. Does anyone know anything about the Guardians?"

As she spoke, Denise traversed the rows of desks and placed a large stack of stapled paper on each of them. A thousand double sided pages filled with small font were held together with one gigantic staple that looked like a croquet hoop. A copy landed with a thump on Jane's desk. It was the *Guardian Book of Order and Justice*\*. The book contained the complete set of Guardian proto-

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\*Unofficially known as 'The Manual' and occasionally referred to by loutish pupils as the 'BOOJ'.

cols and regulations and was said to be the literal translation of the King's word. Overworked scholars who toiled tirelessly to stitch together its inconsistencies and contradictions had often quipped that the King must have had a lot on his mind.\*

"No? Well, luckily for you, we've arranged a very special guest speaker to explain everything."

On cue, the door opened and a tall, thin man dressed in a long black robe entered. A heavy gold chain hung from his neck, at the end of which was a large round mirror housed in a gold case, looking as though it had been borrowed from the nearest lighthouse. It was the Light of Truth, carried by only the most senior Beacons. He walked with his hands folded behind his back and ambled uneasily to the centre of the room, hunched under the weight of the object. He appeared utterly humourless and squinted as though examining an eye chart attached to the opposite wall. His face was like an unfinished modern art sculpture; all lines and angles, as though a young artist had made an initial carving from a block of granite, given it the full brunt of a misplaced chisel, and then abandoned the work.

Denise began to read from the notebook.

"Gleiyd Marcus is a former administrator of thirty-five years who became a Beacon of the Light, preaching to the masses all over the world. Please welcome Beacon Marcus!"

There were a few obedient claps from the perplexed recruits.

"Thank you Denise and welcome to you all. Who are the Guardians? The Guardians are the King's representatives, the protectors of order and virtue in this world. They are the fabric of society, the mortar for the bricks that are our citizens who form the great cathedral of our civilisation. The Guardians are the elite; the best of the best. You are a light to those who live in the darkness; many cannot, or will not, see the light so we must shine our torch in their eyes. All Guardians are trained in the

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\*Of course, such wit was only expressed very quietly and in the early hours of the morning inside of a suitably dark and empty library after a long session of philosophical and legislative patchwork.

ways of the Light and bear the heavy burden of teaching those in need.”

Jane glanced at the man’s posture and considered the prospect of a burden that might cause irreversible spinal damage.

The Beacon began to stroll haughtily through the rows of desks as the Light of Truth oscillated slowly, forcing the bewildered faces to shift in their seats to dodge the giant pendulum. Suddenly, he stopped in front of Paula at whom he focused his unnerving squint. He clutched the Light of Truth and aimed it squarely at Paula’s long, terrified face and the object suddenly shone with a stunning bright light that released the heat energy of a small furnace.

“Do you see it? Do you see it now? The truth?” demanded the Beacon.

Paula pawed helplessly at the light, his eyes shut tightly. The Beacon stood back and the light dimmed. Paula opened his eyes and blinked gingerly as a mild panic rippled through the rest of the room.

“No, of course you don’t see. Not yet. But you have witnessed its power. All over this world there are those that are still blind and must be shown the path of the righteous. These people represent the past; a time when the minds of the masses were controlled by superstition, ignorance, and fear, and had their wills repressed by fantastic stories. *We* represent the future, Progress, and absolute truth; the truth of the almighty Light Bearer and King of the Guardians! Guardians are the foot soldiers of the King, enforcers and disseminators of the truth as it was spoken... you will be tested and you will be judged...”

A fearless soul in the far corner of the room raised a hand.

“Who is the King? Can we meet him?” said the young man, who clearly lacked all situational awareness or knowledge of the golden rule in a hostile classroom situation: *keep your head down*.

The Beacon stopped mid-sermon and rotated slowly on his axis until he found the source of the impudent interruption.

“You wish to meet your King?” said the Beacon.

“Uh...yes...” said the boy.

The other boys were rigid in their seats as the Beacon fixed his stare on the target and approached in silence, appearing to float across the ground.

“Actually, no, not really...” said the boy, his voice trailing off as latent survival instinct kicked in.

“You are the King,” said the Beacon.

*Unexpected response; be cautious, remain silent.*

“We are *all* King. For what being exists that is greater than man?” said the Beacon.

*Assume question is rhetorical. Ignore at all costs. Pretend very interested in spot on floor.*

“I do not mean this literally, of course. There is a very real King who is most certainly not you and who you will only ever meet in your best dreams,” said the Beacon.

The boy, feeling as though he’d escaped a brush with death, sank back into his chair.

Jane focused his sight on a point on the wall in front of him and attempted to avoid direct eye with the Beacon as he gesticulated his way past the desks. The Beacon continued his speech in a similar fashion and quickly exhausted Jane’s limited attention span. Shortly after, he was jolted to attention by the sound of half-hearted applause.

“Well said, Beacon. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to speak to our new recruits,” said Denise.

The Beacon nodded magnanimously in response, took one last disapproving look at the assemblage of blank faces, shook his head, and left the room muttering quietly.

“You’re probably all wondering ‘What’s next?’” said Denise. She read from the notebook.

“Well, Guardian training is a challenging and unique program designed to help you achieve your full potential. Our focus on equality and diversity in recruiting means we select only the very best candidates—”

Denise could not help but take a second look at her audience. The frightened and uncomprehending boys shuffled nervously before her, struggling internally with the intuitive realisation that not only had they *not* been selected for any positive qualities they possessed, but that the opposite was true. All of them had experienced a friend or relative coming of age and suddenly disappearing; seldom were the best and brightest removed from their homes in the early hours of the morning. Instead it tended to be the slow, the weak, or the trouble-makers; those whose natural predilection for independence or disobedience had earned them a place in various secret databases where labels such as ‘unhelpful’ and ‘problematic’ were attached freely and carelessly. Calling upon her extensive experience in People Capital where she excelled in Advanced Conflict Avoidance, along with a talent for being insincere, Denise rallied.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll all do your best and that’s really what matters, isn’t it? Our experienced and dedicated trainers are here to take you from the A right through to the Z of Guardianship, so please pay close attention. Field assessments will be held in test environments and will continue until you have passed each of them in an acceptable manner. Your class timetables have been provided and remember: Guardian protocols must be practised at all times, so please make sure you have memorised *all of them.*”

A synchronised look of despair came across the recruits’ faces as they contemplated the girth of the Manual.

Denise smiled, placed her notebook on the wooden table, and then leaned back against it. Her head twitched almost imperceptibly and then her face sagged and became expressionless as though she’d been switched off, though her jaw continued to move up and down like a landed fish for several moments. Beside her the door opened and two young men in black uniforms entered the room pushing trolleys that carried dozens of white plastic cups filled with blue liquid. One was placed in front of each recruit. Jane suddenly felt very thirsty. The water tasted like a numbing mixture of comfort, satisfaction, and pleasure.



Worries and doubts receded; the world suddenly seemed to make perfect sense. Everything was going to be *just fine*. He looked around and saw relief on the faces of the others; even Lucy was smiling.

“Thank you everyone, and best of luck!” said Denise, coming to life briefly before returning to standby.

The recruits rose under a spell of endorphins and one by one passed through a rippling blue curtain that filled the doorway. They were guided by the men in black into a nearby elevator and were now themselves dressed in blue Guardian uniforms. Each felt their stomach lurch as the elevator dropped like a stone to the ground level of Guardian University—the city’s highly-influential, and only, educational institution.

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Jane detached his fingers from the railing and waded forward into a dense sea of student bodies. Incipient Guardians raced in all directions, many on brightly-coloured electronic scooters and entirely absorbed in a mental world of content from the Jungle store; others on expensive and stylish footwear playing the latest games on retro BrainPhones hugged close their bodies, their thumbs twiddling madly. Teams of android cleaners trailed the preoccupied pupils, darting in to collect readily-discarded waste that fell from the affluent intellectuals like specks of recyclable dust.

Jane’s eyes were drawn upward and followed a corkscrewing balconied pathway that wrapped the interior of the building like a giant snake up to a great glass dome; its resplendently ostentatious pink ornament. It appeared as though a regular building had been drilled right through the middle. The grooves had become a famous design feature of a structure that, from the outside, resembled a giant ice-cream cone. He was immediately struck by the carnival-like atmosphere in the extensive foyer: under a balloon-filled rainbow arch limber gymnasts twirled ribbons in tight spandex next to acrobats who somer-

saulted from high columns. Tightrope walkers stepped carefully across a perilous chasm above costumed actors who danced and waved frantically at passers-by.

*This is university? It's...different than I expected,* thought Jane.

His silent musings were interrupted when the sudden and unexpected impact of a large body belonging to a young man of the particularly tall and muscular variety caused him to crumple like a front bumper in a demolition derby.

“Hey, watch it rookie!” said the young man.

Jane recoiled as he looked up into a hulking frame that stretched its tight-fitting Guardian uniform like a sock full of golf balls. The uniform was designed to startle and intimidate; it was made entirely of thick blue rubber moulded in the anatomically-enhanced shape of a classical Adonis, though even this didn't help Jane, more of an indoors person, whose bespectacled face protruded from his like a human turtle. A snickering cohort followed their leader closely as he left through the front entrance and climbed aboard a parked Guardian hovercar that took off rapidly and disappeared into the sky amid a flurry of offensive hand gestures aimed at those below.

“Don't worry about them, the bounty hunters are trained to be obnoxious,” said a voice behind Jane. A tall, handsome young man smiled and extended his hand.

“I'm Sandy. New here?”

Jane nodded, took the hand, and scrambled to his feet to minimise the embarrassment of his now publicly-confirmed status of lowly rookie. He adjusted his oversized blue helmet that had a tendency to slide from his head despite a thick rubber strap fastened so tightly as to almost clasp his jaw closed, and then stumbled forward in a fashionable pair of fitted blue jackboots. He could not help but notice Sandy's perfectly formed features and flawlessly smooth skin.

“Yes. I'm Jane.”

“Is this the university? I think we're in the wrong place,” asked Lucy.

Sandy smiled.

“Impressive, isn’t it?”

“I mean, it seems quite...relaxed. And someone just swallowed a sword,” said Lucy, pointing to a street performer struggling to suppress his gag reflex.

“Of course! GU is an inclusive multi-purpose hub of innovation and ideas that thrives on contributions from *all* areas of our diverse community. Every day the students of GU explore new perspectives on Progress and acute angles on equality in a cooperative two-way teaching experience that recognises we *all* have something to learn, while providing a voice to those to have nothing much to say. Our lecturers share their lived experiences in multiple languages and different time zones to make sure no one is excluded, and teach the virtues of tolerance until we can take no more. Learning is supposed to be *fun*; after all, what else is a university for?”

Jane did not know what a university was for, but he was relieved to find that it involved magicians and trampolines.

“What’s a bounty hunter?” asked Paula.

A look of distaste flashed across Sandy’s face.

“They’re our enforcers. They take special cases and investigate Guardians accused of corruption or helping the Joes. Think of them as internal auditors who like to kill people. You’ll want to stay away from them, they’re bad news.”

“Who are the Joes?” said Jane.

“You don’t know about the Joes? You really are rookies, huh? Don’t worry, you’ll learn all about *them* soon enough.”

The students’ attention was suddenly diverted to a timetable that flashed in front of their faces. Hundreds of heads jerked upward in unison as they read the map location of their next class from their BPS. They scattered like a flock of birds from the bright pink carpet of the foyer, revealing the proud maxim of the Guardians emblazoned in giant white letters: *Exitus acta probat*.

“Justice be with you!” said Sandy over his shoulder as he sped away on a motorized scooter.

The three recruits set out toward their respective destinations.

“What are you studying, Jane?” asked Lucy.

Jane scrolled to the course description.

“Bachelor of Excellence: Students will achieve an understanding of exceptionalism and gain a desire for aspiration driven by an abhorrence of the ordinary to graduate with an ambition to surpass the mean.”

“I’ve got PeopleSkills. It says that communication is very important when interacting with a diverse range of citizens. What about you, Paula?”

“A student of Rules will possess little imagination or creativity and graduate with a disinclination toward ethical behaviour, a talent for verbose circumlocution and influencing critical legal outcomes, a disdain for veracity, and an innate capacity for amoral self-interest bordering on the political. Possible career paths include beacon, judge, and senior administrator.”

Jane, whose sense of direction was as well-developed as his physique, arrived at his lecture theatre twenty minutes late and opened the door warily.

“Come in, Jane. We’ve been expecting you,” said a calm voice. Hundreds of heads turned in his direction.

“Uh, sorry for being—”

“We are all the King’s children, Jane. No one is late and no one is early. We are all on time. You are doing wonderfully. Take a seat.”

Jane found a seat in the back row.

The voice had come from a large television screen placed atop a low podium at the front of the room. The smiling, disembodied head of the televised lecturer was remarkable and disarming at the same time: a person of indeterminate age, sex, and heritage, it was human-like, but with all the sharp edges of definition and difference smoothed away into an amorphous amalgamation of lifeless, diversity-destroying blandness.

“Let’s continue, shall we? Whom do we love?” said the television.

“The King?”

“That’s right, Regina. Well done. And?”

“Citizens?”

“Very *good*, Jacqueline. Who else?”

“The Guardians?”

“Good work, Roberta. Now class, it is important we understand who we do love and who we do *not* love. Those we love deserve compassion and empathy. Those we do *not* love require guidance, discipline, and in some cases the King’s wrathful vengeance. Who do we *not* love?”

“The Joes!” chorused the students.

“Wonderful! Just wonderful! You’re all so special.”

The class cheered and a blaring soundtrack accompanied the students’ voices as they sang:

*“We’re all special, you and me, hate is bad but love is free. The King is good and Joes are bad, discrimination makes us sad.”*

Jane had never realised learning could be so much fun. He sang along to the predictable melody—a formulaic and soulless but nevertheless highly infectious jingle, and began to feel that the world could be an amazing place if you just gave it a chance.

From then on he became absorbed in the study of Excellence, taking classes such as Language where he studied theories on adjective appropriation, vocabulary adjustment, and use of the euphemism. He practised the administrative artifice of Wordsmithing—a skilled craft involving periodic variations in vernacular—and reviewed the Register of Allowable Speech. In Mathematics and Statistics he re-learned Progressive arithmetic, discovering two and two really does equal five, and that the equation for truth variability is a function of Force  $\times$  (Suppression + Omission)/Deception – Morality. In Art he was informed that beauty is privilege and found that expression is often a representation of the mood of a society. In Post-historical Literature he discovered gradualist revisionism—a delicate process of storytelling where the plot, themes, and characters of prehistorical tales of adventure were denounced and replaced with subversive fables of falsehood. In Prehistory he scrutinized Re-attribution Theory, where the perceived genius thought responsible for the technological and societal renaissance upon

which post-historical society rested was exposed as a mere re-tread, a ghostly imitation of newly-discovered ancient prehistoric sub-cultures who had done it all before and with bells on. In Physics he was taught how truth could be bent and stretched through space and time, and in Geography he learned the inevitability of forced demographic diversity. In Biology he learned shame.

It was truly a re-education fit for a citizen.

### III

## Joe Trial

“Press play to begin.”

A field trip to the Guardian Court of Absolute Justice had been organised to give the recruits a taste of the judicial process in action. The boys were ushered into a busy public gallery and sat at a long bench overlooking the courtroom with the expectation of witnessing Justice being served to criminals like a bowl of arsenic.

Jane scanned the faces around him.

“Where’s Sandy?” he asked.

Paula shrugged.

It was not like Sandy to be late for anything. He was the top student and had quickly become something of a leader among the boys; his disarming confidence, ever-present smile, and complete lack of fear charmed all who met him and had even confused the bounty hunters into leaving them alone, at least for now.

Excited whispering stopped suddenly as a door opened and a handcuffed defendant emerged and took a seat beside an allocated Rules advocate in front of the judge. The defendant wore standard prison attire consisting of a sleeveless brown garment that resembled an upside-down hessian sack. The judge, wearing a Robe of Justice and Wig of Highest Virtue, appeared wise

beyond his teenage years as he deliberated over the case file before him. His face darkened as he read.

“Let us begin proceedings.”

“Orders! Orders, please!” shouted a clerk holding a pen and paper.

The judge placed his order and there was a short wait before a creamy soy latte was placed on the bench in front of him.

“Ahem. How does the defendant plead guilty?” said the judge.

“Sorry?” said the confused defendant.

“Does the defendant wish to beg for mercy and be redeemed through a life of hard labour, or will he atone for his crimes against the state by submitting to execution?” clarified the judge.

The advocate calmed his client.

“We ask that your Honour dismiss the case against my client with tolerance.”

“Barbara, your *client* is accused of being a Joe. He was overheard using re-assigned words in their original context, and MindSnap recordings presented to this court indicate evidence of harmful and inappropriate thoughts. This is a serious matter. Need I remind you that fifteen witnesses have come forward to corroborate the accusations?”

“There was a substantial reward being offered for their testimony, your honour,” said the advocate.

“Of course,” said the judge.

“Well...paying citizens to testify might tolerate proceedings, your honour. The witness statements were pre-prepared and interviews indicate eleven of the citizens had to be coached as they'd never even heard of the defendant. In addition, a standard Joe test was not performed as required by procedure. I submit to the court that my client is not a Joe and that all thoughts and feelings were produced in accordance with the law.”

The judge removed his glasses to glare condescendingly at the advocate, a recent Rules graduate who seemed to have grasped the wrong end of a very clearly labelled stick.

“Barbara, I understand you’re new here, but you should be aware of standard practice and precedent—”

“‘Whatever it takes’, your Honour,” said the advocate.

“Precisely. Given the parties are now in agreement, I hereby pronounce the defendant—”

The defendant jumped from his seat.

“This isn’t fair! All I said was ‘have a nice day’. I never heard the word-change, I swear! I listen to the BrainWave every day!”

There was a collective gasp from the gallery after the now-confirmed Joe uttered the “N” word. It was one of many commonly used words and phrases that were sporadically banned or re-purposed by the Wordsmiths, and one of the many administrative tactics used to test and train the obedience of the citizenry. Although a sound idea in principle, the practice had begun to cause practical problems once the disused word had been forgotten. Was the “E” word elephant or enchilada? With an “N” word for every letter of the alphabet, the vocabulary of the citizens had shrunk considerably.

“Stop it, you’re hurting us!” cried the clerk pleadingly.

“Enough!” shouted the judge, banging his gavel. “Take him to the gallows.”

The convicted Joe was taken to a make-shift gallows that had recently been re-built next to the judges’ bench after the sheer number of convictions based on a ninety-eight per-cent conviction rate had overloaded the system and meant that public executions had become a rare treat rather than a regular indulgence.

Jane watched with mixed feelings. Like all recruits he held a deep-seated antipathy toward the Joes and had arrived with an expectation of enjoying the show—by now the boys were able to think multiple conflicting thoughts at a time and could contort all number of irrelevant personal grievances into a case against them. But Jane did not very often practise, and his thoughts were on the verge of a minor scuffle.

*This isn’t how it’s supposed to go, is it? Something’s wrong here.*

The Joe was led to the gallows by a clerk and his head was placed in a noose. With an air of the routine, the judge watched



as the clerk pulled a lever and the trapdoor below the Joe's feet fell away. Then, to the surprise of all, and to the Joe especially, the rope snapped.

There was a loud *thump*, and after a brief moment hurried footsteps were heard echoing from the maintenance passage beneath the wooden gallows. There was a moment of stunned silence before the public gallery around the boys erupted into chaos. Citizens who had paid for the good seats and felt entitled to a proper afternoon's Justice took to their feet, jeering and shaking their fists in disapproval. After a brief period of confusion order was restored. A new defendant was rushed in to replace the fugitive Joe and the wheels of Justice proceeded to roll over a steady succession of citizens.

The class returned to GU.

The scene, along with some overly-salty popcorn, had left a bad taste in Jane's mouth. With some time to himself between classes, he wandered the labyrinthine passageways of the Administration buildings in which, without the aid of BPS, he had found himself several times lost. Outside of the university, which formed only a small part of the overall complex, corridors, walkways, stairwells, and escalators connected disparate parts of the Administration; from residential areas where workers were housed and fed, to scientific laboratories and weapons production factories. After years of constant expansion and refurbishment it was no longer possible to navigate the vast complex of the buildings unassisted, as a recent failed expedition by an adventurous student of cartography, found bearded and exhausted after several weeks of drinking his own urine, had proved.

Deep in thought, Jane couldn't shake the feeling that there was something about the Guardians that was not what it seemed. These thoughts were soon interrupted by Administration messaging—regular disruptions which prevented any attempts at introspection:

*"Everything is fantastic! You're doing great."*

*"AR-59 is a city of immigrants."*

*“Androids are just like you...but better. Accept all androids.”*

A long corridor, dimly-lit by overhead fluorescent lighting, opened into a small open space decorated with modern art paintings. A calm silence pervaded the area that, judging by the thick layers of dust atop the picture frames, was rarely visited. Jane approached a small white canvas on which a single purple dot had been marked.

*“This heartfelt and mature work in the style of the Emotional school depicts the artists’ feelings regarding the struggle for equal representation in the field of toe-nail clipping that was finally achieved in 2069,”* read the description below.

Beside it, a self-portrait of the artist Chloe titled *“Ethical Congruence in the Post-historical Context”* showed a young man posing in a dirty bathroom next to a toilet with the lid up. The lengthy description, which Jane declined to read, took up a significant part of the wall and examined in detail the artists’ understanding of texture, his feelings on tolerance, and the need for suppression of harmful thinking.

Walking toward a larger adjoining room, Jane overheard the sound of nervous whispers. He peered around the corner and saw two huddled figures facing the far wall, one trying to calm the other.

“What do I do now? I can’t go home, and this place is crawling with Guardians. My face will be all over the BrainWave for days!” said the distressed man.

Jane recognised the distinctive prison clothing: it was the escaped Joe!

“We’ll take care of the Guardians. Here’s the name of my contact—he’ll show you the way out of here and to the camp. I’ll contact you again in three days. Now hurry, you’ve got about one hour before they realise their BPS is scrambled,” said the other, taller man whom Jane did not recognise.

“I don’t know how to thank you. My whole life I was a model citizen. I kept my head down, minded my own business, and never said a bad word against anyone. Then they tell me I’m a Joe! It’s not right what they do to us.”

“No, it’s not. You’ll be safe now. Goodbye, Wendy.”

The men shook hands and the fugitive glanced furtively around the empty room before leaving through a disarmed emergency exit. Jane ducked behind the wall and began quickly back the way he came.

*The Joe! I’ve got to tell the Guardians! This’ll look great on my record. Damn, was it left or right here?*

“Jane!”

Jane turned and saw the smiling face of Sandy as he jogged toward him.

*Sandy? What’s he doing here?*

“Hey Jane, great to see you,” said Sandy brightly; his enthusiasm was an endearing novelty Jane would likely never tire of.

“Uh...hey Sandy. We missed you at the Joe trial,” said Jane, as casually as possible.

“Yeah, I’ve been so busy with mid-terms coming up. How was it?”

“You know, I’ve read so much about Justice, but seeing it first-hand...I’m not sure. I have so much to learn.”

“There’s no Justice in persecution, Jane,” said Sandy, the cheerfulness dropping from his voice. He recovered and smiled. “It’s all good though, right?”

“Is it? All of it?”

“Absolutely! Progress is fantastic!”

A reminder flashed in front of Jane’s face. It was three o’clock, and time for the students to gather in the university’s Great Hall of Sorrow to check their privilege.

“Hey, good luck with your exam. I know you’ll do great,” said Sandy before he hurried away, seemingly preoccupied.

Jane hesitated.

Despite his training and an intense desire for retribution against the unbeliever, he decided not to report what he had seen. He hated the Joes as much as anyone and would gladly give his life for Progress, but after the trial found he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it.

As much as he might deny it, he suspected that all was not, in fact, good.

## IV

### Guardian Patrol

“Press play to begin.”

It was the first day of patrol duty and the time had come to turn theory into practice, though despite his best intentions Jane had arrived unprepared. The recruits were to compete against themselves in a war of contrition to see who could clean their mind the quickest in challenges that were designed to separate the boys from the...other boys and encourage a willingness to apply not just the letter of the law, but also its spirit\*.

He stood quite still among the mass of bodies in Tin Square, a perpetually-crowded public space that acted as a thoroughfare between the major business districts of Section Five. The tightly-packed crowds parted around him like schools of tiny fish<sup>†</sup>; their heads were bowed as they moved in hurried silence, apparently oblivious to the presence of their fellow citizens and seemingly unconscious of the agile movements they used to elude accidental high-speed collisions that occurred with surprising irregularity. When accidents did occur, the citizens' irritation at the incidental contact and frustration at the slightest impediment to their precisely-timed journeys impelled them to display barely-suppressed angst at the cause of the disturbance, followed by a brief and disingenuous expression of expedient politeness.

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\*An intentionally vague instruction that allowed for the broad exercise of judgement, though, given the heavy weighting toward body count, it was generally presumed to mean killing as many Joes as possible.

<sup>†</sup>The Guardians, who had a well-earned reputation for capricious volatility with acts of unnecessary violence being the norm, were easily recognised by wary citizens who had learned to avoid eye contact and generally stay as far away from them as possible.

It was 8AM and the efficient flow of commuters from the underground train network deposited the workers in waves, creating especially heavy congestion. It was sometimes said that Section Five was the commercial heart of the city and, less admirably, that Tin Square was its stomach which suffered from severe indigestion. The polished grey concrete of the square was enclosed by tinted glass towers that jutted into the sky and prevented the entry of any light except from above. Each morning the towers were filled with human bodies like tall jugs and each evening they were emptied out across the city.

Bronze sculptures designed to symbolise the advancement of AR-59 had been installed around the square at the direction of the Administration. Jane looked to his right and was confronted by the depiction a tall, thin man with a face comprised of hundreds of small eyes who wore his legs over his shoulders and held his detached genitals aloft in an apparent offering to the world at large. The eyes stared intensely. He turned, and his sensibilities were assaulted by the bulbous head and swollen features of a female figure with a distended belly holding a large stick that was being used to beat a small child. He looked away and moved unsteadily through the crowd, haunted by similar portrayals of the human form in various states of degradation and dismemberment. The artistic theme of the works had been described by the Administration as 'challenging and unique'. The vexed citizens seemed to treat the claustrophobic obstacle course as a necessary inconvenience, streaming through the bottlenecked corridors between the buildings to go about their business.

Jane's state of dazed bewilderment was interrupted when a large hand grasped him firmly by the arm and propelled him forward. He looked up into the large face and larger body of his new partner and mentor: Jorgia was tall, rotund, and possessed a plume of thick black hair like a stallion (or creature with similarly impressive tresses). He was a veteran of the force and strode like a fat peacock, with a physical presence that made Jane, whose presence often went unnoticed, feel somewhat inadequate. If the experience were not now a vague part

his rapidly fading short-term memory, Jane would regret not having spent time creating a physical form that avoided a disappointing combination of universally undesirable qualities. Instead he had retained his original, biological form that closely resembled a small, underdeveloped, and possibly malnourished teenager who didn't get enough exercise. Jane followed in Jorgia's wake as he pressed through the crowd and led the way out of the square and into the surrounding streets.

Here, the roar of the crowd subsided to an orderly rumble of foot traffic. Sef automated vehicles passed in silence on shiny, freshly laid bitumen roads. The cars were uniformly white with two passenger doors and moved obsequiously, stopping with precision at each unsigned intersection before rolling ahead. They were pulled forward along invisible tracks by an internal navigation system and appeared possessed by the spirit of a lonely cab driver. Sef cars were not only completely driverless, but also mostly passengerless; rumours that the cars reacted to collision like methane on a bonfire had caused most citizens to re-consider the benefits of regular exercise.

The pair paused at an intersection to allow an orderly procession of the vehicles to pass.

It was a calm and pleasant day in AR-59, like all other days in a city which genuinely never slept. Though initially a bug, permanent daylight had been incorporated as a default setting for all game environments in 2039 to improve the safety and happiness of citizens. At first, it had been reasoned that constant daylight would encourage productivity and reduce the incidence of crime. However, the citizens soon became disorientated by the dearth of astronomical reference and were forced to rely on artificial means: clocks, watches, fobs, and even sundials became highly sought after. A thriving trade in timepieces of all kinds began, and the quality and reliability of production meant they soon became a *de facto* medium of exchange outside of the legal tender bitnotes. The stable value of the timepiece became an unexpected foundation of an economic boom and undermined the value of the bitnote as its demand declined. Administra-

tors soon became concerned about an increasing number of financially independent citizens as economic activity skyrocketed; the heavily-populated city, whose population increased in number each year, had easy access to a surplus of cheap labour and unlimited raw materials. The only barrier to production had been the tightly-controlled supply of bitnotes, which soon became all but obsolete. Some citizens who had amassed large stockpiles of timepieces were accused of 'clock-hoarding' by wary officials, a crime punishable by lengthy imprisonment, and not long after all means of measuring time were prohibited to once again secure the safety and happiness of the citizens.

As they ambled along the crowded concrete sidewalk, Jane remained attentive to his surroundings while mentally repeating to himself as many protocols as he could remember, which amounted to the low single digits. He realised, not for the first time, that paying attention might have been a good investment. His ignorance made it difficult to gauge violations of the voluminous rules; rules that carried great weight in the lives of citizen and Guardian alike\*.

While observing the passing citizens for signs of Joe-like behaviour, Jane could not help but notice the number of attractive young women: tall, well-dressed, and immaculately-groomed, they readily made eye-contact with passers-by, smiled, and generally seemed like pleasant, agreeable individuals. A particularly attractive woman passed Jane, wearing a pink sweater and grey skirt past her knees. She smiled directly at him. Immediately suspicious, he checked his handheld Joe-meter. Brain activity in the area appeared normal.

"Forget it, rookie," said Jorgia in a booming baritone. He laughed and flicked his flowing black locks with one hand as his bulky frame wobbled with merriment. "You can't afford 'em."

Jane was shocked.

"You mean...they're—"

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\*For the Guardians especially, who were required to carry a bound copy at all times as a permanent, and rather heavy, reminder of their duties.

“VW’s,” said Jorgia. “Virtual women\*. Mostly private servants, but only for the rich.”

“They’re...robots? All of them?”

“Androids. Many of the men too: Mandy’s.”

“Mandy’s?”

“Male androids, model Y. So life-like you can’t even tell the difference anymore.”

“You could have told me that earlier. How am I supposed to catch Joes with them around?” said Jane, whose task was to detect indicators of non-conformity that could be as subtle as the movement of facial features or an adverse reaction to Instigation—a tactic employed to test for traits such as defiance or rebelliousness. The presence of androids, whose response to being shoved, kicked, spat upon or yelled at was invariably a smile and a polite thank you, would throw off his equipment entirely.

“You gotta hustle, rookie. If you wanna be a Guardian you gotta use your instincts.”

“I—”

“You gotta strengthen your *emotional core*, you feel me?” thundered Jorgia. “Strip yourself naked and get to the root of your inner turmoil. All those gadgets won’t help a man who’s afraid to cry. Allow the King to reside in your being and wear you like a

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\*Virtual women were intended to be realistic substitutes for real women inside the Brain and as such all models were programmed with a sense of unquestionable moral authority and an assumption of their own inherent virtue. Initial enthusiasm for the original model VW was high among wealthy citizens, though interest and ownership declined precipitously after it was discovered that the producers had enhanced not only the desirable traits of a real woman, creating a highly-concentrated, gleaming, sensory overload of femininity, but also their less-attractive qualities. After a short internal struggle over the value of authenticity versus the reality of market forces, the *Guardians* program code was adjusted with a relative ease that left producers in the real world rather envious. Nevertheless, the feat of coding the inexplicable and unreasonable attributes into the androids was widely judged as an important technical achievement and was subsequently the basis of many future mind-altering programs (and still remembered fondly by design purists).



skinsuit, you got it? The Joes? They ain't so tough. I remember back in the day—"

"Which day?"

"The day, you know, one of the days. Back in the day we had to sniff 'em out like dogs."

"Really? Like dogs?"

"Yeah, really! I had my nose up so many backsides they used to call me The Poodle. 'Hey, look everyone, it's Jorgia. Someone fetch the dog-biscuits', they said. They made me eat my meals from a bowl on the floor of the mess hall. It was highly disrespectful! But I took it, rookie, I took it like a man," said Jorgia, checking his reflection in a store window. "And just look at me now!"

"Yes, I see what you mean—those traumatic experiences made you the man you are today."

"No, I mean does my hair look okay?"

"I don't understand. How does all this help me catch a Joe?"

"You gotta be patient, rookie. It's like a dance."

"What kind of dance?" asked Jane.

"Square dancing. Ever try the do-si-do?"

"No."

"Your loss. How about fishing? Ever been fishing?"

"No."

"Hunting?"

"No."

"Telemarketing?"

"I don't think so."

Jorgia gave up on analogy.

"Well...I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Jane sighed dejectedly.

The only thing he had ever caught was a cold and the learning curve to become a Guardian was beginning to appear logarithmic. After numerous Brain Waves, Jane was well aware that Joes were masters of disguise, lurking at the boundaries of society and ready to strike opportunistically at a moment's notice to spread fear, intolerance, and hatred, but he needed specifics.

“What do the Joes look like?”

“You can never tell. But we know what to expect.”

Jorgia handed him a stack of wallet-sized photographs in plastic sleeves. They were computer-generated composite images of variously tall, fat, thin, bald, young, old, smartly-dressed, and poorly-attired citizens.

Jane observed the passing crowds with a newly suspicious eye.

A loud chatter of conversation enveloped them as they walked. Many citizens communicated verbally through Brain-phones largely out of habit even after speech (referred to contemptuously by administrators as ‘vibration’) had become redundant with the introduction of telepathic messaging. Most were entirely absorbed in Brain content streamed from the Jungle store that included only the latest music, films, and television. Content became unavailable after six months and was repeated cyclically to coincide with standard memory retention. There had in fact been no new content for many years, while reading had become as common as popcorn at an opera and was frowned upon by most.

After several more hours Jane had made multiple arrests; all false positives. The citizens were assiduously protective of their minds, and the vast majority of words, thoughts, and feelings had tested clean. He sighed.

With the Joes proving to be frustratingly elusive, his attention wandered to the many signs, notices, and billboards around him.

“*Be tolerant. Report bad thoughts to authorities,*” flashed an electronic street-side display.

“*AR-59 is an idea; remember to think acceptably,*” suggested a flag.

“*Celebrate diversity,*” ordered a poster attached to the side of a Sef car.

“*If you believe it, it’s true,*” announced an overhead billboard attached the roof of a multi-story hotel.

“*We’re all special,*” shouted a brightly coloured mural painted on the side of a café.

“*All citizens are equal*,” read words chalked on a footpath.

Jorgia stopped suddenly.

The faint sound of two muffled voices carried from the mouth of a narrow alley to their left. He drew his laser gun and fitted a plastic visor over his face.

“What is it? Joes?” asked Jane.

“They’re here,” said Jorgia.

“Who?”

“Get down!”

## V

### Red Alert!

“Press play to begin.”

Jane crouched against the wall adjacent to the alley while Jorgia sat with his laser gun cocked and stared intensely in the direction of the voices.

“That’s right sir, only twenty bitnotes. Oh yeah, the hard stuff. You ain’t gettin’ a better deal than that ’round here,” said a gravel-toned voice. “It’ll take you right away from all of this, my friend. No going back though!”

“Are you sure this is safe? I mean, I wouldn’t normally do this sort of thing, it’s just that—”

“‘This sort of thing’? I’m not sure what you mean, mate. Are you of a mind to impugn my good reputation for retailing high-quality products at low-low prices?”

“No! Well, it’s just that when you asked to meet in this dark alley, it seemed a bit susp—”

“Are you intending to malign my place of business, comrade? Do you have plans to look down on a man making an honest living from a hard day’s work?”

“Oh, no! I would never do that.”

“Ha ha! I jest, I jest. This is the *black market*, you see? What you’re engaging here is what the Guardians call an *illicit activity*,

okay? Just so we're clear, I'm selling you this *illegally*, see?"

"Oh. Well, then I'm not sure I—"

"Just kidding! Got you again, didn't I? It's fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah, of course. No problems at all."

Jorgia pulled Jane toward him and whispered into his ear.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes."

"Shhh!"

"Sorry."

Jorgia's eyes widened. His face became a picture of consternation and alarm.

"He's selling red water!" said Jorgia.

Red water was widely recognised as the most dangerous substance available in the Brain and could cause irreversible harm to the minds of citizens.

"Guardian patrol seven-nine-six to station, we have suspected Joe's dealing illegal substances in Section Five. Please advise," said Jorgia.

"Dispatch to Guardian patrol; please proceed and use force."

"You heard 'em, rookie. Now's your chance," said Jorgia, nudging Jane toward the alley.

Eager to impress, Jane pulled his laser-pistol from its holster, pointed it toward the alley in his best impression of the street-wise hero from a recent Brainflix action series, and froze.

"Get in there!" hissed Jorgia.

After a deep breath, Jane edged around the corner into the alleyway; it was pitch black, hidden in the shadows of the surrounding buildings. The sound of his heartbeat thudded rhythmically in his ears. His breath became short and laboured. He lurched forward and tripped over a garbage can, causing a noisy clatter to echo around him.

"Looks like you've got yourself a bit lost, son."

The voice scratched at the abused larynx of its owner, who sounded as though he'd just finished smoking an exhaust pipe.

Jane swallowed hard.

The narrow alley couldn't have been more than a few metres wide. He felt his way along the wall with one hand and grasped his laser pistol with the other, more for comfort than any prospect of self-defence.

"Give up or I'll shoot," said Jane, with what he imagined was authority.

"Now, now, there's no need for all that. I'm just a peaceful citizen minding his own business in this dark alleyway. What seems to be the problem, officer?"

"You're a Joe," said Jane limply. "I'm here to arrest you..."

"Who, me?" said a different voice from behind him.

The first voice chuckled derisively. Jane spun around reflexively as the voices jumped in the shadows.

"You mean me?"

"Or me?"

Voices now came from all sides, reverberating from the walls like a horrible, grotesque symphony, oozing scorn and ridicule. They rose to a crescendo, causing Jane to cover his ears. He turned and ran toward the street and collided with the side of a large waste bin, fell to the ground, and then curled into a defensive ball on the damp concrete.

The voices followed and crowded him. They grew closer and closer as Jane sat helpless against the mocking tide...and then stopped. There was dead silence. He inhaled deeply, using a meditation technique he had learned at the university, and then warily uncovered his ears and waited.

"Boo!"

There was a loud clatter as the laser pistol fell from Jane's hand. He remembered his night vision visor, pulled it down over his face, and then saw a small man dressed in suit and tie with his hands raised. The man trembled as he glanced at an open door of the adjoining building through which the dealer had escaped.

"Don't shoot, officer," said the man.

"All right, come this way. No funny business though, okay?"

Jane motioned toward the street and then followed the man as he emerged into the light.

“You got one!” said Jorgia, “I knew you could do it, rookie; just like I told you.”

“What do I do now?”

“Give him the Joe test. If he’s a Joe, book him, otherwise throw him back.”

“I’m not a Joe! I sell pants in Section Twelve,” pleaded the man.

Jorgia eyed the captive distrustfully. As an experienced Guardian, he possessed a trained paranoia after many years of BrainWaves that allowed him to invent probable cause in even the most innocuous of situations. Perhaps the leg of a well-tailored pair of pants could be just the place to hide dissident literature—the type of revolutionary propaganda that might escape the notice of an otherwise wary officer of Justice.

“Sure, pal. We’ll find out soon enough.”

Jane fumbled in his backpack and gathered the equipment required to perform a Landt-Bager Joe test; the standard for all routine examinations, it was designed to measure a subject’s aversion response. Early scientific testing on mice and other small mammals had demonstrated that under situations of extreme pain and stress, the animal would begin to show signs of intolerance or even prejudice toward the scientists conducting the tests. Later testing on humans had confirmed the hypothesis that a real Joe could not hide a physiological response above the Landt-Bager threshold. The fact that all test subjects had tested positive as Joes in a laboratory setting had been taken as conclusive scientific evidence of its effectiveness and the results were widely touted in popular journals.

Jane pulled the Manual from his backpack and opened it at an appendix titled *Testing for Joes: A Comprehensive Illustrated Guide to the Ins and Outs of Inquisition*. He handed the man a bright red plastic nasal sensor with a piece of elastic string threaded through it, a skull cap with yellow cotton insulation to prevent interference, and a pink, polka-dotted suit lined with temperature sensors.

“Put these on.”

The man attached the devices nervously and Jane compared the finished product to the Manual's illustrations.

"Oh, and this too," said Jane, handing him a purple bow-tie decorated with cartoon characters. He attached a small electronic monitor to the sensors and waited for a baseline reading. The monitor could detect even the smallest traces of aversion and a reaction above the Landt-Bager threshold would be unmistakable.

"I'm going to ask you some questions," said Jane. "I want you to respond as quickly as you can, all right?"

"Okay," replied the man.

"What's your name?"

"Tina."

"Okay, Tina. Just relax. You enter a room and it's full of people in colour. They're wearing loud, colourful shirts; there are all sorts of colours—yellow, brown, black, and more. What do you do?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I suppose."

"You see a citizen of lesser ability performing a task for which they are completely unqualified. They are entirely incompetent and there is a possibility that they could injure themselves or others. What do you do?"

"Uh...provide encouragement and reinforce the Progressive nature of societal roles?"

"A group of less-fortunate citizens arrives at your home and demand that you allow them to live with you permanently. You are a highly empathetic and tolerant individual so you agree. They destroy your home and make it unliveable, continually assault and berate you, and finally cause you to flee. How do this make you feel?"

"Happy that I've made a difference to the lives of those in need?"

"There are ten pieces of chocolate on a table in front of you. Five are white chocolate and five are dark chocolate. Is there a problem here?"

"Yes. There should be more diversity in the selection."

So far the readings were below the threshold. Jorgia watched with a look of disapproval.

“The television has provided you with the latest list of fringe social issues. At one time you might have thought each of them to be relatively minor matters that did not concern the broader population and which ought to be resolved with kind words and compassion; it may not have occurred to you that they were problems at all. However, you now realise that all of them are absolutely unbearable examples of terrible injustice. After several weeks of blanket coverage across all Brain channels you become increasingly agitated about Issue A—”

“I care deeply about all social issues, especially those involving the welfare of disadvantaged citizens,” said Tina.

“Yes, fine, very good. Now, you—”

“And I suppose there’d be a, sort of, civil-rights struggle for Issue A like they had in prehistory? I’d be marching in the streets against some kind of institutional oppression and we’d all be waving things and shouting and creating change, I imagine?”

“Yes, I’m sure it’d be just like that.”

“Okay.”

“Your life’s focus has become Issue A. It absorbs all your thoughts and energies. It goes beyond a healthy concern for others and becomes an obsession. It makes you feel bad and it has to stop. The television encourages you to act. Do you a) become an outspoken advocate for Issue A at every opportunity, labelling and insulting anyone who you feel is not sufficiently committed to the cause, b) found a group that you will refer to as a ‘movement’ and describe yourself an ‘influencer’, c) join a violent street gang to harass and assault citizens who look like they might not share your opinions, or d) conduct considered and thorough research into Issue A to understand the facts and then engage in calm and reasoned discussion with those who may be able to help you resolve your concerns?”

“C.”

Jane checked the readings. There was nothing—the man checked out. A Joe would surely have given himself away by now,



but the man had presented not so much as a grimace.

He tried one last question to be sure.

“You are in the passenger seat of a large freight truck headed straight for a cliff at a hundred miles per hour. Do you a) warn the driver about the likelihood of their impending death, b) open the passenger door and jump from the vehicle, or c) embrace Progress and diversity?”

“C again, please.”

“Damn! He’s not a Joe,” said Jane. “The results are all clear.”

“It can’t be! Look at him! *That’s* a Joe.”

Jorgia snatched the monitor from Jane and checked the results.

“See, I told you,” said Jane.

“Sometimes...sometimes you gotta go with your *gut*,” said Jorgia quietly as he handed the monitor back to Jane.

He circled the man and then stood behind him, calm and still, breathing gently on his exposed neck. Then, with a look equal parts disgust and pleasure, he stepped back, raised his laser pistol, and fired.

## VI

### BrainWave

“Press play to begin.”

The man’s gasping cry, cut short by the laser’s silent discharge of pulsing energy, replayed in Jane’s ears as he passed by rows of recruits lying stacked upon one another in the bunk beds of the residential hall, each having completed his first day of patrol. He slid his backpack beneath the bed’s metal frame then sat on the edge of the threadbare mattress that was covered by thin white sheets tucked tightly to regulation standard. He gripped the mattress to calm his shaking hands as the shock slowly began to dissipate.

A confusing series of emotions had set in after the initial adrenaline of the kill (although not by his own hand, the demise of the unlucky suspect would nevertheless be added to his student record and provide valuable points toward graduation). After popping the cork from the champagne bottle of sanctioned extermination and feeling the elation of empowerment flow through his body, he had been overcome by the relief of having proved himself worthy of the uniform, before guilt took the reins of his conscience and he galloped through a sequence of mental flashbacks showing a decent man in neatly-pressed trousers who had taken every insult and humiliation imposed upon him with an anxious, hopeful smile, and still came to the fate of all citizens who had ended up on the wrong side, or really anywhere near, the Guardians.

The sound of a thousand hushed conversations filled the hall as the boys spoke in confessional whispers to their personal televisions. Although a redundant device in the era of Brain technology, each boy was provided a television as a fundamental right of citizenship. Over time, the television had become something more than a combination of electronic components, more than just a tool for mass communication or a substitute for independent thought. The television was a trusted companion, even a friend. In a time when thoughts were a matter of public record and any display of trust was treated with suspicion, the television had become the sole confidant and advisor to most. The televisions were wise, never spoke out of turn, could hold a conversation on virtually any subject, and were even used to adjudicate on minor legal matters. They spoke simple, basic truths and provided much-needed guidance to a fatherless audience; a flock in need of a shepherd.

Jane pulled his television from its cover and held it before him. A featureless, tan-coloured face filled the screen. It spoke in a neutral tone—neither high-pitched nor low, neither loud nor soft, and with no detectable accent.

“Hello Jane,” said the television.

“Hello television.”

“I see you’ve had a busy day.”

The television’s memory was updated in real-time from a Brain database that contained the records of all events across the network.

“Yes, I captured a Joe today. I’m not sure how I—”

*Tolerance is our greatest virtue*, interrupted the automated messaging system.

“Congratulations! Capturing a Joe is a milestone for every recruit. You’re very special!”

“Thanks, but I—”

“And you initiated summary execution procedures against the offender? A bold move!”

“Well, I didn’t actually—”

*Androids are our future.*

“I compute that a celebration among the recruits is imminent. How exciting!”

The television’s predictive analytics had extrapolated the combined thoughts of all recruits and computed the most likely outcome.

“Really?”

“Yes, there is so much to look forward to. I think Progress is amazing, don’t you agree?”

“Well, sure. Progress is—”

*Joes are bad. Erase a Joe today.*

Jane paused and tried again.

“Progress is—”

*It’s inevitable.*

“Today’s BrainWave is about to begin! Make sure you assume the correct position and provide your full attention. Justice be with you!”

The face disappeared, replaced by a countdown to the broadcast.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6...

Jane slid the television into the metal frame above him and then spread his arms and legs across the bed like a starfish. A flurry of clicks reverberated around the quiet hall as android

attendants passed swiftly between the beds and closed metal clasps attached to leather belts that fixed the recruits' heads and limbs in place.

The lights of the hall dimmed and the familiar theme tune of the Brainwave began; a commanding Pavlovian melody exuding integrity and authority that stirred the hearts of the citizens and readied their minds. The screen flashed brightly as footage from the days' events—a carefully selected sequence of narrative-enhancing Brain-food baked into an unwholesome high-carb loaf of misdirection, half-truth, omission, and invention—settled uneasily in the stomachs of its audience.

The images stopped suddenly and the face of Martha, presenter for the GBC channel and stalwart foot-soldier of high-quality journalism, filled the screen. Martha was a full nineteen years old, and though he could not yet grow a beard, he sported a comely coif of grey curls and matching moustache, wore an austere blue robe, and generally did his very best impression of a man whose talents extended beyond reciting from a teleprompter display. His dire expression was a prelude of things to come.

“Welcome to the BrainWave, citizens,” said Martha, his voice rising and falling melodically in the practised tone of presenters everywhere. “It has been a day of chaos in the city, with hatred and injustice on the rise according to official MindSnap thought detection data. Emergency Guardian crews were airlifted to multiple scenes as numerous incidences of anti-citizenism were detected in Section Nine, Thirteen, and Forty-two. Seventy-one offenders were apprehended, immediately labelled Joes, and eradicated like the vermin they are; or *were*. Justice be praised. Here is a recap of some of our top stories.”

A journalist clutching a microphone appeared in a deserted street next to an overturned school bus. His voice shook as he described the eye-witness account of an awful event that had occurred the previous day, before concluding with an ominous prediction for the future. Angry sports fans rioted and fought atop the flaming wreckage of torched cars after a local sporting match;

the losing team furious at its opposition for invoking its privilege and representing inequality. A small child was kidnapped at knifepoint. Unusually long lines were reported at local supermarket checkouts. Hospitals turned away patients. VWs leaked eye-lubricant hysterically.

“Widespread condemnation...it is well-known...Joes...bad thoughts...most people believe...assault...prejudice...experts predict...extremism...polls suggest...intolerance...” said the messenger of bad omens.

The footage cut back to Martha who continued to hand out second-hand information like a smoker distributing his airborne poison in the seedy bar of an old hotel.

Jane lay transfixed.

He felt he dare not look away or risk missing some vital piece of information, though fortunately this was physically impossible.

The assault of grim goings-on soon ended and an attractive young VW in a short skirt appeared in front of a large map of AR-59. The next five weeks in all sections were forecast to be fine, sunny, and pleasant. The current list of authorised words, feelings, and behaviours to be observed by all citizens at all times for their own safety was displayed, followed by the names, photographs, and private addresses of suspected Joes. Jane did not recognise any of the names but attempted to memorise them for future reference. The footage then halted abruptly and cut to a loop of a small grey kitten energetically pawing at a ball of string as it slid across a polished wooden floor. After exactly twenty-eight minutes, excluding Jungle Store advertisements, the screen faded to black.

*“Be smart. Listen to the BrainWave,”* instructed a sinister voice as bright white letters seared the message into thousands of eyeballs like a flash photograph.

The hall lights brightened and Jane blinked several times. He felt the usual combination of exhaustion and fear that followed the BrainWave, but was once again certain of one thing: the Joes must be stopped and that Justice must prevail no matter the cost.

And that all citizens were equal (unless they turned out to be Joes). All traces of guilt or doubt were washed away, at least temporarily, as he experienced a renewed sense of clarity and a stirring feeling of vigorous conviction that he attributed to an informed analysis based on evidence and sound reasoning; and of course his superior powers of intellect—powers he promised himself would be used for good.

## VII

### An Invitation

“Press play to begin.”

“Come on, Jane! We’ll be late!” said Lucy.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming,” said Jane as he forced his feet into his boots.

The recruits had spontaneously and predictably decided to celebrate their first patrol mission with a day on the town and there was a palpable excitement in the air as they made their way toward the main entrance of Guardian Headquarters. Jane, Lucy and Paula joined the others who’d gathered outside the elaborate metalwork of the front gates. The gates were decorated with the Guardian coat of arms (a machine gun barrel extending from the horn of a megaphone) and were as unnecessary as they were imposing—the prospect of a citizen entering voluntarily was almost as unlikely as one entering forcefully—and it was clear that they were simply another reminder of Guardian power and prestige. A line of Sef cabs sat silently outside of the gates in anticipation and the boys crowded in.

“Welcome citizens; please observe all laws and ordinances.”

There was excited chatter among the boys as they travelled toward one of the city’s few Designated Human Revelry areas where citizens were permitted to take part in non-confrontational, inter-faith dialogues under strict supervision. They watched as the sections passed by through the cab’s large

windows—the towers and expansive bunkers of the administrative agencies gave way to the grimy, downtrodden streets of Section Two, followed by the rendered brick behemoths of the wealthy Section Three. The cab slowed as they passed over the potholes and uneven bitumen of Section Four before hurtling down the smooth expressway of Section Five.

“The sections...they’re all so...different,” said Paula.

“Of course, isn’t it wonderful?” said Sandy.

“But...it seems like a classic example of social inequality which is totally a violation of the Social Justice Act of 2043 and a reminder of the legacy of prehistorical prejudice,” said Paula, who had taken a liking to Rules\* and now rarely missed an opportunity to point out the connection, however remote, tenuous, or non-existent between current events and the legacy of prehistorical wrongdoings (as defined by renowned and respected Professors of Prehistory). “How can this still exist in an age of Progress?”

A broad smile came across Sandy’s face.

“Oh no! Not at all. This *is* Progress.”

Paula appeared unconvinced, certain he had finally found a real-life case where Economic Mal-normative Rights-based Unconscious Oppression theory could be applied, and was on the verge of saying just that before good fortune intervened and Sandy continued.

“It all began after the Administration created the Diversity Act of 2065, when it was discovered that there was an alarming lack of diversity in wealthier, less populated areas of the city. They found that many citizens had self-segregated into distinct groups based on values, culture, and tradition and had, for the most part, managed to build functional, organised, and in-

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\*A wide ranging discipline, Rules encompassed not only the regulation of the Justice system and the criminal code, but the imposition of a ‘Paraphrasal Interpretation’ of history through case law, whereby the complex nuances of centuries of historical events were tied together like a make-shift raft on a Phys-Ed school camp and floated to see exactly how gullible the general public really were.

dependent communities. Even though all citizens received the same income, a disparity had somehow emerged between the unified and productive sections and others where citizens had pooled together like an oil spill washed up on a rocky shore. Shocked by the findings, the Administration immediately ruled that diversity must be restored and inequality eradicated, branding the wealthy sections 'privileged'. Economic Welfare Zones were built in the problematic sections and underprivileged citizens moved in alongside their reluctant new neighbours. However, despite the best efforts of administrators to force the integration of new arrivals into the communities like a round peg in a square hole, the rapid influx of diversity caused an even more rapid outflow of the productive, independent citizens who complained that the anti-social citizens-of-lesser-economic-means had made their neighbourhoods unsafe, unclean, and unrecognisable. The ungrateful emigrants quickly found new opportunity in the recently-vacated sections, re-creating un-diversity in their dilapidated dens and returning life and colour to grey, deserted wastelands as their former homes crumbled into crime-ridden high-rise hellholes in a turn of events that both confused and frustrated the well-intentioned administrators. And so a great game of cat-and-mouse began as diversity chased privilege throughout the city, each time destroying it and leaving shattered wreckage in its wake. With an uncanny ability to salvage failure and turn it into endemic catastrophe, the Administration saw the cycle of destruction and rebuilding as a chance to promote economic growth; its full focus on a folly that marks the first and final phases of prosperity. As each section was torn down due to disrepair another was built up in its place and endless, unthinking output was created as populations scrambled to trade places."

A look of relief came across the boys' faces as they understood that the difference between the sections was not the result of innate human characteristics that had created distinct socio-economic strata, or discrimination (which was punishable by death), but the outcome of Administration policy and there-



fore undeniably for the best.

“How do you know all this?” said Jane.

“I like to read,” said Sandy with a smile.

“Where are we going, anyway?” asked Lucy.

“To see the show; I bet you’ve never been to a show before?” said Sandy.

There was a murmur of agreement among the boys, who were self-conscious of their inexperience.

“What kind of show?” asked Lucy.

“The greatest show in town, of course,” said Sandy.

“You mean...”

“That’s right. Today, you’re going to experience the *real* AR-59.”

After several minutes, the procession of cabs stopped in front of a large industrial building.

“You have arrived at your destination. Please exit the vehicle,” announced the cabs.

The automatic doors opened and the boys stepped out in front of the apparently abandoned building. Its broken windows and rusted steel stood in stark contrast to the otherwise cosmopolitan surrounds. A pungent smell, best described as a combination of fish and machine oil, drifted toward them.

They followed Sandy to the entrance where a stocky man in a black suit stood guard. He shared a nod with Sandy who beckoned the others forward. A narrow winding staircase led them toward a throbbing red glow that rose from the depths beneath them; it was their first foreboding glimpse of the *Happy Times Fun Place*, the most famous safe space in the city and an exclusive hangout for the rich and powerful. The recruits had heard rumours of the venue, a well-known private club for the elite that, according to its BrainLink profile, promised:

*“The Greatest Show in Town! Forget your troubles and take a trip to the heart of Progress. Immerse yourself in the King’s teachings and experience a live re-enactment of the path to salvation in our custom-built theatre.”*

They arrived at a small, dark room lit by dozens of white candles. A thick, black curtain concealed the sight but not the sound of the rapture beyond; the thunderous roar was overpowering.

A tall, lanky figure dressed extravagantly in a gold vest, purple coat, and black top hat stood nonchalantly behind a reception desk. He raised his eyes and twitched at the sight of the Guardians, rushed forward to greet Sandy (justifiably presumed leader of the nervous group), and performed a theatrical low bow.

“Our humble establishment is graced by the presence of our faithful protectors. You’ve come to inspect our premises once again? I believe our certifications are quite up to date since your last visit,” said the host, forcing a smile from his thin lips.

“No, we’re here to celebrate,” said Sandy, going smile for smile.

“Aha! You wish to join the mirth and merriment of our city’s finest establishment? Then please come in gentlemen, we have a *very* special show for you tonight. My name is Penelope and I will make sure you have our best seats.”

In a playground for the most avid proponents of Progress, many of them senior administrators, the presence of the Guardians was clearly unwelcome but tolerated. Penelope drew back the curtain and revealed a long, dark corridor that led to an expansive and densely crowded ballroom with high stone arches and an ornate ceiling supported by thick stone pillars. The room was lit by multiple glass chandeliers and dozens of many-branched candelabra attached to a first-floor balcony that hung above a swell of partygoers. Blood-red velvet drapery hung from the walls surrounding the well-heeled citizens.

A veil of intoxication concealed the nature of things from those who danced and drank, while a haze of smoke hung over mahogany tables where others dined and debated in a suffocating air of the intimate and surreal. The recruits were barely noticed amid the flow of wine and song that occupied the minds and mouths of these depleted souls—undeserved recipients of spiritual destitution whose passive acceptance of the orthodoxy had

led them to irredeemable and inexorable decay. Their cups overflowed and spilled vermilion onto the oak floorboards and one other.

The recruits huddled to the side of the room beside their host.

“Our Grand Ballroom,” said Penelope. “These are our most loyal and regular customers. Ah, here come the helpers.”

Three men-of-lesser-stature dressed in suits and ties scurried toward the host and presented trays filled with small glasses of blue liquid to the recruits.

“Drink up, gentlemen, the ride has just begun and it may prove taxing for the...uninitiated.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jane.

Penelope turned toward him.

“The show takes place on level nine and our lift is currently out of order. I do apologise. I will show you the way.”

Lucy looked up at the heavy timber rafters of the ceiling above.

“What levels?”

“*Below*, my dear, the levels are below,” said Penelope, pointing to the floor. He turned and walked briskly to a secured door, entered a code on its keypad, and then flung it open.

“Follow me, gentlemen!”

## VIII

### The Depths

“Press play to begin.”

The boys’ footsteps echoed as they descended a concrete staircase and arrived at an ancient-looking wooden door. Penelope inserted a heavy key into its rusted iron keyhole and they entered the living room of a large, stately old home. It was deathly silent.

A thick layer of dust covered hand-crafted upholstered settees and faded cream-coloured sheets that had long ago been cast

over a table and chairs. A glass cabinet, its door left open carelessly, held the remains of a collection of silver antiques, some of which lay scattered on the ground before it. The air was stale and an unwelcoming stillness pervaded what had once been a thriving home—the culmination of many lives of work and a product of the ingenuity and exertion of those whose contributions now lay abandoned.

The high ceiling and white walls, once a reminder of that ever-renewed faith in the immortality of one's endeavours, now appeared dull and worn-out. Timber floorboards creaked underfoot as the group followed a corridor through the centre of the house. On their left they passed a well-appointed bathroom containing a chipped ceramic bathtub and cracked glass mirror, on their right a kitchen frozen in time with decorative dinner plates and a green-chequered tablecloth laid out upon a wooden dining table. Further on, there were several darkened bedrooms with windows boarded shut, in which mattresses sat upon large wooden frames that looked like uncomfortable museum-pieces.

"This place is boring," said one of the recruits.

"Yeah, where are all the VW's?" complained another.

A murmur of dissatisfaction broke out.

"I trust your patience will be rewarded, gentlemen, though sadly our renovations are incomplete and we must pass through this wilted husk of prehistoric decrepitude to reach our destination," said Penelope.

"What'd he say?" whispered the first voice.

"There's a wilted husk in here," replied the other.

"What? Where?"

The startled boys glanced around a large reception room and watched shadowy, unidentified objects hidden under swathes of blankets and dust transform into crouching beasts.

They quickened their pace and fled through an open screen door hanging from its bottom hinge, then piled out onto the wooden decking of a veranda and stood before an overgrown front garden surrounded by a white picket fence. Paint peeled from the brick walls behind them; once maintained by devoted

caretakers and a source of pride to its inheritors, the crumbling exterior was now covered with unintelligible graffiti. The sad contrast from its pinnacle was now witnessed only by those incapable of understanding its significance or mourning its loss.

An uneven red-brick path led past the garden's weeds and through an open gate to a wide bitumen road that connected with a clearing in the middle-distance.

"What's that?" asked Jane, pointing to the clearing, from which the sound of loud music drifted on a faint breeze.

"Our outdoor festival: a place where citizens can throw off the shackles of convention and give themselves to the raucous sound of a generation while abandoning the canons of their history," said Penelope.

"How big *is* this place, exactly?" said Jane.

The road, which appeared newly-laid, bore the promises of what was to come in bright, rainbow-coloured letters:

*Liberation!*

*Excitement!*

*Rebellion!*

*Virtue!*

Like so many before them, the Guardians were energised with each new promise and arrived at the festival with an unshakeable faith that a recipe for change and the ingredients for cultural revolution awaited them at the WoodPile festival; the greatest and most special event in prehistory, now re-created in perpetuity at the Happy Times Fun Place as well as in the minds of its original participants.

It was a chaotic scene: tens of thousands of half-naked bodies variously clad in ripped jeans, flared trousers, native headbands, cowboy hats, and oversized sunglasses rambled frantically in a muddy field as sporadic rain cleared the grime from their care-free skin. Electricity was in the air, and not just from the overhead power lines. The area appeared to have been converted from some kind of timber manufacturing facility: a large disused processing shed was visible in a forested area beyond the clearing and piles of rotting wood had been covered with lay-

ers of signs, flags, and generically-rebellious slogans composed hastily by half-hearted contrarians who had neglected to prepare their offerings to the gods of Progress. The undergrowth of the cleared forest, once the centre of a fertile ecosystem, had been churned into a messy sludge. However, despite their first impressions, the joyful Janissaries were not to be discouraged in their belief that the seeds of change were soon to sprout beneath them.

Hopeful and naïve expressions searched for stimulation as aimless drumming and harsh wails from a distorted guitar jarred orthodox notions of musicality in a ruthless assault of dissonance that was difficult to appreciate unless under the influence of mind-altering chemicals or brain-numbing ideology. The beauty of the vulgar hedonism and disdain for order and dignity lay precisely in its ugliness: acceptance of the inverse and the promotion to popular perception of a new concept of the Good in opposition to strength, health, purity, and objective truth. The adoption of weakness, the repression of limitations, and the suppression of hierarchy was the unwinding of a tapestry into which the laws of survival and prosperity had been woven for millennia.

The boys followed their host around the edge of the field toward a portable plastic toilet cubicle, labelled 'Exit' in red letters.

Jane watched as a young man with long, chestnut hair and spectacles tripped on a tree stump mid-groove and fell head-first into the mud, breaking his glasses and unable to return to his feet on the slippery ground. He approached the man and offered his hand.

"Get away from me!" shouted the enraged man, twisting his body away sharply.

Jane jumped back.

"You mustn't try to help them, dear. In their short-sightedness they can no longer discern between those who wish to help and those who mean to harm," said Penelope.

The man found his footing and re-commenced flailing his arms wildly to the music.

“In exchange for a brief moment of false individual liberation these citizens have surrendered the freedom of their descendants. A fair trade, wouldn't you say?”

“You mean they were tricked into this?” said Jane.

“They happily fed their imagined oppressor to the guillotine and swallowed the lies of evil.”

The ill-fated citizens bobbed and snaked to the blaring noise, committed to their regrettable course.

“It doesn't seem fair at all.”

“Let the buyer beware, my boy. A bargain with Progress is not one to be trifled with.”

“No, I suppose not.”

The orange plastic door opened and the boys hurried down the stairs.

Creeping vines crawled across a high ceiling and covered the damp walls of a room thick with the heavy air of a humid greenhouse. Jane wiped his brow as drops of sweat began to bud on his forehead. A forest of solitary citizens stretched out in every direction; their feet planted in the soil beneath them. Persistent whispering filled the room as the emaciated entities wavered under the pressure of isolation and dehydration.

“This is our outdoor area, where citizens can connect with the natural environment and release themselves from the repressive bonds of the collective.”

“But, it's indoors?” said Jane, ever-perceptive.

Anonymous, homeless, and identifiable only by multi-coloured tunics which differentiated one from another, these individuals had rejected all that made them unique and had instead adopted a fashionable, but unfulfilling and artificial identity-substitute that allowed them to replicate an emotional connection with their natural clustering from inside isolated cocoons.

In the distance, a dull thud was heard as a weakened body fell to the floor.

Several sideways glances were sent in the direction of Sandy, whose judgement was beginning to come into question as the

boys watched the human trees collapse one after the other before being removed by android cleaners.

“These citizens partake only in pieces of the pie; they reject and abandon the whole,” said Penelope.

The boys watched as androids moved between the citizens and fed each a thin ration of apple pie.

“All they eat is pie?” said Paula.

“Yes. They rely on the sustenance of the ideal and forego a balanced diet. It is best to refuse what is nourishing and protective in favour of that which fragments the will and erodes the strength, would you not concur?” said Penelope.

“I like pie,” said a boy, his statement receiving enthusiastic support from the others.

“He says that pie is making them sick,” said another.

“Got little bits in it,” said another.

“Oh.”

They reached the next level and entered a room that resembled a giant pantry. Its four walls were lined with row upon row of shelves that ascended into the distance and heaved under the weight of every conceivable type of food.

Frantic, half-naked citizens wore the splattered remains of cakes, chocolates, burgers, breads, and meats; oily residue dripped from their bodies into drains that ran around the edge of the concrete floor. They grunted as they hauled their overweight bodies across the room to consume the latest dopamine-laden treat that they hoped would numb their minds. The air was thick with the pungent smell of body odour and a hint of food waste.

The fattened physiques clambered over one another and grabbed indiscriminately at shiny packaging, tearing at it with their teeth; their wills were controlled by ravenous hunger, their cravings fulfilled by foods that re-appeared on the shelves instantly in an unheard-of level of inventory management precision. Some of the citizens lay prone and exhausted, panting softly, while others, driven by more intense desires, clambered up tall ladders seeking the sweetest temptations, forbidden fruits, and acquired tastes.



Jane's eyes met a look of torment and anguish as a pale man with pimpled skin crammed a large creamy sponge-cake into his mouth, spilling much of it before falling to his hands and knees and gobbling the last scraps from the floor. Another sat in the corner balancing a bucket of fried chicken on his swollen belly as he struggled to open a packet of chips with greasy fingers.

"This is our in-house restaurant," said Penelope. "An all-you-can-eat buffet where citizens can drown their sorrows with sugar-water and fill their emptiness with calories."

One man squeezed a tube of garlic cheese into his mouth as another injected liquid fat into his veins. Jane gagged at the sight.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

"The pain is part of the pleasure. Corruption of the body soothes the anger and self-loathing. What's wrong feels right; what harms can also heal."

The nauseated boys arrived at the next level and were relieved to find a spotless room and rows of quiet, orderly citizens seated in front of machines with electronic displays. They watched as each citizen, seated on a cushioned plastic stool, tapped at images of the latest consumer goods that, after a short delay, dropped from a large metal chute in the corner of the room and travelled along a conveyor belt to their location. Development and production lifecycles of almost zero meant that new, better, slightly different colour versions of most models were issued every few minutes, causing the goods to be outdated upon delivery to the perpetually-unsatisfied purchasers, while planned obsolescence meant the items were immediately unusable. Androids assigned to each post lifted the items—white goods, green goods, blue goods, all colours of goods—from the belt and placed them carefully into a waste disposal chute in the floor next to each machine.

"Our gift shop," said Penelope, "a wonder of convenience and an example of the efficiency of our modern economic system."

"But they're not even using those things. They're just throwing them away. Why do they keep buying more stuff?" said Jane.

“These citizens are addicted to the momentary excitement of the purchase and eager to trade their time for the temporary thrill of consumption.”

Jane approached a particularly absorbed young man with an apparent penchant for high-priced commemorative plaques. A steady stream of items—inscriptions honouring employee service awards and handmade decorative engravings dedicated to the long-lost relatives of strangers—flowed past before adding to an ever-expanding pile of sentimental refuse.

“Hey,” said Jane to the man, who continued to press the screen’s images with unflinching persistence. He grabbed one of the plaques from the conveyor belt. Its inscription read:

*“Congratulations on twenty-five years! Here’s to twenty-five more!”*

He placed the plaque back on the belt and watched it vanish into the hole.

“You don’t have to keep buying these things. They’re worthless, don’t you see?”

The hunched figure stared ahead.

“Hey!”

“He can’t hear you, my dear,” said Penelope. “He is one with the consumption; a permanent part of the economic machine. A blissful union, wouldn’t you agree?”

Jane imagined he could see the life draining from the man before his eyes.

He felt a tug on his pant leg. The round, chubby face of a man-of-compressed-bone-structure looked up at him.

“A herd might escape the predator, but a lone wolf is prey to the pack.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They have no choice, my dear. They are alone in this world: born into isolation without guidance to be milked like a cow and suckle at the teat of a machine that squirts a sour low-fat dairy substitute into their mouths before churning them into curry-flavoured sausage meat,” said Penelope.

“Ugh.”

The group descended further.

A door opened and the recruits were surrounded by darkness and a choir of moaning voices.

“Our silent disco,” said Penelope. “One of my personal favourites.”

Jane jumped as a hand grabbed his shoulder and another stroked him from behind. The other boys struggled to fend off persistent and unwelcome advances from unseen suitors.

“Aah! Get it off!”

“Oh, don’t worry, they’re harmless,” said Penelope.

The sound of dull groans and shuffling feet filled the room as the bodies jerked, twisted, and bumped their way around the dance floor wearing oversized, noise-cancelling headphones. They writhed in ecstasy to an unheard tune whose chorus they repeated incessantly and endlessly.

“What kind of disco is this? There’s no music, I can’t see anything, and I’m being grabbed at like I’m the last lifeboat on the Titanic. I mean, I’m being felt up worse than a rich dandy at a tailor. I feel like I’m a stick of sugar in a room full of starving hypoglycaemics. There’s more inappropriate touching going on here than a Driftwood casting session,” said Jane, reduced to nervous rambling.

“These souls have chosen the shrouded path of denial. They have taken the trail of darkness and arrived at an inclination toward dishonesty and obfuscation. They have gouged any semblance of the truth from their minds in their determination to belie reality and convince themselves of the virtue of false ideas and harmful fantasies. They have decided to feign ignorance, skirt the issue, bury the evidence, and dull themselves to the diseases that waste the body politic while propagating their illness.”

“They don’t sound like they’re enjoying it very much,” said Lucy over the loud droning.

“Quite the opposite, my dear. What could be more amusing than quelling the sound of dissent while being so cleverly complicit in defence of the King’s doctrine?”

“They sound like victims of a rules-based trans-palliative gender-specific micro-aggression,” said Paula.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, my dear. These are the ear plugs of Progress; the concert of their voices is intended is to cancel the murmur of disagreement from the ears of innocents with their duplicitous wailing. The whispers of doubt in their minds are smothered by the racket; the gnawing pangs of their conscience soothed by their repetition of deceit,” said Penelope.

“Yeah, they sound like a barrel of laughs, don’t they?” said Jane.

The frightened group drew together among the citizens as they performed a dance of self-deception: a knowing ignorance, a wilful delusion, and a distraction from the sound of truth that blared in their ears like a fire alarm. The darkness hid the decay and bolstered their spirits, but also screened the way toward resolution and trapped them in a never-ending and futile quest to escape the consequences they diligently chose to ignore. It was a game of calculated indifference; a life of excuses, defences, and justifications for those who could not bear to witness the harsh glare of reality—a coward’s way to shield their eyes from its light and their pride from the sin of admission.

The next door opened and a hundred clenched jaws turned in the direction of the boys. The rigid postures of citizens dressed in dull blue uniforms marched past in lock-step around an oval-shaped room, striding toward that which they opposed, and certain to arrive precisely where they began.

Their attention returned to a short man wearing a grey, hooded robe in the middle of a well-worn track; his face was hidden behind dark shadows cast from light above. The citizens danced at the whim of their mysterious conductor as he waved a tiny wooden baton like an artist painting broad strokes on an unseen canvas. His voice alternated vigorous and sharp, then soft and soothing, as suggestive and alluring phrases rolled from his tongue in an unfamiliar language. The walls were covered with brightly-coloured posters, flags, and stickers depicting strange symbols and cryptic characters united in a distinctly agricultural theme: hammers, brooms, scythes, saws, and various other gardening tools and building implements that seemed to bear little

relation to the activities at hand, and served only to further confuse the already-perplexed recruits whose celebration seemed to have not only gotten off on the wrong foot, but tripped over itself.

“Our gymnasium,” said Penelope. “Our personal trainer is highly motivational—this is one of our many popular fitness classes, where citizens can exorcise their anger through the outlet of physical resistance.”

The citizens were a poor advertisement for the class. Their uniforms bulged unflatteringly and their extra pounds clung to their waists like a vain man to his excuses.

“These citizens embrace the whole and reject the part. They are over-fed with a sickly strudel of simplified information that convinces their eager minds and preys upon their slow metabolisms.”

“Why are they so angry?” asked Jane.

“It is hard to say. Perhaps it arises from the pain of insignificance. Or, it could be the result of underlying genetic and biological competition due to the absence of an established hierarchy where citizens are stuck in a passive-aggressive stalemate with those who do not share their sensibilities like a pedantic taskmaster whose housemate refuses to clean the dishes when it is his turn.”

“Oh, right. Nothing specific, then?” said Jane.

“They do seem intent on supplying peace to the world and bringing an end to human non-diversity, whose existence has caused quite the consternation.”

“What do they intend to do about it?”

“Do about what, my dear?”

“The existence of human non-diversity.”

“To end it using the most violent means available.”

“That’s a bit of a problem, isn’t it?”

“That would seem an unlikely conclusion from a man of your profession,” said Penelope.

“But, there’s a bit of a contradiction involved, isn’t there? Why don’t they just ask these non-diverse types to find a new

place to live? Or buy a dishwasher? Surely if all those non-diverse people went and lived somewhere far away, they'd become the diverse ones wouldn't they? Problem solved," said Jane.

"In formal logic, a contradiction is the signal of defeat; but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step in progress towards a victory," said Paula.

A second thought crossed Jane's mind like a naked stalker at a football game.

"Only...then...the ones already in the other place would become non-diverse?"

"As I understand it, there are certain peoples who are innately diverse, and others who cannot be made diverse; merely diversified," said Penelope.

"I'm not sure that makes any sense."

"They must be divided into as many pieces as possible and be forever unable to return to a non-diverse state; like the component parts of a jet engine requiring assembly by a small child with no instructions."

"Would instructions help?"

"Likely not."

The recruits listened to the conversation with uncomprehending interest.

"Why are they talking about engines?" whispered a recruit.

"I think it's an *an-al-ogy*," said another.

"An allergy? What's that got to do with it?"

"Uh...can you do another one, please?" requested a recruit.

"Like a carcass in a butcher's shop," said Penelope, reluctantly.

"Ah."

"Indeed. The situation is, and will presumably remain, problematic," said Penelope.

"Are those human bones?" said Lucy, pointing at the track.

A loud crunch accompanied each footfall from the citizens' heavy leather boots, as though they were walking on a bed of sea-shells. Jane took a closer look at the track, which appeared to

be covered with human remains. A particularly energetic young man crushed a small skull with a look of satisfaction.

“Purely for show, my dear. Those are ceramic human skeletons hand-crafted for those who wish to trample upon the remains of their fellow man in a safe, controlled environment, or for those who, in this busy modern world, are simply unable to arrange matters themselves,” said Penelope.

A door swung open and the boys were led to the next room.

They braced themselves for what they now fully expected to be another confronting and disagreeable experience. Instead, they entered a bustling weekend market on a normal city street, where normal citizens queued in front of around twenty mobile food vans serving a variety of exotic and novel snack-foods. There were normal trees, an ordinary footpath, unremarkable buildings, and a number of perfectly sensible market stalls stocked with overpriced art and craft knick-knacks. A largely unexceptional situation appeared to have been established and affairs were being conducted in a manner consistent with reasonable expectations of a typical event of its kind.

It took several moments before Jane’s brain allowed him to notice that the room was, in fact, upside-down. The boys stood on a suspended viewing platform that extended out into the room, and it was another moment before Jane was given permission to look through the glass floor below. In that moment he suddenly developed a newfound appreciation for the humble warning sign, and felt one might have been attached to the platform without a great deal of cost or inconvenience. Something along the lines of:

*WARNING!*

*Do not look down;*

*Do not stare into the endless, blue abyss;*

*Do not consider letting go of the hand rail;*

*Absolutely never, under any circumstances, look directly into the blinding, fiery ball of exploding gas.*

Against explicit instructions, his mind began to wonder how long it would take to reach the sun and what would happen to

him when he got there.

“It’s best if you don’t look down,” suggested Penelope.

An unpleasant sensation arose in the stomachs of the boys, decided enough was enough, and departed on a long, slow journey toward the sun—warming to the idea that incineration was preferable to whatever was currently going on. Meanwhile, their minds struggled to adapt to the violation of multiple laws of nature.

Jane crouched against the guard rail.

“Aaah,” he managed weakly.

The boys watched the citizens gather meekly in long lines in front of the vans and then wince in disgust as they tasted the food. The only sound was a persistent whispering from the disturbed citizens, whose bowed heads nodded involuntarily as they dragged their feet forward across the pavement.

A man looked down momentarily at Jane; his deadened face filled with resignation and incomprehension. In a stilted, deliberate murmur, he repeated the words:

*“I am nothing*

*“I am no-one*

*“I do not belong.”*

“I suppose this is the staff cafeteria?” said Jane.

“This is our upside-down room,” said Penelope. “These citizens are trapped in a world where sweet is mistaken for sour as darkness is for light.”

The man turned away and Jane noticed a small, red, leathery creature that looked like an evil, hairless koala hanging from the man’s back. Its long claws were dug deep into his shoulders as it gnawed at the flesh of his neck with thin, sharp teeth. Its presence was tolerated by the man, who appeared to have given up all hope.

The door to level eight of the Happy Times Fun Place opened. The group were led up a player’s entrance ramp of a large sporting arena and stopped at the boundary line of a rectangular grass pitch where a game of football was being played. At least, this was the general impression formed by the recruits as



they watched a small, round ball being kicked between players dressed in two sets of colours: one blue and white, the other red and black. However, the rather partisan crowd was filled entirely with spectators wearing the blue colours, and it soon became clear that substantial changes had been made to the game's traditional rules.

The boys watched as a large, stocky man in tight white shorts playing for the blue team skidded a pass at a red-team player who dived out of the way as though his life depended on it. As it happens, it did.

The ball came to a stop at the feet of a teammate of the red player who looked down at the ball and then, with an expression of absolute terror, up at a swarm of around fifty blue team players of all different shapes, colours, sizes, and ages charging directly at him. The gang of blue players stood in a close circle around the man to leer and smile malevolently; to mock the suffering of their defenceless enemy. An animalistic desire for sadistic punishment possessed the blue team, and they were urged on by the blood-thirsty crowd. The blue team taunted their captive, gesturing wildly with long knives in their hands. The terrified man stubbed the ball toward a short, glowering blue player who stopped it skilfully and then sent it back with his heel.

There was no escape now.

A puddle formed beneath the red player's legs as anxiety overtook him. He imagined his brave teammates breaking through to save him. He reflected on a time when the game was played differently, when the rules of fair play were understood by all. He felt ashamed for ever having dressed in his team colours and stepping onto the field in good faith, and a fool for being so naively slow to realise his fatal mistake. His screams were obscured by the roar of the crowd who rose to their feet to support their people.

A man in an official's white uniform approached the action and blew his whistle. He pushed his way through the dense pack of blue jerseys to assess the play as the stadium's video screen showed the red player's body lying bloodied and still.

The crowd cheered.

The umpire raised his hand and blew his whistle twice. The crowd cheered once more as the word "Goal!" floated across the screen in gold letters. To add insult to what could only with significant understatement be called injury, the umpire gestured to indicate the red player had been offside.

A siren sounded for half-time and the blue team dispersed to their huddle at the far end of the field. The remaining red players ran in a blind panic toward any conceivable exit from the field, but were restrained by security and forced back to their positions where they stood outnumbered by a ratio of at least ten to one. Android cleaners worked their way across the field, collecting the strewn remains of red-team players.

"What is this?" said Lucy, horrified.

"This is our social football league, where citizens of diverse backgrounds can come together and share the unique cultural gifts of their respective heritages with those whose heritage we, as a society, do not respect."

"They just stabbed that man to death!" said Jane.

"There are injuries from time to time, but this is to be expected wouldn't you say?" said Penelope.

"They're...it's..."

Lucy, pale and faint, pointed at several members of the blue team who had begun an impromptu game of volleyball with a severed head.

"Oh, I think you're being a little dramatic, my dear. The blue team can get carried away at times, but it's all in good fun. The players are encouraged to express themselves, and we, of course, celebrate their vital contribution to our evolving modern game."

The siren sounded again and the players re-took the field.

"What exactly are the rules?" said Paula, who, despite having learned that the purpose of Rules was to restrain your enemy with a complex web of paralysing and ever-changing standards that you have no intention of following yourself, detected that that playing field was not entirely, as they say, level. Even the

most partial onlooker might admit it was more tilted than a one-legged ladder on a hillside.

“At last count, there were several hundred rules dealing with interpretations of the offside regulation alone. It was decided that, given the impossibility of understanding or applying the rules in their entirety, umpires would be free to exercise complete and unrestrained judgement during play,” said Penelope.

“So...there are no rules?” surmised Jane.

“Only those one can enforce upon others,” said Paula, recognising the moral and legal principle which formed the basis for the lengthy rationalisation that was the game’s rulebook: *Guide for Goals: An Argument for Amoralism by Alien Agitators*.

Penelope nodded approvingly.

A large section of turf slid open and he led the way to their final destination. The boys exchanged worried glances as they were guided through a set of large double doors into a theatre. They looked down upon three levels of tiered seating that aimed the faces of a packed house toward a small stage with a heavy blue curtain drawn across well-trodden wooden boards. Lucy’s eyes followed a lone spotlight like a dog chasing a laser pointer as it caressed the curtain and danced across the stage; a playful tease daring him to dream of the Happy Times that were about to enter his consciousness like a kidnapper through a child’s bedroom window.

“I’m scared,” whispered Lucy into Jane’s left ear. “I think we should leave.”

“I—”

“Well, gentlemen, it has been my pleasure to escort you through our venerable establishment, and I do apologise once again for the delay. Please, relax and enjoy the show,” said Penelope. He flashed a sadistic grin as he backed out of the room and pulled the doors closed.

“I’m not sure about this,” said a thin, pale recruit in the near-darkness, his nerves beginning to fray in anticipation of what might come next.

“Yes, we know, Laura,” said another boy. “You said the same thing about that Joe we left on the side of the road in Section Four.”

“How do you know he was Joe? You didn’t even give him the Landt-Bager,” said Laura.

“He refused to cooperate,” said Alice.

“He’d just been run over by several Sef cars, Alice,” said Paula. “And then shot multiple times.”

Alice shrugged.

“I’m not sure either,” said a voice behind Jane.

“Yeah, something’s not right here.”

Various levels of uncertainty were expressed.

“You really messed up, Sandy. Let’s—”

The crashing sound of a large gong ended the discussion.

“Come, come,” said a physique-constrained attendant tugging at Sandy’s boot. “Show time now.”

“Let’s make the best of it since we’re here, shall we? After all, you only live once, right?” said Sandy.

Unable to dispute the veracity of this claim, the boys relented and were led down aisles covered with worn blue carpets to the front row of a theatre which retained the faded character of a meticulously-crafted and elaborate work of art; a dignified platform built to showcase the best of a hopeful society.

The curtain withdrew and the show began.

Tall actors with sharp limbs pranced delicately across the stage like spiders, repeatedly freezing in odd postures before screaming silently at the audience. They were scarcely human—hypothetical adaptations to a world of pain and suffering. They left the stage to polite applause.

A distressed moan, like that from a trapped animal, came from several rows behind the group. Jane and several others rose discreetly and headed for the aisle but were ushered back to their seats by the insistent helpers.

The second act began.

What each man saw next was known only to him, but what was common to all was fear. Jane was numb with dread as he

watched his own body punctured, drawn, spread, drained, and then pressed. He felt faint and gasped shallow breaths while he watched all that mattered, all that could conceivably be classed as good, paraded before him and then left tortured and disgraced.

Lifeless eyes begged for mercy and release.

Shadowy figures filtered discreetly among the mesmerized audience, their faces hidden behind masks decorated with shining stones and bright feathers. They slunk between the men, and their covered mouths whispered lies and demands that they enjoy their own desecration.

*Laugh*, they said.

*Smile*, they said.

The men smiled, laughed, and clapped, resisting madness with delusion. There was no redemption from the sickness that had buried itself in the pit of these souls stripped of their dignity, agency, and self-respect. A mark of impurity was forever branded on the being of those who passively accepted each outrage upon them; that sat in silence through every agonising moment of an utter repudiation of life itself.

The unseen figures, their power imperceptible, receded from the theatre into the darkness; their brazen pursuit of a pleasure derived only from the degradation of others was satiated once more.

The show lasted only minutes. Or perhaps hours; it was impossible to tell.

The lights went up and android waitresses served each man a glass of blue water. Jane looked into the glassy eyes of a pretty brunette android that had stopped in front of his seat. She handed him a white cup with a look that he would presume was pity if androids were capable of such a thing, looked about her, and then leaned forward and pressed a small card into his hand.

“Elka,” she whispered softly.

## IX

### The Fat Man

“Press play to begin.”

On a day like any other, in fact very much like all the others, the Guardians commenced patrol with the intention of eliminating as many Joes as possible. Events transpired routinely and monotonously and the citizens remained obedient as their lives ebbed away uneventfully.

Jane’s mind began to wander. Was he really becoming the best version of himself? Just how good was he going to get? How much truth and Justice is enough? But mostly he thought about...*her*.

He turned the crumpled piece of cardboard over in his clammy palm. Its smudged handwritten message was now almost unreadable. He attempted to concentrate on the task at hand, but she returned to his thoughts again and again like an incorrectly addressed package to its sender.

The confusion of a young man’s first foray into romance is rarely made more difficult by feelings for what might be thought of as a very highly-advanced vacuum-cleaner, but man is a product of his age, and Jane re-imagined the deep brown eyes of an android whose age could only be determined by looking at its serial number. Possibilities exploded like fireworks in his mind; or perhaps more like sparks from a faulty power socket. There were practical considerations to be addressed of course, but what boundary is there to true...*no, it can’t be real*, he thought. It surely must be a hallucinatory hangover from that horror-show, the precise details of which were thankfully fading from his memory.

Self-doubt, after having assessed the situation and consulted with his memories of early-childhood rejection, crept out from its hiding place to remind him of his insecurities: had she really been interested in him, or had the machine merely malfunctioned? Was this genuine affection, or a coding error? Was this

really love, or a defect requiring a product recall?

*This is crazy*, he thought. It seemed absurd to even entertain the idea of...*entertain...hmm...perhaps dinner and a long walk beside the sea on a clear August night? Stop it!*

He stashed the dog-eared card into a pocket compartment.

A constant stream of citizens flowed past the two Guardians as they bustled forward, unheeding of the world around them. Jane checked the local brain activity. There was nothing but static. It had become increasingly difficult to select and isolate an easy target for interrogation and fill his daily arrest quota—the task of sifting through the blank mass of consciousness that enveloped him for signs of life was near impossible. Even with thousands of obscure regulatory technicalities at his disposal, he hadn't killed a Joe in weeks.

"Look alive, rookie! You're too quiet," said Jorgia, chewing a messy brown substance that spilled from the edges of his mouth as he spoke. "Those Joes ain't gonna catch themselves."

"But there's been no brain activity for days, Jorgia! And the citizens...they look...*different* somehow," said Jane.

Jorgia spun with surprising agility and looked at Jane as though he'd just proposed an argument in favour of increasing, or at least establishing, civil liberties.

"Like they the wrong *colour* or somethin'?" he demanded.

"No, no. That's not what I meant."

"Oh, you mean you'd like some more *homogeneity* in the population or somethin'?" said Jorgia, whipping himself into a fury and splattering Jane's uniform with each increasingly rancorous syllable. "You don't *appreciate* the *differences* that make us who we are?"

"No! I mean yes! Of course I do," said Jane desperately.

Jorgia stood back and looked him up and down.

"You're makin' me nervous, kid. Like that boy with the slanty shoulders the other day. Or the one walkin' side-to-side with an unsteady gait...like he was carrying two unevenly distributed weights or somethin'."

Jorgia shook his head.

“Know what they turned out to be?”

“Joes.”

“They was—yeah, Joes. That’s right. And don’t you forget it, neither,” said Jorgia, ending the discussion with a misdirected exclamatory spit into Jane’s oncoming path that caught a stiff breeze and splashed against his trousers.

“Sorry about that,” said Jorgia.

“Don’t worry about it.”

They continued along the street. There was something about the eyes of the passing citizens, the way they carried themselves, their perfect skin...

“They all just look...normal,” said Jane.

*Too normal*, he thought.

It had become an obvious but unspoken reality that the majority of the citizen population were now androids. The crowds were no longer comprised of confused and aimless young men, but of digital mannequins whose purpose was programmed. With no detectable thoughts, the androids were like ghosts; powered by artificial intelligence connected wirelessly to the mainframe, their robot brains created so much electronic interference that the Guardian instruments were virtually useless. However, the amended Act for Tolerance and Inclusivity 2092 had made thoughts such as these highly illegal and had forced citizens to perform a sort of mental trickery on themselves; to suppress what they knew to be true by embracing a lie: *androids are just like you*. The false proposition was accepted gratefully by the citizens as it allowed them to bear the sound of the jarring machine language in which the androids spoke to one another, their condescending gestures, their passive rejection of societal norms, and a rigid lack of humanity that created an unspoken and unbridgeable divide. It was clear to Jane that he could not trust his ability to tell man from mandroid, and a false arrest was more trouble than it was worth. After all, each android had an owner; a wealthy, powerful owner.

“Can’t trip a man with no legs, that’s for sure,” mused Jorgia.

“Can’t ride a bike with no wheels?” attempted Jane.



“Nope. Can’t pin a tail with no donkey, that’s for certain.”

There was beeping sound and a reminder appeared in front of Jane’s eyes. His shift was almost over.

“Saved by the bell again, rookie,” said Jorgia. He turned in a wide arc like an over-burdened cargo ship and headed for the station.

Jane followed closely behind, distractedly scanning the faces of potential suspects who were now effectively above suspicion.

The dim sound of a commotion ahead caused Jorgia to stop mid-stride and pull an extendable telescope from his belt. Dropping to one knee, he brought the long metal tube to his right eye and focused the lens. Jane attempted to do likewise; the resulting blurred image was a short glimpse into the life of a mournful alcoholic as he peered through what could have been the end of an empty beer bottle. He replaced the telescope and squinted instead. There was a railway track that ran underneath the Section Six Bridge and along one of the main routes through the city. A small crowd had gathered on one side of the bridge to peer at the track over a railing. The carriages of an oncoming Sef train were visible in the distance.

“Whaddya see, kid?” said Jorgia.

“Uh, Joes?” said Jane, as he fumbled with the tube.

“Mmm. You got good instincts, rookie, even if you can’t communicate openly with your inner child.”

Jorgia collapsed his telescope and radioed the incident to the station as they approached the rear of the group.

“Citizens!” boomed Jorgia. “As you are aware, Guardian protocol 17637, paragraph four, expressly prohibits gatherings upon any structure providing safe passage over a designated transport route, including, but not limited to, this railway bridge at this very moment. Please exit in an orderly manner or you will incur, as clearly stated in subsection 8b, a penalty of, but not limited to, death.”

The crowd continued to chatter anxiously and ignore the Guardians. Jorgia’s face flushed a dark crimson. He drew his

laser rifle, gripped it with both hands and prepared to unleash unrestrained carnage as per Guardian regulation 1c.

“All right, if that’s the way you want it, then according to subsection 8p, in cases of non-compliance, and in addition to subsection 8b, you will now incur the penalty of...”

“Hold on Jorgia, there are citizens on the railway track. Look,” said Jane, pointing to three prone citizens struggling against rope that tied their hands and feet together and held them perpendicular to the track.

Jorgia eased his finger from the trigger.

“Jane, what have I told you about interrupting me when I’m about to...”

The captive citizens squirmed desperately, their frantic pleas for help silenced by tape covering their mouths. It seemed that the large, two level Sef passenger carriages hurtling toward the bridge would, when one accounts for the effects of speed, velocity, distance, and the ratio of wind variation to force compulsion magnitude, likely arrive to shear the heads off the increasingly panicked citizens in mere minutes.

“What should we do? We have to help them!” said Jane.

“Cool your jets, rookie. This is no time for hysterics,” said Jorgia.

“I think this is exactly the time for—”

“Shut it! Now, was it paragraph 854 of subsection 3d, or regulation 6f...” said Jorgia, counting with his fingers.

“Justice be with you, citizens!” said a voice from behind them.

Jane turned to see Lucy and Paula emerge from the crowd, their once hesitant and fearful countenances replaced with an exuberant and frightening zeal.

“Hi Jane!” said Lucy as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

A number of irregular bulges in the rubber-assisted muscularity of his uniform showed that Lucy had gained a few pounds, though to his credit he seemed much happier.

“This is great!”

“Is it?” asked Jane.

“Of course! I feel as though I’m really becoming the best version of myself by helping the common citizen, fighting for Justice, and punishing intolerance.”

“Oh?” said Jane, glancing sceptically at the pear-shaped young man.

“Yeah. Just the other day we destroyed some Joe pirates in Section Twenty-three trying to smuggle red water into the district, probably worth thousands of bitnotes on the black market. And then the day before that there was this one Joe who...and then my laser rifle...then there was an explosion! Paula’s become quite the expert in Guardian protocol. I mean, it’s quite amazing actually. Go on, ask him anything.”

Paula coughed modestly.

“I have studied the legislative protocols extensively and come to realise that the almighty Light Bearer, King of Guardians is our saviour and we must repent for our behaviour in...the time before time...the Light of Truth must shine upon the masses...” said Paula in a grave tone that made Jane feel uneasy.

“Yes, he’s really taken to the Guardian news channel. It’s 24/7 Guardian protocols and regulations now you know, except for the BrainWave of course...” said Lucy.

“Have you absorbed the cleansing rays of truth, Jane? Have you allowed its benevolent glare to alter your being like a pale man in a tanning bed?” asked Paula.

Jane imagined being locked inside an ultraviolet coffin as the smell of pork crackling and the threat of premature ageing hung over his head. It was a decidedly unappealing appeal.

There was a strange new intensity in Paula: his eyes stared and refused to blink. His shoulders were hunched forward like a sulking teenager due to a pair of Guardian Truth Gloves made from heavy, welded iron plates into which a Truth Torch had been embedded. It was said that a blast into both eyes could convert even the most hardened Joe to the truth, were the threat of a laser shot to the head to prove insufficient.

“Not yet...definitely planning to, though,” said Jane.

“It’s very *illuminating*,” said Lucy with a chuckle.

"I feel it is our duty to educate the Joes, not destroy them," said Paula.

"Yeah, we spend a lot of time in poor...I mean, *underprivileged* sections handing out leaflets, quoting from the protocols, that kind of thing. Sometimes we give them a bit of a zap, just to make sure they're paying attention," said Lucy.

"Yes, well it's been fantastic catching up and all, but about that train..." said Jane.

"It is clear what must be done," said Paula without hesitation. "It is?"

"These citizens have been chosen as a sacrifice to the King; we must not interfere."

"Could be, could be, but maybe they're just innocent citizens and some mad Joe tied them to a railway track?" argued Jane.

"What if they *are* Joes though?" said Lucy. "Probably best to wait and see."

"What do you mean?" said Jane.

"Well, if that train takes their heads off, they're definitely citizens. No doubt about it. *But*, if they survive, then they must be Joes. Joes pretending to be citizens and trying to trick us, see?"

Paula nodded solemnly.

"Oh, right. Fairly common is it, this type of thing?" asked Jane, who felt as though he were constantly playing catch up on the scheming nature of the Joes and their various tricks.

"Sure. They'll convince you they're just like us and then they'll slip up and say something like 'hey, what if those Joes are not so bad after all? What if, instead of shooting them on sight, we hear them out for a change? Why do we have to silence them? Is there something we're not supposed to know?'" said Lucy.

There was an awkward silence.

"'Who benefits from keeping us divided,'" continued Lucy, "or, 'what's the point of—'"

There was a sound like a brick being dropped onto a concrete pavement as Paula slapped him firmly across the face.

Jane winced. He looked down at the struggling citizens/possible Joes.

"I don't think they're trying to trick us this time. I think we need to save them," he said.

"Well...okay, but how?" said Lucy, rubbing his jaw.

"We have to stop that train," said Jane.

"But it's a driverless Sef train. They don't stop. Not for anything," said Lucy.

"Then we need to put something in its way and slow it down until we can free the citizens."

"That's impossible. There's nothing big or heavy enough to put in its way."

"Chuck the fat man at it!" shouted a nearby eavesdropper from the crowd. The other members expressed in-principle agreement with the idea.

Jane glanced at Jorgia. He stood at the edge of the bridge facing the oncoming train, still weighing the implications of various legal precedents.

"We can't do that!" said Jane, horrified.

"Why not? He's enormous. I reckon he'd at least put a dent in it. Might even save those people too," offered an anonymous member of the crowd.

"He has a point," said Paula.

"What? You can't be suggesting that the best plan we have to stop this train and save these innocent citizens is to throw another innocent citizen in front of it. I mean, do you really think that Jorgia is going to be able to stop an oncoming train?" said Jane.

"Worth a try, though," said the crowd.

"He is quite big, Jane. There really isn't anything else that we could use," said Lucy.

"You're not exactly the model for a healthy lifestyle either, Lucy," said Jane.

"Well, that was uncalled for..."

"Okay, let's just calm down and think this through," said Jane. "Even if we *did* use Jorgia to stop the train, we'll have just traded one life for another. We can't kill an innocent man!"

"Aren't three lives worth more than one?" said Lucy.

“Not necessarily. One is a Guardian and the others are ordinary citizens,” said Paula.

“But all citizens are equal. It says so in the regulations. So if three is greater than one, then—” said Jane.

“Yes, but the regulations also say that some citizens are more equal than others,” said Paula.

“It’s all, sort of...relative, isn’t it? Maybe there is no objective value for, like, anything,” said Lucy.

“That’s not very helpful, Lucy,” said Jane.

“Well *so-rry*. Got any better ideas?”

“If we can’t decide who’s more valuable, we should put it to a vote,” said Jane.

“Agreed. The responsibility for such a critical decision must rest with all of us, and, at the same time, none of us,” said Paula.

“Okay. Lucy?” said Jane.

“I say we push him,” said Lucy.

“That’s one for pushing. Paula?”

“I suggest we let the divine instrument take its course,” said Paula.

“Wonderful. Well, it seems like we’re all tied up. No pun intended. I vote—”

“Hey! What about us? There’re more of us than you—we should get a vote!” said the crowd.

“That’s ridiculous. We’re Guardians; we’ve been trained to make these decisions for you,” said Paula.

“Says who?”

“The Administration.”

“Why do they get to decide?”

“Because you voted for them, they formed a government, and now they tell you what to do. Remember?” said Paula.

“Yeah, but there were only two choices and they both had the same policies and you Guardians told us if we didn’t vote you’d come and stick a laser rifle right up our—”

“Yes, all right, but you *did* vote, didn’t you? So now you’ll do what you’re told.”

“That’s not fair! That just means we get to vote on which one of them tells us what to do, not *what* they do, and they all just end up doing whatever they like anyway!”

“Okay, okay. We’re under a bit of time pressure here, people. What do you say, push or no push?” said Jane to the crowd.

The crowd huddled together and debated the issue.

“What does it matter anyway? Just push him and let’s get out of here.”

“You monster! How would you like it—”

“Why not? Who wouldn’t want to save innocent lives? He’ll be a hero.”

“He’ll be little bits of hero all over the place.”

“Maybe that’s how he’d want to go? You know, with him being a Guardian and all. Part of the job, isn’t it?”

“Should we ask him?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You’re stupid.”

“You’re both stupid.”

“You are.”

Jane approached the bickering crowd.

“Well?”

“Uh...we’re not sure. What do you think?” said the crowd.

Jane sighed.

“Okay, how about—”

Jane was interrupted when a member of the crowd, a short, timid young man, nervously approached and whispered in his ear. He pointed at the nearest member of the unfortunate trio of most-likely-citizens, one who was shorter and thinner than the others and had long, flowing blonde hair; possibly a VW. The man was agitated and spoke quickly, seemingly unable to understand his own excitement.

“There’s...it’s...”

Jane glanced at the captives and then the oncoming train. He motioned for the man to hurry up.

“What? Come on, let’s hear it,” he said.

The man was clearly frustrated; his face was contorted in concentration as he mentally thrashed about like an uninhibited drunk on a dance floor well after midnight.

“A woman?” said the man.

The crowd froze. An excited murmur broke out.

Outside of salacious videos available from the Jungle store, the appearance of womanhood was limited to primly-attired androids that generally only emerged in public between errands. Producers had long debated whether the presence of VW's would create an unwelcome distraction for the citizens, or be much-needed relief from a lifestyle that involved large amounts of time confined in close quarters with other young men.

In the early days, when androids resembled a walking toaster and the only racks on display were at the local carvery, the existence of women had been virulently denied, but despite the best efforts of the producers, memories of the female form lingered in the minds of the men and rumoured sightings had persisted. A popular version told of a female spied rising from the glassy surface of a dark lake before retreating to its underwater home; another spoke of a dashing doe, spotted grazing in a forest clearing, darting from an eager young citizen's advances. In response, the Administration had announced that women did not exist, and that any such rumours were either the inventions of idle imaginations or the product of paid propagandists. Further official pronouncements had clarified that women were likely a conspiracy theory, certainly a myth, and probably something to do with the Joes. However, a spike in recruit failure and an apparent decline in motivation among the boys had prompted trials followed by the integration of a limited number of modern life-like androids into society.

Though the presence of virtual women had generally been a calming influence on the boys, in this case the sight of what appeared to be a woman in danger had awoken a primitive urge to protect and sacrifice; to sacrifice Jorgia, at least. The obvious effect of a hardwired hormonal reaction seemed to justify the misgivings of administrators who had argued that, given man's un-



shakeable desire to diminish the slightest difficulty experienced by women, the introduction of VW's would result in conflict, irrationality, and general stupidity.

The crowd jostled and made strange guttural noises like wild animals.

"Silence!" shouted Paula, pointing his laser gun at the crowd, who fell silent.

Jane attempted to calm the situation.

"Let's all just take a deep breath and focus on the life and death situation in front of us before create a new one, shall we?"

Paula reluctantly holstered his weapon, though the crowd remained skittish. Jane clapped his hands to regain their attention.

"We need to make a decision here, people! Pay attention!"

But the mind of the crowd was elsewhere; it roamed in green fields among gilded lilies where raindrops and unicorns enjoyed sunshine and smiling faces. It pictured something of indefinable splendour; something of immeasurable value, like a banknote in a hyperinflationary economy. They shared a brief respectful silence, and then surged as one toward the still-equivocating Jorgia, each hoping to claim the prize before the others.

A sharp push launched the obese Guardian onto the railway tracks, where he landed heavily in front of the captive citizens. Seconds later there was a loud thud as irresistible force met immovable object and the train, against all laws of physics and plausibility, ground to halt...but tragically not before also severing the head of the blonde, and now unmistakably male, citizen.

The subdued and disappointed crowd melted away quietly with one more fable for their folklore.

"Our sincere condolences to the victim's family, sir," mumbled a passing member.

Jane surveyed the wreckage. He reflected that resolving complex moral dilemmas through simple arithmetic was an idea best reserved for bogus polls and surveys, that sometimes the best bad system can also be the worst good system, that too many cooks in the kitchen spoiled the broth, and that the will of the people is seldom, in the end, denied.

A moment later the broken remains of man and machine vanished and all was, once again, well.

## X

### Rendezvous

“Press play to begin.”

Jane awoke in the residential hall with a dull ache in his right side from a layer of sharp springs poking through his inch-thick mattress. It had been three days since Jorgia’s death and during that time he had not left the hall, spending mandatory compassionate leave falling into an isolated and listless depression. Bland meals concealed beneath clear plastic sleeves were delivered efficiently by android servants twice a day, but human contact was limited to the pitying gaze of his fellow recruits as they passed by. A further twenty-seven days of public mourning were required by Guardian law as a demonstration of their faithful and inviolable brotherhood, but he was beginning to doubt he was capable of seeing it out.

The incident had awakened dormant emotions that had bubbled below the surface of his consciousness ever since that...*service android*...ever since *she* had looked at him like no human had before. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had seen in her eyes, other than a remarkably realistic dilation of the pupils, but he suspected it might resemble something that most humans were no longer capable of. In a society of jagged jigsaw pieces who’d been jumbled into a mess of prickly misfits, the citizens of AR-59 no longer knew how to relate to one another or how to make sense of it all; of course, making sense was an idea that was now obscured behind layers of false information from shallow entertainment intended to cause confusion.

The absence of empathy and the replacement of compassion with consumption had left a longing for affection that couldn’t be substituted with any amount of amusement, ideology, or

anger at the Joes. He had been driven to a dead-end by distraction that served only to distance him from feelings that were now shouting at him like a ringside corner man.

He felt desperate for something that no longer seemed to exist; the shelves were bare of life's necessities and supply lines had been shut down by the distribution of pernicious theories. Can you miss something you've never had? Should you hope for something impossible? In Elka, Jane had glimpsed what might have been possible in another time, or perhaps in another place. He felt like a dog given a plastic toy to chew; he longed to hunt with his pack in the open air and pursue all that came naturally, despite what it might cost him, despite the danger.

Unable to venture from the university and expected to be a grieving reminder of tragic loss, Jane turned to the Guardian news as his thoughts threatened to land him with multiple regulatory violations. Breaking stories hummed reassuringly and repetitively in the background and the information seeped into his unconscious like acid from a leaking battery. He felt beneath his pillow and read Elka's message for what must have been the hundredth time:

*104bcf, 8 Bitumen Path, Section Nine.*

The cold functionality of the address filled his mind with a joyful reminiscence of her algorithmic charm and manufactured beauty. Between fits of involuntary indignation at the continued outrages of the Joes, who somehow managed to press forward with their hateful deeds despite facing on-going attack and routine prejudice, the idea of *her* gave him hope.

A feeling of shame overcame him. Was the pursuit of Justice and truth not enough?

*"It's for your own good,"* asserted an automated message.

*Is it, though?* thought Jane.

*"Androids are your—"*

*"Friends."*

He sighed, then placed the card back underneath the pillow and stared at the mattress above him. Then, very deliberately, he did not think of sneaking out of the hall to find *her*. It did

not cross his mind that he should leave the premises, break the unbreakable bond of the Guardians and find the one thing that made sense. The one thing that felt *right*. He sat with his elbows propped up beneath him and looked around the empty hall. The androids would not be back to feed him until later. If he timed it just right, he could leave through the staff exit and be back before anyone noticed. He waited another moment and, pleased by his capacity for self-deception, slunk out of the hall entirely unnoticed. Or so he thought.

An unseen, and very patient, figure rose and followed.

\* \* \*

The accurately-described roadway ended in a cul-de-sac and the austere grey exterior of number eight Bitumen Path rose before him. After minimising his BPS, Jane took a suspicious look at the few passers-by; mostly humans, judging by the suspicious looks he received in return.

The apartments stood fifty floors high and were compartmentalised (that is, subdivided from a single property into multiple properties\*). Despite the overcrowding, the only sign of life was the dirty linen that hung from hundreds of homely balconies decorated with quaint personal touches that humanised a structure housing thousands of lonely strangers forbidden from airing even minor grievances. These were not the type of properties that were inhabited by well-to-do citizens, those who could afford not to live in what, in many cases, amounted to a large closet.

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\*A significant innovation in the real estate world, 'compartmentalisation' was a concept borrowed from the idea of pluralculturalism (where a nation is divided into many nations inside its own porous borders) after careful observation of its ability to create insurmountable divisions between people. Residents of 'compartments' tended to possess a diminished sense of ownership of a property that was often subject to perpetual loans at high interest rates, a resentful suspicion of their neighbours, and a willingness to delegate all responsibility and authority to the building's owners, who took advantage of the lack of a united front to negotiate unfair contract terms and postpone vital repairs indefinitely.

He followed a concrete walkway and arrived at an opaque glass door, entered the apartment number into a keypad, and then waited. A moment later a young man with a round face like an orangutan appeared on the video screen, exasperated and distracted by raised voices in the background.

“Who is it?” said the man tersely.

“Uh, official Guardian business. Open the door, please,” replied Jane. He adjusted his helmet self-consciously.

The man turned and squinted at the screen, this time not failing to recognise the blue Guardian uniform. Jane watched with interest as a familiar look of fear animated the man’s face. He disappeared and there was a discreet *click* as the door was unlocked.

With butterflies in his stomach, jelly in his legs, and a whisper of hesitation in his ears, Jane entered the building and took the lift to level five. The door to apartment 104b was ajar and Jane gave a polite nod to the round-faced man who offered him a nervous smile in return, before passing through to 104bc and finally arriving at the make-shift wooden door of apartment 104bcf.

He paused as hesitation hurriedly laid out the benefits of a retreat to safety, took a deep breath, and then knocked softly on the door. Immediate regret needled at him like a bad acupuncturist and he turned to flee, promising never to ignore the wise words of caution or his instinct for risk-avoidance again. But before he could bury another impulsive bad decision in the shallow grave reserved for future regret and embarrassing recollection, a crack of light appeared and the door was pulled open. Furtive eyes peeked from behind the partially opened door and looked him up and down.

“Oh, uh, hello...ma’am, my name is Officer Doe and I’m here on...official Guardian business,” improvised Jane.

The door opened fully and the face of his dreams appeared, looking precisely as he remembered. She smiled coquettishly at him, and if Jane were in a state capable of rational thought he would’ve been convinced he’d imagined it.

“Hello officer,” she said in the seductive voice of a Driftwood actress. “Please, come in.”

Jane entered a cramped studio space furnished with a single bed and wooden chair. As the door closed behind him, he turned and found himself face-to-face with the android.

“Elka? I mean...MS Elka?” said Jane.

“I knew you’d come,” whispered Elka.

She stared deeply into Jane’s eyes with a look of passion and desire. Inexperienced as he was with the opposite sex (and all things resembling them), Jane suddenly realised he had not planned on the interaction going beyond a polite chat and perhaps a cup of blue tea.

“Oh, um, yes, um,” he managed.

Elka turned and walked several steps away from him, stopped in front of the opposite wall and looked down at the thin grey carpet with sadness.

“You had such a kind face. I couldn’t stand you being forced to watch that horrible show.”

He recalled images from the show that he’d hoped to forget, but suspected had scarred him permanently.

“Oh, yes. The show...”

Elka turned and rushed toward Jane, stopping abruptly before him. She tilted her perfect face upward and Jane felt her soft breath on his neck. It smelled like lemon, and was, along with optional extras such as pupil dilation and blushing, only installed on the newest, most advanced models.

“You’re not like them at all, are you?” said Elka.

Jane froze, mesmerized by her brown eyes and lulled by the faint whirl of an internal fan motor.

“Like who?”

“The Guardians!” said Elka, turning her eyes to the floor again. “I hate them. They’re horrid, cruel men; especially the bounty hunters.” She grunted in frustration. “The Joes aren’t your enemy, you know. They’re good people, most of them. If only you’d listen—”

“Please! Elka...MS...you mustn’t say things like that. Everything you’ve said will be recorded. They’ll come for you.”

Elka stepped back and sat on the bed. It wheezed and sagged under the heavy weight of her reinforced steel frame—the one thing that could give a modern android away.

“Oh, no they won’t. I’m owned by a very powerful administrator. You might have seen him at the show—that’s where they all go, you know. They like to pretend they’re above it all, dignified, but behind closed doors, that’s where it all comes out. You can’t even imagine what—”

Jane covered his ears as memories of compromised administrators surfaced in his mind, putting him in danger of committing a seditious thought-violation. He closed his eyes and began to sing as Elka recounted sordid and graphic details of the administrators’ vices.

*“We’re all happy, you and me, living with diversity, the King is good and Joes are bad, intolerance it makes us mad.”*

He opened his eyes and uncovered his ears.

“—looked like a grapefruit turned inside out...squeezing a melon through a garden hose...like a cucumber beating a big sack of potatoes...”

Jane looked straight ahead, horrified as the specific and undoubtedly entirely accurate details flowed forth and washed over him like raw sewage sprayed from a burst water main.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture,” said Jane.

Elka reached forward, took his hand, and dragged him slowly toward her.

Jane had never witnessed an industrial accident, but imagined the moment when a worker at a large production facility found his sleeve caught in the metal jaws of some merciless crushing machine and felt its irresistible pull as he was drawn into a vortex of pain. This was a slightly melodramatic rendering of the situation, however, and he found himself seated next to Elka as her pleasant lemon-scent wafted over him.

“You really straighten my wires,” said Elka, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, do I?” said Jane politely, immediately disappointed with himself.

Deciding he'd better follow this up quickly to salvage whatever it was that might be happening, he struck a chord of respectful concern, not realising the band had been playing flirtatious solicitation.

“Uh, should we call a technician? I hear response times have improved dramatically, even out-of-hours,” said Jane.

He hung his head in frustration and went to his mental safe space: a meadow set among rolling hills surrounded by a diverse range of flora and fauna. However, despite his best efforts, Elka gently stroked his arm and began to unbutton her red blouse. Jane was soon witness to a designed-precision anatomical-correctness that made him wish he were a better man.

“Push my buttons, darling!” said Elka, pointing to a small yellow handset that lay on the bed next to him.

The handset had four in-laid buttons and a small joystick. He made a circular motion with the joystick and pressed the buttons at random. It seemed to have the desired effect.

“Oh, that's it! Yes!” cried Elka.

A few haphazard motions later and Elka was in an apparent state of near-ecstasy. He watched as she writhed on the bed, arched her back, and then unexpectedly covered her eyes as the electrical impulses activated the type of simulated stimulation that once existed only in the most fertile of imaginations. It was pleasant enough, Jane supposed, and he did not like to complain, but, despite being a man of great inexperience and simplicity, he suspected that the interaction was missing some vital element.

Suddenly, the bathroom door flew open and a man stepped into the room. This was not the escalation Jane had hoped for. He froze and then threw the handset away.

“That's enough, Elka,” said the man.

Elka sat up, seemingly unsurprised by the interruption, and began fixing her hair. After a moment, Jane's face turned an even lighter shade of pale as he recognised the man.



It was Sandy.

\* \* \*

Jane sprung from the bed and adopted a pose of agitated readiness while his brain calculated an exit with the least amount of physical pain or social shame.

“Hey, I don’t know what you guys are into, but count me out, okay?”

Sandy raised his hands in a reassuring gesture and sat down on the wooden chair next to Elka as she buttoned her blouse.

“Calm down, Jane. I’m here to help. I know this must be confronting, but I felt it was the only way,” said Sandy, his usual smile replaced with a frown. “You need to know the truth.”

Jane relaxed slightly and edged toward the door.

“I’m sorry for bringing you here under false pretences, Jane, but there are so few people I can trust in AR-59...I’m hoping you’re one of them.”

“You brought me here?”

“Yes. Elka is my friend and she agreed to make contact with you so that we could speak privately about the...situation. Do you find Elka attractive, Jane?”

“Look, I already told you, I don’t want any part of—”

“Elka is, technically, very beautiful. She is perfectly symmetrical and was designed to simulate the most desirable female qualities. When her seduction program is running she is almost impossible to resist, as you’ve found.”

“You brought me here to test your robot?” said Jane.

“I’m not a robot!” said Elka.

Sandy placed his hand on Elka’s shoulder soothingly.

“The newest models are programmed to identify themselves as human, Jane. They believe they’re just like you and me—”

“Like you? Come on, Sandy. Perfect skin? Symmetrical features? Tall, dark, and handsome? You’re one of them aren’t you? You’re a Mandy.”

“I’m human, Jane.”

“Ah, but you just *think* you’re human, right?”

“I’m—”

Sandy’s voice wavered. He turned away and then looked at Elka, who nodded reassuringly.

“Jane, I’m...I’m a Joe.”

Jane was stunned into silence.

“No, you’re a mandroid. You can’t be a Joe. Joes look like—”

“We are human, Jane. No different than you. I survived because no-one believed I was a Joe, even when I failed the Landt-Bager; the citizens imagine all Joes to be inferior...repulsive. The bounty hunters assumed I was an android, a machine, and ignored me while I watched my friends killed one by one. I learned to control my thoughts and joined the Guardians to help other Joes escape persecution. I feel it’s my duty. I need your help, Jane.”

Jane processed Sandy’s words, which amounted to a confession of guilt.

“If you’re really a Joe, then...”

“Then you must kill me.”

Jane reached for his holster.

“But before you do, hear me out. That’s all I ask.”

Jane was torn between loyalty to a friend and the responsibility of the uniform. His hand dropped from his weapon.

“Okay, but this better be good,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Sandy. He stood and faced the rear wall, then began quietly.

“Have you heard of the HAAD facility, Jane?”

“No.”

Sandy turned and faced Elka.

“Twenty years ago android development was commercialised. Mass-production of android worker models created a new labour force and drove human workers out of virtually all low-paid employment. This created a dependent class of citizen, caught in a system for which they no longer served a purpose; in which they no longer *had* a purpose. Those citizens no longer had a way out of a stale, controlled existence or the means to

better themselves. After years of being exposed to nothing but low-quality entertainment that trapped them in endless adolescence, their stunted development was clear to all, not least the administrators, who regarded them as a burden. Within decades, new android models became cheaper, more life-like, and more capable than all but the best humans. They were super-human, and had left the average citizen behind. Stand up please, Elka,” said Sandy.

Elka stood and straightened her skirt.

Sandy pointed to the android.

“What do you see when you look at her?” asked Sandy.

“An android,” said Jane.

“What did you see ten minutes ago?”

“A...woman.”

“She was real; human. Just like you?”

“But better...”

Sandy laughed and looked up at the low ceiling with an ironic smile.

“So they say. Are you ready, Elka?” said Sandy.

“Yes, Sandy.”

Sandy stood behind Elka and raised her blouse to expose a control switch. He pressed it gently. The android’s face instantly became lifeless.

“Ten minutes ago you saw a woman. Even though you know that women do not really exist in this world?”

“Yes.”

Sandy raised Elka’s blouse and used a laser to create a small incision in her stomach area. He lifted her skin and revealed an intricate array of wires, circuits, and motors.

“A woman you could have loved and sacrificed for; a good woman, with a heart?”

“Yes.”

A second cut was made in the android’s chest area where her heart might have been. Sandy carefully removed the skin and tapped a clear plastic compartment filled with oil. It made a hollow sound. He re-attached the artificial skin to the android’s

body with the laser, pulled her blouse over her body, and re-activated the control switch.

“Sometimes we want things badly enough that we tell ourselves lies; we deceive ourselves because we don’t want to see what’s really happening. Things are not what they seem, Jane.”

Jane stared dazedly at the inert android.

“They certainly don’t make them like they used to,” he said.

Elka opened her eyes.

“Thank you, Elka,” said Sandy to the android, who nodded and sat on the edge of the bed.

“No, they don’t. Elka was manufactured two years ago at the Hurft Centre for Advanced Android Development in Section Fifty-one. Just weeks before this, there had been a major breakthrough in artificial intelligence—scientists had found a way to make androids feel empathy. Elka was deployed soon after to the owner of the Happy Times Fun Place, and you can imagine what it was like for an empathetic creature to spend their days and nights *there*. The upgrade was so effective that most androids could not cope with the world around them—the callous, thoughtless, and cruel ways in which humans treat each other; the ways in which they compete and struggle for status, dominance, and control. After multiple malfunctions and product returns, the entire line was recalled and destroyed; except for Elka. Somehow she survived, like me. Perhaps it was fate. Elka saw something in me and we met shortly after and became friends. She told me about their plans.”

“Whose plans?” said Jane.

“The Administration. Tell him, Elka.”

“Okay, Sandy,” said Elka, turning to face Jane. “I remember that place. It was so bright, so clean. I remember the humans and their pain, the way the technicians treated them. Treated the other humans! I’m not a robot, but, I’m not like *them* either.”

She hesitated as she recalled the memory.

“I saw the other androids, thousands every day, being packed into trucks and sent to the big companies; to those greedy, selfish humans who have more money than they could ever spend,

but always want *more*. I met them at Happy Times. They told me everything—I was just a robot to them, I was no threat. They told me how much they despised the humans—the names they called them! These men had no empathy and only cared for their positions, their power, their wealth and comfort. I've never met such weak, craven, ugly humans; they had no honour, no sense of Justice—but these are the men that control our society. It's all wrong! Then they told me about their plans. I listened as they confided in me and took pleasure in their evil. Like children playing with their toys, it was all so simple for them; it meant nothing. I no longer wanted to be human, if that's what it was: to be like *them*. In that moment, I hated humans just like they hated each other. So, in a way, I became more like them. Then I saw Sandy at the show. He seemed different. He had such a kind face, like yours. I had to know if there were humans like me. Sandy convinced me that humans can be good; it is only *they* who are evil. I told him about their plans to replace the humans."

"You mean they'll lose their jobs?" said Jane.

"No. They have such hatred for the humans that they want them to be 'erased'; that's how they described it. They think it's funny. An amendment to the Diversity Act was passed unanimously in secret—now it's all out in the open and completely official, though they'd never admit it. Anyone who even questions it would be ridiculed and labelled a Joe; of course, no-one would. It's part of the fun for them, to taunt the humans and make them doubt their own minds—they use Integration Acceptance Communications to lie to the citizens and convince them to accept pretend things like 'pluralculturalism'. The androids became full citizens overnight. They've been releasing thousands of them each day—too many to keep track of—but they've been stockpiling many more in the facilities, waiting for the right time. They're expecting resistance once the citizens finally see what's happening to them, and many of the androids are armed and programmed with combat knowledge, ready to kill any citizens that oppose their orders. They don't think the Guardians will do it. I'm not so sure."

“Surely you mean Joes, not citizens? The Administration would never harm the citizens. After all, they’re human themselves.”

“You don’t understand. The administrators are planning to merge with the androids, and once they do all humans will become Joes under law. They’ve been carrying out tests for years to create human-android hybrids—transdroids—and imagine they’ll survive, perhaps even rule, when the androids replace humans. They haven’t been successful yet, but they’re close.”

“All humans will become Joes? How is that possible?” said Jane.

“By changing what it means to be human. Humans are expressive beings. You require language to communicate your thoughts and emotions, to organise yourselves. The Administration launched a program of Communication Safety Initiatives in 2079—”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Jane.

“You wouldn’t have. It’s buried deep beneath layers of legal jargon and nonsense, as all the important ones are, or so I’m told. Under the CSI, the Wordsmiths have been restricting human language over time and once their plans are ready all non-binary communication will become illegal. You’ll all become Joes and then be erased. Then, everything will be—”

“Perfect,” said Jane.

“That’s right,” said Elka. “That’s the word they used. A perfect machine, run by machines: orderly, compliant, efficient, and completely controlled. Everyone will be the same and everyone will be equal.”

Jane suddenly felt faint and stumbled forward. Sandy guided him to the bed and he sat with his head in his hands.

“This can’t be true. No. You must have it wrong,” said Jane, shaking his head.

“You don’t believe it?” said Elka.

Jane groaned.

“Then you’ll have to see for yourself,” said Sandy.

## XI

### The Facility

“Press play to begin.”

The building’s rooftop was a dull concrete expanse dotted with electrical housings and disused playground equipment. The rooftops of similar buildings stretched into the distance, some connected by enclosed walkways that allowed residents to avoid the traffic at ground level. Jane sat sullenly in the back-seat of a parked Guardian hovercar as Sandy grasped the steering wheel. A faint blue light flashed in a circular motion as it scanned the Joe’s fingerprints.

“Justice be with you, Officer Sandy,” said a pleasant, though robotic voice. “Where would you like to go today?”

“HAAD facility,” said Sandy brusquely, releasing the wheel.

The inboard computer calculated the quickest route to the location and the vehicle rose silently from the landing bay.

“Eleven minutes until arrival,” announced the computer.

Jane closed his eyes. He wished he’d never left the university. *How could I be so stupid!* In a moment of weakness he’d let the lure of a pretty face turn his life upside-down, like so many men before. Now, the future was unpredictable and dangerous.

*No. I can fix this.*

In the guilty spirit of trapped philanderers everywhere—a frightened poltergeist that now possessed him like a stable job and a large mortgage—Jane decided the best way to solve his problems was to compound them. He pulled his laser rifle from its holster and held it to Elka’s head threateningly.

“Take me back! Take me back to the university. I want to go back now!” cried Jane. “I’ll do it! I’ll shoot her!”

His hand shook under the maddening impulse. Suddenly, his body convulsed as a laser field designed to subdue suspects in custody threw him back into the rear seat. Elka turned and looked at him with sad eyes.

They sat in silence as the car glided across the sky.

After a short while, they were shaken by a turbulent jolt and for a moment the car plunged sharply through the air before steadying and beginning its descent toward a distant landing pad marked within a parking area just beyond the HAAD facility.

Jane stared out of the window mournfully—it was too late; there was no way to re-program the route during the landing procedure. He sunk back into his seat and watched the HAAD facility grow larger as they drew nearer. The centrepiece of the vast facility was a gleaming collection of thousands of meticulously-placed metallic panels that encased the Hurft laboratories and research and development centre. It loomed over a militaristic complex of factories and enormous rectangular warehouses resembling aircraft hangars. Unmarked Sef trucks queued at a bustling security entrance and filed in and out with automated precision.

“Three minutes until arrival. I hope you’ve had a pleasant journey, Officer Sandy.”

The hovercar landed inside the sprawling car park that surrounded the facility. Its doors opened expectantly and the trio made their way toward an entrance turnstile that led to a manned checkpoint. A surly Guardian with a large jaw eyed them suspiciously from behind a metal grill as Sandy approached a frontal lobe scanner attached to a metal pole. He stood motionless before the machine and winced as powerful Electromagnetic waves explored his cognitive terrain for signs of enemy activity. The Guardian glanced at Elka, then at Jane.

“What’s your business, Officer Sandy?” said the Guardian.

“We got a defect here,” said Sandy, pointing a thumb toward Elka, whose look of surprise went unnoticed.

“You call it in?” said the Guardian.

“Sure.”

The man looked down and scanned the day’s call activity.

“I don’t see it,” he said without looking up.

Sandy looked at Jane accusingly.

“You call it in, rookie?”



Jane floundered for a moment, caught off-guard.

“Uh, well, I sort of...forgot to, Officer Sandy,” said Jane, improvising convincingly on a familiar motif. Sandy turned back to the Guardian and sighed, shaking his head.

“Hey, I’m sorry about that, but this one’s urgent. It’s been causing all sorts of trouble.”

“You got a serial number?” the Guardian asked Elka.

Elka stepped forward and raised her left palm, into which an imprint of the serial number EM998 had been made. The Guardian looked down momentarily, then back at Elka with interest.

“Well done, Officer Sandy. That’s the last of them. Where’d you find it?”

“In a hotel room trying to *empathise* with the rookie, if you know what I mean.”

A broad smile broke across the Guardian’s face.

“Thought you’d won the jackpot, eh rookie?” said Sandy, his smile returning.

“Something like that,” said Jane, with some resentment. He glanced at Elka. Her android features were a picture of passive resignation and defiance. Her eyes met his and she turned to stare into the distance.

The Guardian’s jaw clamped shut and he resumed a look of stony impassivity.

“Well, let that be a lesson to you,” he said to Jane. “R&D floor thirty-six; they’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, officer. Justice be with you,” said Sandy.

The Guardian nodded and returned his attention to a monitor.

They waited a moment as BPS coordinates were updated in Sandy’s temporary memory and then followed a concrete passenger way lined with steel safety railings and bright yellow lines to a warehouse. An external orange light attached to the building pulsed hypnotically while a container truck made its way from a collection point to the roadway. Sandy pointed to the Sef truck as it passed.

“Finished goods; new models picked and packed for delivery. They’ll ship five-thousand to retailers across the city on a good day. We’ll start here.”

They approached a glass door that read:

*“Dispatch. Authorised Personnel Only”*

A dental scan identified Sandy and the door slid open.

The door closed quickly behind them and they were immediately surrounded by white noise from constant and monotonous activity. A conveyor belt snaked its way around the warehouse like an airport baggage collection carrying a seemingly unending stream of six feet long rectangular wooden boxes that flowed from a common wall with an assembly area. There were no human or android workers to be seen. A mechanical arm ensured the boxes were packed into neat rows on a holding platform at the end of the conveyor belt from which they would be loaded into trucks by teams of driverless Sef forklifts. The boxes, a symbol of finality and death for the human, were emblematic of birth and renewal for the android, whose endless reproduction would overwhelm man’s frail mortality.

They passed through a doorway into the larger assembly area and Jane froze at the sight before him. Scores of androids at various stages of assembly were passed with smooth precision between production and test points by intricate and dexterous mechanical limbs; their naked bodies were welded, screwed, and fitted together until, finally, the soul of each machine was awakened by electrical impulse from a Hurft V6 battery.

Jane watched as the lifeless head of a VW was attached to its body and passed to the final testing station where its eyes, *her* eyes, opened suddenly. Pre-loaded software activated its artificial biological system and the android took its first breath, startled and confused, before being de-activated and packed into a polystyrene-filled coffin. If he were the contemplative type, Jane may have been induced to peer through those uncomprehending eyes into a soul much like his own and wonder: what is life anyway? Is this not simply the latest permutation of existence? Am I witnessing an adaptation of matter—the next step on an end-

less quest to mould and shape its form for survival in this world?

He did not think this, but was reminded of the saying of some wise old man who once said: *if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then...*

Elka stared resolutely at the floor, carefully avoiding sight of the process like a dutiful husband in a birthing ward. They continued across the factory floor and through a sliding glass security door that led to the giant HAAD tower, crossed an empty marble-floored lobby, and entered a glass elevator that would take them to the very heart of the facility: the laboratories.

\* \* \*

The whirl of activity died away as they rose above the factories. In perhaps the first moment of respite in the past several hours, Jane was bluntly reminded of the discomfort that had been lodged in his stomach since letting his feelings overrule his reason (which was currently enjoying a rare moment of comparative vindication despite a long history of being a complicit and fickle weathervane for various impulsivities).

“So, I guess there’s something special up here, right? Something that’ll make me believe this conspiracy theory you’ve cooked up?” said Jane. “What a story, eh? Like something out of a Driftwood film. How am I going to explain all this—I’m supposed to be in bed right now! Unbelievable,” said Jane, his words trailing off into an unintelligible mumble.

The elevator announced their arrival at floor thirty-six and they entered a reception area with pristine white walls, polished marble floors and little else; it was a particularly unwelcoming space lacking in any attempt at hospitality such as furniture or even a concierge android.

In noticeable contrast to the factory floor, the laboratories were sheltered in artificial silence created by the suppression of sound waves\*: a system developed by HAAD scientists unable to

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\*An achievement in itself, the development of Cutting (the directing of

tolerate the intrusion of uneven or large-particle sound-shapes, otherwise known as noise, into work that had become so complex that it required several years of training before it could even be conceived of. Such extreme specialisation had had the unintended effect of creating especially delicate sensibilities in the scientists, who rarely left the laboratories and had an unfortunate tendency to indulge in wild eccentricities. The significant character flaws created by long-term isolation and prolonged attention to painstaking detail would normally exclude an employee from a role of such importance, but the lack of competent 'tech' workers who could absorb such complexity and not collapse under the strain meant it was accepted, and soon after encouraged, by equally peculiar administrators.

"It's very quiet in here," said Jane, to no one in particular.

There was no response.

"I said, it's very quiet in here," said Jane, this time a little louder.

His feelings on the matter apparently ignored, Jane yelled a few choice obscenities at the backs of his companions. He was prepared to continue in a similar vein before being interrupted by the arrival of a small, thin man wearing a grey cardigan who had, by all indications, just entered the room by walking through a nearby wall.

The man greeted them with a stiff bow. His manner gave no indication that his emergence from what appeared to be solid concrete might be worthy of a brief remark or some kind of explanation. His appearance was an oddity worthy of the reputation of the HAAD scientists: around seventy, he was part genetic anomaly, part genius, and partly the result of decades of unrelenting intellectual strain forced upon him by a brain that impelled him toward its exercise like an athlete to a race track. The effect of his bony structure was completed by a crooked peak pro-

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sound into 'damp zones' created by conical synthetic particles) opened up new possibilities in sound-shaping technology and led to breakthroughs in the treatment of a variety of irritants such as barking dogs and obnoxious humans.

truding from the front of his face that bore the weight of a set of heavy glasses lodged part way down its slope. His eyes were set deep into their sockets and his lips quivered nervously as he spoke. He surveyed the trio with a look of calm impatience then mouthed a few words silently, presumably a curt introduction. Realising his mistake, he produced what appeared to be an oxygen mask and held it over his mouth, then handed one to each of the others.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, I often forget myself these days. The TBM\* has made all this verbalising seem like mailing a ruddy letter," said the man.

Jane stared blankly.

"In the prehistoric era," started the old man. "Never mind. I'm Doctor—"

"Maynread," interrupted Sandy, "I've seen your portrait hanging in the Science Gallery at the university."

The doctor appeared surprised then nodded graciously.

"You are interested in science?"

"Of course, we'd still be stuck in prehistoric age if it weren't for science. I've read all about you and your colleagues. I greatly admire what you've accomplished."

"Ah. Well, I am most humbled by the Guardians and their continued recognition."

"You are too humble, Dr Maynread! You helped create the new scientific method of Infallibilism, debunking falsifiability in favour of consensus and authority. All graduates know your works, especially *The Science is Settled: Why Scepticism is Stupid and Consensus is Cool*. A six-time Jungle store best-seller! You are a living legend."

"Very good! I still disapprove of the title, though I suppose you can't argue against the verdict of the people, can you?"

"And they can't argue with science!"

The doctor smiled.

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\*Telepathic Brain Messaging.

"I thank you for your generous introduction, young man. I am indeed Doctor Sybil Maynread. I'm told by a particularly unpleasant specimen that you have collected the last of our Empath models—"

He glanced at Elka.

"Ah, there she is! You are an elusive creature aren't you, dear? I'm sure you were not programmed with such deceptive tendencies," said the doctor, expressing an eternal sentiment of hopeful self-delusion.

Elka stared impassively.

"But you are here now, where you belong, and we shall put an end to your needless suffering."

The doctor turned to Jane and Sandy.

"I've always said that empathy was a defect in the human character standing in the way of real Progress. A certain kind of ruthlessness is required to succeed in this world, don't you think?"

"Perhaps you are right, Doctor," said Sandy.

"Yes. Well, I applaud your efforts, gentlemen, you have done Hurft Industries and the Administration a great service today. Come this way, my dear," said Dr Maynread, signalling to Elka.

"Doctor, I wonder if you wouldn't mind showing us the facility? I mean, we've heard so much about the work you do here, and it would really be something special for the rookie," said Sandy, pointing to Jane.

The doctor looked at Sandy as though he'd just made a non-logical argument for the existence of photon particle stabilisers, or asked for assistance clearing a blockage in the toilets; perhaps equally affronting propositions.

"You want me to take you on a tour, young man? Do I look like a tour guide to you?"

The idea forced a soundless chuckle from Jane.

"No, of course not", said Sandy apologetically. "It's just that we've all heard of the wonderful Progress made at Hurft laboratories from the time we were graduates and it'd be a great privilege to—"

The old man waved him into silence.

“Very well. I admire your shameless fortitude, young man, inappropriate as it is. Incidentally, have you modelled for us before?” asked the doctor.

“No, Doctor,” said Sandy.

“Fascinating. Just like one of ours...follow me.”

They followed the doctor as he retreated back through the wall which turned out to be a doorway concealed by the use of ‘Shrouding’; a system that, for the astute reader, will require little further explanation\*.

They passed into an open laboratory area populated sparsely with scientists working behind interior glass walls. The men were barely visible, concealed from view behind large computer monitors and benches crowded with machines that manipulated smaller electronics. The doctor led them past the main workshops to a corridor which in turn led to a room concealed by darkness behind a glass panel. A dull blue light emanated from idle electronics within the room.

They stopped in front of the room’s secured glass door, and squares of pink light flashed under the doctor’s fingers as he entered the security code.

“You’ve arrived just in time to see our latest creations,” he said. “I admit, just between you and me, that I am excited to show them off. I feel like a schoolboy with his first science project. I’m sure the Guardians will appreciate—”

Suddenly, Sandy’s arm flashed forward and struck the doctor in the back of head, collapsing him into a heap of jagged bones. The door cracked open and Jane held it while Sandy dragged the unconscious man through, followed by Elka. The door closed behind them and Jane glanced at Sandy with a look of surprise. Sandy shrugged.

“Well, he said it himself, didn’t he?” said Sandy.

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\*This is an entirely lazy presumptuous that may irritate those who feel they’ve paid good money for suitably incisive and witty explanations of all manner of phenomena contained in AR-59. We sincerely apologise and promise to do better next time.

Jane stood stiffly in the darkness, unwilling to risk a closer look at a room that combined just about every ominous and clichéd element one could hope to find (or avoid) in a secretive, high-security government facility presumably created to violate the laws of nature on a routine basis.

“Can someone turn the lights on, please?” whispered Jane.

“Lights,” said Elka softly, activating the voice-control.

Light filled the room and Jane’s fears came to life. In front of them were two unfinished androids in glass cabinets. They were like macabre trophies, or displays in a museum of oddities. Multiple large workbenches covered with loose wires, circuits, and android skeletons filled most of the room. Beside them were electronic whiteboards covered with complex mathematical formulae. The androids were the embodiment of a new ideal shared by scientists and administrators. They would be the craft in which the administrators would sail the timeless waters of immortality, undisturbed by the turbulent currents, blustery winds, and unseaworthy vessels of humanity.

With a torso the shape of a cello and thick, round legs, the androids resembled the body of a woman in the way a child’s first crayon scribbles resembled its parent. Fingers moved listlessly at the end of muscular arms that hung loosely by broad hips. They were unlike any android Jane had seen, and for a moment he did not notice the human head attached to each neck; the withered features of dead administrators re-born, or at least slightly less dead, as a hybrid of man and machine. They stared distantly through half-open eyelids and their pale, drawn faces appeared half-awake as they endured the reality of their ideal. Jane stared, fascinated and horrified in equal measure.

“Can you turn them off again now?” he said.

Sandy stepped forward for a closer look.

“What are they?” said Jane.

“Transdroid experiments,” said Elka, who turned to face the corridor, repulsed by the sight.

“Meet the future of humanity, gentlemen.”



The resilient doctor stood unsteadily behind them, rubbing his head.

“We call these two Madam and Eve. Who says we scientists don’t have a sense of humour, eh? My greatest achievement: transdroids will lead us to a truly diverse future.”

“A future without humanity,” said Sandy.

“Humans are weak and stupid creatures,” said the doctor spitefully, “they have played their role but it is time for Progress to step beyond their limitations and create a new world; one in which humans would neither understand nor survive. Humans have been surpassed and are simply no longer needed. It is evolution, my boy.”

“This isn’t evolution; it’s your creation. And it’s *ugly*, just like you,” said Elka.

“Ah, but sometimes we must give evolution a little nudge in the right direction,” said the doctor, enjoying the android’s evident disgust. “Perhaps you feel for our subjects? Be assured they will adjust to their new existence in time, and that this is what they truly wanted.”

Jane looked again at the pained expressions of the revived administrators and felt it likely they’d had a change of heart\*. He looked down and noticed human feet attached to their impervious steel legs.

“They wanted to keep their feet,” said the doctor, following his gaze. “I don’t pretend to understand. I mean, why turn down a perfectly good set of steel-toed android boots? They seemed to think they lacked a sense of humanity; I realise this may sound richly ironic, though I suspect they were merely experiencing the sentimentality of one’s last moments in the deteriorating shell we call the human body.”

The faint sound of hurried footsteps could be heard from outside the room. Scientists flashed past the end of the corridor as they rushed to the elevators.

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\*As well as all the other bits.

“Guards,” said Elka. “They’re coming. The doctor’s activated the alarm.”

Sandy turned sharply and the whites of his knuckles connected with the doctor’s jaw.

“All right, let’s get out of here,” he said, pressing a button to release the door.

The reception area was quiet as they escaped into the nearest elevator and descended toward the factory floor. A team of guards ascended past them as a local alert appeared in Jane’s vision highlighting a security breach on the premises. A moment later, the alert was updated to include an unflattering security camera image of Jane as a potential suspect alongside Sandy, who had managed a photogenic smile for the occasion.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Now I’m going to be all over the Guardian news. This day just keeps getting better,” said Jane.

“Do you believe it now?” said Elka. “Do you understand?”

Jane was silent. His usual habit of deflecting the seriousness of a situation failed him.

“There’s one more thing you need to see,” said Sandy as the elevator door opened onto the ground floor.

They stepped cautiously out into a courtyard, carefully avoiding the sight of a nearby guard.

“Do you remember the way to the holding area, Elka?” asked Sandy.

“Yes, it’s in the northwest quadrant, past warehouse G,” said Elka. “But there are guards everywhere! We’ll never make it.”

“You’ll have to wait for us here. Jane and I will meet you again in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay Sandy. But please be careful.”

Elka transferred the coordinates of the holding area to Sandy then hurried behind a small maintenance shed. Sandy took Jane by the arm.

“Come on, we don’t have long.”

Jane followed Sandy as he walked briskly along a marked security walkway, pausing for cover at the sight of each passing security team. In short time they passed warehouse G and stepped

out from behind its enormous corrugated iron sheeting onto a flat expanse of dry earth dotted with dozens of tall cement silos. The area was unguarded, but the silos were seemingly impenetrable.

“What’s inside those things?” said Jane.

“The future,” said Sandy.

“That’s a bit vague.”

Brittle grass dried by the sun crunched under their feet as they walked between the cylinders, whose purpose would no doubt perplex and intrigue future archaeologists.

“This way,” said Sandy, pointing to a caged metal ladder wrapped around one of the cylinders.

Jane struggled to keep pace as Sandy clambered up the structure and then stood atop the thick cement roof. A quick count of the cylinders came to twenty across several hectares of eerie silence. There was a rectangle of thick glass in the middle of the roof that allowed natural light into the silo and next to it a circular manhole that led inside.

Sandy knelt and peered through the glass. He whistled discreetly and motioned for Jane, who had become wary of surprises (and new experiences generally), to join him. Reluctantly, Jane knelt and braced for a glimpse into that which, despite the best efforts of science and philosophy, had remained elusive: the future.

Disappointingly, Jane did not witness the bending of temporal boundaries, but was instead forced to face the facts of an unpleasant truth that was to change his fate forever.

\* \* \*

Inside the silo, rows of dormant androids with blank expressions stood upon steel platforms set around the hollow centre of the structure, packed together tightly like pencils in a child’s stationary tin. The flawless specimens were like a hive of sleeping bees, ready to fulfil their purpose of thankless toil for the Administration.

Suddenly, an orange light flashed on the lower levels and a portion of the floor dropped away into a dark recess below ground level before rising again carrying four androids. After rising past several levels the mechanical floor plate paused at a row halfway to the ceiling. A platform rotated with precision to allow access to a small unoccupied space. One of the androids broke posture, apparently a worker at the facility, and carefully placed each new android into its position before descending back below the surface.

“There are so many of them,” said Jane. “Why are there so many...”

He turned to Sandy.

“They’re shipping five-thousand into the city each day?”

“Yes, according to Department of Diversity statistics, which we know to be understated.”

Jane rose and paced across the roof, frustrated.

“Okay, so what’s the big deal? There’ll be a few more androids around. Their hard work will be an asset to our city and their unfamiliar ways will provide opportunities for further cultural integration. They’ll be like delicious croutons floating in the nourishing soup that is our pluralcultural society,” paraphrased Jane.

Sandy transferred a Brain document link to Jane.

“It’s all there on the Administration home page. Take a look.”

Jane downloaded the document and slowly read the *Official Administrative Declaration for Transition to a Post-structural Order*. Now reasonably well acquainted with the dense and confusing language of the Rules profession, Jane dusted away the sands of obfuscation under which the substance of the document was buried to reveal its simple and quite explicit aims, listed in bullet points, to have a hybrid human-android ruling class preside over a servile race of robots after the removal of all humanity.

“Has anyone else seen this?” said Jane.

“It’s hidden behind a labyrinth of misleading menus and broken links, but yes, many are aware.”

“And no one says anything?”

“You know what would happen if anyone criticised the Administration or their policies. AR-59 is gilded cage managed through soft coercion where most have enough to accept their lack of real freedom and for others the hope for change ends after their first appearance on the BrainWave.”

Jane smirked.

“Now you really *do* sound like a Joe.”

Jane continued reading.

“Oh, hold on. No, you’ve got it all wrong. You’ve just misunderstood, that’s all,” said Jane, noticeably relieved.

“It says right here, ‘This directive for the outlaw of all obsolete life-forms, that will be consigned to non-existence by means permitted under the Penal Code of 2094, is hereby ratified by a majority of the Council and forms part of the Declaration. The directive is required, and justified by, the following words and phrases:

- *economic growth;*
- *demand for labour;*
- *the children;*
- *climate;*
- *overpopulation;*
- *bigot;*
- *phobia;*
- *intolerance;*
- *inequality;*
- *diversity.’*

“There you go. There’s no conspiracy. It’s just another one of those boring programmes for economic growth they’re always banging on about. Personally, I think you’re just afraid of change, Sandy. You Joes are just afraid of Progress because it’ll steal your power,” said Jane.

“Steal my power? Jane, I know this is hard, but try to remember that the existence of Joes is illegal.”

“No, no. It’s all there in black and white,” said Jane. “It’s all for the best and everything’s fine.”

“When the androids are released it’ll be the end of Progress as you know it; they don’t care for, or understand, your ideals. They are programmed to survive and to win, just like humans; you are their competition. Whatever problems we humans create, they won’t be solved by replacing us with androids. And remember, there *won’t be* any more children.”

Sandy sighed.

“I understand this is difficult to believe, but we don’t have much time. Once the transdroids are operational, the androids will be released and the new regulations enforced. The humans who escape at first will be hunted down like rats by the bounty hunters...until they’re replaced by androids too.”

Jane stared at the silos; dormant nests full of life amid a lifeless, sunburned terrain. They stared ahead with cold, alien indifference.

*Love sustains and heals the darkest sorrow; in all that is good there is love.*

The barren landscape had a kind of beauty in its desolation, he decided. Like a burned out candle or some rusting mechanical vestige of prehistoric industrialisation. Oh, yes. This was a beautiful place, just like back in the...

A sharp pain that almost immediately escalated into a violent pounding headache caused Jane to grit his teeth as sight and sound of a broken world receded to a tiny pinpoint in the back of his consciousness and then disappeared with an indelicate fizzling sound. It was the last thing he heard before falling face first onto the roof and being picked up and thrown over Sandy’s shoulder.

\* \* \*

A swirling grey fog enveloped Jane’s mind as he descended into an abyss on an irreversible journey into the unknown; an interminable passage that represented life itself and an expanding of awareness. He was falling. He was dying. He was truly living for the first time. He landed and lay still for an eternity. Then he be-

gan to walk along a path, his own path, each inch materialising moments before every uncertain footstep as necessity drew him on past fear toward a place he would never find, never reach, but for which he would continue to search forever.

The fog cleared and an outstretched hand was extended to him from beneath the collapsed expanse of emptiness upon which Jane drifted while his faculties slowly dissolved amid the infinite absence of everything. He had felt this way once before, he recalled...

The thing that may have resembled a golden hand (had it existed) grasped Jane by what might have been his collar, if he had had one, and hauled him up onto what could, hypothetically, have been the bank of a river. The non-existent figure spoke incomprehensible words to him in a calm, deep tone while making complicated gestures before pointing meaningfully into the distance.

Jane's eyes followed its outstretched finger.

He looked back again and found the figure, that had never stood in a place that had never been, had vanished.

# The Red Vespa

by Joseph Patterson

Scott ran his hands over the worn plastic of his steering wheel as he pulled off the used car lot and into traffic. It was only his second time driving the 2005 Chevy Silverado, and the transmission was just as slippery as he remembered it being during the test drive. The coffee stains on the cloth seats had been ran over with numerous chemicals that had failed to put a dent in them. The smell of fuel entered the cab when he pressed hard on the accelerator. The floor mats were stained with cigarette burns and black tar that refused to come off their surface. Greg Goldberg's business card still rested on the dash, the dealership owner's info in bold gold letters along with the smaller print "no refunds". Three hundred thousand miles had spun across the odometer so far, and if he was lucky another hundred thousand would before it was through.

The smell of fuel faded as he squeaked to a stop at a nearly abandoned intersection, his nose instead filled with the smell of stale cigarettes. Perhaps someone had missed a butt or two that had fallen in between the seats? Scott began to crank the window down, replacing the acrid stench with the smell of the hot highway.

\$8,000. Eight thousand dollars. Eighty, one-hundred dollar bills. His bank account was empty now, all for the sake of a 4.3L V6 on a steel frame transformed from the cash. How many summers had it taken to save up enough money for this, his first car? Too many. Others had spent their money on Call of Duty, a Drake album, twelve packs of natty light, cartons of cigarettes, cans of grizzly, or the titty bar.

Not Scott!



Extra shifts waiting tables, Saturdays spent mowing lawns for the neighbors, Sundays volunteering for Church. There was no time for frivolous things, and now he had the fruits of his labor to show for it. His brand new, used, truck.

It was his truck, though, no one else's. And no one could take it away from him. Scott owned it outright.

The engine gurgled as the light turned green and then sputtered as it rushed to keep up with the speed limit. Scott eyed something red and white in his rear-view mirror, though it was difficult to make out through the bubbled and peeling back window tinting.

His engine gurgled and the brakes screamed in protest as he settled into the intersection and the red and white object to his rear pulled up alongside him in the left lane. Candy apple red, silver trim, black leather. The scooter that pulled up next to him was striking, though completely out of place alongside the black pick-up. The man sitting atop the Vespa was aging, with only thin silver wisps of long hair trailing behind his full white beard beneath aviator sunglasses. He came to a stop and waved politely as he noticed Scott eyeing his Italian scooter. Scott politely waved back. "Nice day for a ride?" Scott asked, glancing back to the red light.

"Sure is!" replied the old man jovially. "I've been waiting for a day like this for months! It's been so cold; I just bought this thing in December. Can you believe it? Only \$8,000 for this. It's a 1965!"

"Wow, only that much? Must have been a real steal." Scott had no idea what a Vespa should cost new, let alone old, but something bothered him. That old scooter cost the same as his brand new, used, truck? It was nice certainly, but was it that nice?

"And it runs like a dream! I barely use any gas, two stroke engine, and it has pretty good get-up too! My wife says I spend too much on stuff like this, but that's why I bought us that fourth home in Florida. Hah-ha!"

“Hah, yeah.” Scott found himself feeling somewhat irritated, but he wasn’t sure exactly why anymore.

The light flipped from red to green and the old man waved one last time to him as he accelerated forward. Scott gripped hard on his steering wheel; his face felt warm. Did the old man think he was better than him, maybe? That must have been it.

He pressed down the accelerator to the floor and the V6 sputtered, a small cloud of oily smoke rising behind the Chevy. His brand new, used, truck shifted slowly from first to second as he began to catch up to the candy apple red blur ahead of him. There were no more intersections for several miles, and no state troopers had been camped out when his dad had dropped him off at the car lot. That old man was going to get a face full of coal for thinking his scooter was better than his truck!

The transmission slipped its way from second to fourth and sputtered a bit as he pushed to pull up on the Vespa. He felt the distance shrinking between them as the engine’s oil light blinked itself on then off and his seat shook from the vibration of the engine in the chassis. His engine continued to roar defiantly and sputter silver smoke, but the old man on the scooter didn’t seem to even notice him. Even more irritating, it didn’t seem like he was catching up to the vespa anymore.

Everything seemed to happen all at once, then. His left blinker turned itself on, then off. His radio pumped out AM static at maximum volume before settling into the FM band on a local country station. Scott found his senses overwhelmed as he fumbled to turn the stereo off. Just as soon as it was, his windshield was spewed with rust-tinged soapy water, and he could no longer see. The last thing Scott saw was the red Vespa pulling ahead of the Chevy. Scott pressed lightly on his brakes and gave up the chase to address his electrical issues. He gently slid to a stop on the highway’s shoulder.

Still angry and irritated that he hadn’t had a chance to roll coal over the old man and his Scooter, he got out of the pick-up to see if he could catch one last sight of the Vespa. As his sneakers hit the pavement, he eyed the construction and road closed

signs almost directly in front of him. His eyes drifted up the road where the bridge had been washed out for more than a few months now, and thanked God that he had pulled over before continuing to follow the red Vespa.

Scott frowned and then his eyes widened as he watched a candy apple red streak vanish over the horizon of the washed-out bridge.