

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 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

*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).

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 pre-historic 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 distant 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, pointing 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 Afarius 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

*In fact, just like the others but all mixed together like a pre-schooler’s jumbled collage of old magazine clippings.

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. 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 stu-

dent 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 ev-

erywhere, 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 controlled 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 strug-

gle 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, 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

*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.

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 artificial 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 cylin-

ders, 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 ul-

timately 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 protocols and regulations and was said to be the literal translation of the King’s word. Overworked scholars who toiled tirelessly to

*Unofficially known as ‘The Manual’ and occasionally referred to by loutish pupils as the ‘BOOJ’.

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 ways of the Light and bear the heavy burden of teaching those in need.”

*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.

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.

* * *

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 somersaulted 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 enti-

tled 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[†]; 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.

It was 8AM and the efficient flow of commuters from the underground train network deposited the workers in waves, cre-

*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.

[†]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.

ating especially heavy congestion. It was sometimes said that Section Five was the commercial heart of the city and, less admiringly, 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 disap-

pointing 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. Self 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. Self 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. Administrators soon became concerned about an increasing number of financially independent citizens as economic activity skyrocket-

eted; 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—”

“VW’s,” said Jorgia. “Virtual women[†]. Mostly private servants, but only for the rich.”

*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.

[†]Virtual women were intended to be realistic substitutes for real women

“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 skinsuit, you got it? The Joes? They ain’t so tough. I remember back in the day—”

“Which day?”

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).

“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 independent 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, brand-

*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.

ing 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 therefore 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 layers 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 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 streaker 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 faced 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 unshakeable 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 distract-

tion 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.

*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 conveyer 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 endless 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 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

*An achievement in itself, the development of Cutting (the directing of 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.

effect of his bony structure was completed by a crooked peak protruding 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.

*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.

*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.

*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.