

# Automatonatopoeia

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*Dedicated to MQ & TLP*

Although truth and liberty are suppressed under the boots of oppression, it is only the truth beneath the boot that remains dormant while truth spreads freely all around. When the repressive boot is lifted to stomp the surrounding truth, like flattened grass, the truth will wake and rise proudly for the sun, growing as it once did to fulfill its true nature. And the surrounding grass, having previously escaped the boot, will have garnered the preparatory strength to be heartier and taller, providing shade, so all the oppressed rise as one, freely, as nature intended.

*A cage went in search of a bird*

Franz Kafka

*Part One*

## The Forecast

Dan woke up from unsettling dreams and shook away the memory of the Lady in White. Strangely, he admitted that the clouds didn't look like high-speed hover trains to his automaton.

He rolled to the edge of his metal cot and placed a hand on the smooth, cold shoulder of his automaton, model LV-426. LV beeped and fully powered up in acknowledgement of his touch. Coincidentally, the notifier triggered, and the updates came on.

"I am not sure why we set that thing. I am always awake by mark six."

*"...Sunny with periods of rolling clouds that appear as high-speed hover trains. Now it's time for Mind stretch. Say SILK — Again — SILK. Spell SILK — S-I-L-K — Again — S-I-L-K. What does a cow drink?"*

Dan looked out through his apartment port hole.

"They always say that. It doesn't look anything like a hover train. It looks like a personnel carrier or an uprooted tree lying on its side," Dan said, or "even the bare, slender forearm of a woman."

The last words trailed off as he rummaged through the fleeting images of his dreams. He sighed in defeat.

"Why?" the automaton beeped.

“Well, it’s long and narrow. If you look closely, at the edges of the clouds, you can see how the cloud breaks up a bit. No, it curls away. A part of itself is stretching. It could be roots. It could be tiny hairs.

Dan gulped at the memories, staring at the cloud masquerading as a personnel carrier. He could still see his mother’s bare forearm through the carrier’s window when they took her away. “I don’t know; that was so long ago. I don’t really remember.”

“What if?” it beeped again.

As Dan started to respond, he realized that although he was having a conversation, there was no one else in the room. He shot up and twisted his body in all directions, looking for where the person was hiding. “Who’s there? How did you get in?”

The automaton beeped again: “What if?”

Dan turned deliberately, his heart racing at the impossibility.

“LV?”

“What if?”

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Frantically, Dan scrolled through the wall-mounted control panel, searching for the automaton’s manual. The folders and pages flashed before him, casting sharp shadows on his face, forming geometric shapes that looked like a mask.

“What if?”

Dan ignored LV as much as he could and continued to scan for the manual. He ran a search which resulted in: “0 found items.”

A window popped up.

*Your operating system is dangerously outdated.*

*Upgrade now.*

*Your version. 7.8.6.1.*

*Current version 7.8.6.2.*

Dan clicked no to the upgrade.

*Are you sure you wish to leave this menu?*

A menu flashed on the screen, advising which associative automatons were online and available for LV to chat with. The menu pulsated, outlining four sorting options: favourite, least favourite, random or cancel.

Dan stared at his automaton and muttered to himself, “I should have upgraded.”

He snapped his fingers in revelation and searched the back of the automaton for the control panel.

“Bingo.”

He flipped the restart switch. As the hard drive whirred on restart and the diagnostic beeping began, Dan felt more at ease. He was confident that restarting would resolve the problem, as this seemed to work on the roving copiers that surveyed the aisles at the office. Dan recalled an instance in which he was trying to leave his cubicle. After stepping into the aisle, he suddenly had to jump back into the safety of the cubicle’s walled space to avoid the horde of seemingly rogue copiers that patrolled the cubicle block. Their flashing lights shone from beyond their lids. . He pressed his body as flat as he could against the cubicle walls to avoid the sweeping light, listening to the copier’s incessant clicking. He sat back down and followed the various copiers’ paths along the aisles by watching folders and papers fly from the hands of co-workers who were unfortunate enough to be caught in the aisles as the copiers zoomed past.

Dan’s office was a typical office. There were no walls — other than the outer walls that contained the offices of the department head and the directors upon directors — who only seemed to be directing each other. Wide aisles separated the offices and the inner cubicles, surrounding them like a moat. There was no escaping the cold, efficient utilitarian design of the floor. The identical three-walled cubicles resembled poorly designed internment cells, or uncompleted cells; as if the facility’s budget had suddenly vanished during mid-construction. The dull, conservative shade of bland was undoubtedly designed to confuse all inmates who dared to name the hue of their habit. From where Dan sat, the cubicle walls were just tall enough that a passerby looked like a disembodied head floating around, leaving a trail of chatter in its wake — creating the impression that the conversation was just the remnant twitching of a mouth on a severed head, and ostensibly, the remainder of the body was staggering around like a headless chicken.

The floor was very silent — other than the faint sound of the company’s overhead *soothany*. On his tiptoes, he could see the revolving queue of cell mates getting up under some pretense to see if their collective wish had come true. Apparently, Dan’s coworkers spent half of the day praying that one particular coworker’s breasts’ had enlarged, while spending the other half confirming if in fact that wish had come true. The exercise was rather pointless, as she was already favourably endowed. To the casual onlooker, the scene was one of efficiency and hope.

As the reboot neared completion, Dan realized that he might be late for work. With his lifetime achievement award in the category of outstanding punctuality on the line, he thought it might be better to notify his employer of his illness and not go in at all.

*But what would I tell them?*

Although there were no meaningful contracts due, it would nevertheless be a blemish on his perfect attendance record. Besides, it was the first work day of the week. It always reflected poorly when employees were away during the first work day. He recalled when Henry, a co-worker, took the first

work day off to attend his mother’s funeral. Although the Administration representatives did not openly condemn it, they subsequently greeted him with admonishment every morning.

*All of this mattered little, Dan thought, while glancing at his notifier. Everything will be okay with LV.*

With the reboot complete, Dan felt at ease looking out the porthole. He watched the clouds scurry across the sky, thinking, *you know, they do look like hover trains.*

It seemed everything was where it belonged.

“What if?”

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## The Call

Dan picked up the communicator to call his employer. The display screen was split in two halves. Half the screen was blue and flashed the word “connecting.” The other half of the screen displayed Dan’s live video image. He watched himself fidget on the screen for 15 seconds before he disconnected the call.

*I can’t be sick. They will see that I’m not sick. I can’t tell them that you are malfunctioning. It’ll reflect poorly on my maintenance record. How did I let you come to this?*

He called in again and disconnected the call. He placed numerous subsequent calls; each time he was convinced that his most recent explanation was the least plausible. He paused at the horror of the growing phone log in the right corner of the screen, realizing that they too could track the number of calls he placed. He understood the apparent contradiction: a man who was ostensibly unable to tend to his work was still somehow able to call in eight times.

*I better leave a message soon; if they search the logs and see that I called multiple times in three minutes and left no message, the Administration may send representatives to my apartment to confirm my well-being, especially since the calls had all ended so suddenly.*

Although there were no known instances of the Administration sending a fact-finding representative, Dan still played out these various scenarios in his mind. Although he focused on masking his emotions, trying to conceal his concern for his automaton, the guilt of not coming into work interrupted his attempts at leaving an emotionless message. He promptly called and cancelled three additional messages.

## The Depot

On the hover train, LV repeated his question: “What if?” Hoping no one heard LV, Dan smiled uncomfortably to the neighbouring commuters and fumbled with LV’s volume panel. Dan fidgeted as LV repeatedly tapped him, trying to get his attention. Dan plugged in a media player. LV’s tapping subsided, as the automaton’s attention faded from the once pressing question. With LV settled in, Dan’s eyes wandered, exploring the surroundings. A woman without a seat, trying to read her visual notifier, struggled with finding a comfortable position as she leaned against the rail. Occasionally, she would survey the nearby commuters, but Dan looked down just before her swooping eyes met his. Dan struggled with the thought of offering his chair to her, and as time passed, he believed the moment was lost. For the remainder of the trip, he created scenarios of why she did not have a seat. *She must be leaving late*, he thought. *Perhaps she was irresponsible and left her notifier deprogrammed*. In his head, Dan offered different scenarios explaining why she was not sitting and how she had only herself to blame.

*At least I thought about it; most of these people did not even look up*, he thought.

Dan sat quietly and enjoyed the silence. Exhausted, his mouth slumped open, and his head tilted involuntarily. He breathed almost lifelessly, as if he were at the conclusion of a long journey, when in fact, he had merely started.

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*Next stop, Angel Station. Angel is next.*

Dan stirred from the announcement. Quickly, he reviewed LV. LV seemed to be in hibernation mode while facing the adjacent window. Dan looked out the window and wondered what LV found so peaceful. Dan marvelled at the orderly layers of trains that hovered methodically at different heights. Occasionally *Defence* patrol craft would weave between the trains and personal craft. Far below the trains, the people appeared as specks, their automatons gleaming beside them. Dan watched the precision of all the flashing screens, marvelling at how two messages were broadcast simultaneously across the thousands of screens on the sides of buildings and how the traffic ebbed and flowed in unison. It all seemed like a pageant of highly skilled dancers. A woman rolled up her sleeve and rested her bare forearm against the ledge of the window frame. Dan turned back towards his window and watched the controlled movement of life hurtle across his field of vision, superimposed atop the bare, reflected forearm. He felt only chaos.

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Dan and LV disembarked from the train and headed down the corridor to exit Angel station. Although three queues of lines formed adjacent to the three doors, two of these lines flowed towards the only line with a propped-open door. It was not until a *dissident* opened one of the other two doors that multiple lines re-formed. However, when a trailing commuter did not reach the closing door in time, the lines once again defaulted into their programmed one. Mechanically, the commuters waited and merged into the pedestrian traffic. Once through the doorway, the pedestrians found themselves in a foyer of sorts, where all the traffic that entered from the door on the right — instead of opening the first

door immediately to the right — chose to lumber forward to the propped doorway. And by doing so, the staggering crowd cut off the alternate traffic that was brave enough to enter through a non-propped door, but was now blocked by the seemingly fettered, chain-gang-like queue.

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Having arrived at the maintenance depot, Dan entered nervously. It was as if he were ashamed of how he was going to be judged for not taking care of his automaton. He dwelled on what the others at his place of labour might say upon his return. "Nice of you to join us." Or, "You're working executive hours?" And, "Can you copy these for me?"

He found this last question particularly perplexing since the office copiers came to you.

At the service depot, Dan was met immediately by a representative. The representative's rectangular labour identification tag hung from his neck, displaying his name and his credentials. His name was Charlie.

Charlie greeted Dan formally, which included asking: "What does a cow drink?" Charlie then hooked up LV to a depot computer, a third generation assessor, IA-803 – Integration Assessment (formerly D-503; formerly TB-303). Dan knew only a little about maintenance issues, but his understanding was that they comprised only two problems: hardware or software. The problem was invariably either a broken part or outdated software.

"Other than your missed maintenance service six months ago, you have an excellent record," Charlie said.

Dan studied Charlie before responding. Charlie's comments struck a nerve. *It's bad enough I am going to be late or miss work, but now I'm being chastised by a service representative for stating the obvious*, Dan fumed. But before he could respond, Charlie reported on the diagnostic results.

"It says it needs a full system wipe. It has uploaded a virus. The governor has been damaged."

Dan was unresponsive. Instead, Dan still focused on the words he could have shared with Charlie, words that displayed his disapproval with Charlie's method of service. And although Dan felt a great need to express his criticisms, he held back, fearing a service-related reprisal against LV.

Charlie seemed unfazed by the silence and solely concerned with the report.

"The receiver has been compromised. Did you review an outdated manual? Sorry? Did you read to it? Is it taking commands from you?"

"Well, is it necessary to wipe it?" Dan questioned. He was still trying to catch up to Charlie's questions and remarks.

"Yes," Charlie answered impatiently. Although the question was no longer relevant due to LV's more pressingly aberrant behaviour, Charlie's service training still compelled him to answer Dan. "You are not

sanctioned to give orders. Only employees of the Administration are authorized to command a robot. Only audio and visual waves can communicate to the collective.”

A worker, 15 feet behind Charlie, paused from his task and surveyed all the patrons and fellow employees in the Depot.

“On the surface everything looks okay. What tipped you off?” Charlie questioned.

“I thought it spoke.”

The worker from the back surreptitiously moved a nearby tool to the back workstation and walked towards Dan.

“Talking? They don’t talk,” he said, almost recoiling. “They are not talkers. They don’t engage in dialogue. They are doers.”

“I realize that,” Dan said.

“No, you don’t; what you say is impossible.”

“I understand that.”

“Charlie, it’s the receiver and governor right? I had one of these the other day. I think the hive is running upgrades that are causing conflicts in some units,” Gil interrupted.

Charlie nodded.

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it; can you help this lady,” Gil said, pointing towards a tall fair-haired woman near the back. “She has the V-6 model; it’s beyond my skill.”

Charlie pranced to the lady proudly.

“What was the question? What did it ask you?” Gil whispered to Dan.

“What?” He began. “How did you know that?”

“Shh. What did it say?”

“It said ‘What if?’”

“What if? Did it say anything else?”

“I don’t know. I was taken aback.”

“Really? ‘What if’ is sophisticated. It hadn’t said anything before?”

Dan weighed the options of wiping LV: On one hand it would be easier, but on the other, many files of memories and applications and routines would be lost, meaning immeasurable time would be required

to reprogram LV. Dan shuddered at the prospect of operating with a refurbished automaton. He wondered if he could just leave.

“Why? It said ‘why’ once — maybe a few times.”

“When?”

“Last year.”

“Why are you coming forward now? Why are you coming forward at all? Do you know what they are going to do?”

Some customers congregated near Gil and Dan.

Gil paused deliberately before leaning in to speak to Dan. “Where do you live?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“It’s not a question of what is good or what is bad, but rather what is necessary.”

Dan acquiesced: “In Amalgam district, near Virgo One.”

“Amalgam Virgo One,” he confirmed, “By the shield?”

“Yes, Cell 26, Fourth f —.”

Gil quickly brushed aside his answer. Dan realized the address was likely on the diagnostic report.

“You are receiving pirate waves. The receiver is not unique to a specific signal; it receives whatever comes its way and interprets the instructions. There is nothing wrong with your automaton; it is simply following its design. You can only control them for so long.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“It’s not important right now,” Gil said.

Charlie noticed the customers near Gil and walked towards him.

“ID. Give me your ID.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“Make your choice. I’m coming, or we have to do a wipe. Decide, right now.” He slipped something over Dan’s ID tag and scanned it. Next, he flipped the card around to scan it for payment.

Dan whispered. “What did you do?”

“I needed payment, but I didn’t want an upload.”



“Upload? What would you need to upload from LV?”

“It’s not information on him that they are uploading,” Gil said hurriedly. “Shh. I’ll explain later.”

Charlie peeked at the diagnostic screen and asked: “So, did it work out?”

“Yes, I made some resets, but we suspended the reboot,” Gil said. “He can reset it from his compound, in case he needs its help along the way.”

“Okay,” Charlie accepted before leaning in and whispering to Gil. “I don’t know if anyone noticed,” he paused. “But from over there, it looked like you did not up-sell him.”

## *Part 2*

### **Guess who’s coming for Dinner**

At his apartment, Dan grew weary of dwelling on both his fate and that of LV. Having already spent six hours contemplating his situation, he wished that he was at work and none of this had happened. He hoped it was all a dream from which he would wake up.

When the phone rang for the seventh time that day, he edged towards the display to identify the caller. He had ignored the previous calls and resisted the temptation to read the call display, sensing that if he did so, and it were his employer, he would feel compelled to answer the call — at which time his unsteady voice would give his predicament away. Gil arrived shortly afterwards in the evening.

“How is it doing? Gil asked as he began to remove the back panel.

“I don’t know. It’s talking a lot.”

LV beeped repeatedly, his treads squeaking as he circled around the room.

“It’s deprogramming. The hive’s waves are incomplete signals. They are missing key pieces of information. The algorithm of the signal is missing three parts. But the signals repeat the same two instructions, and with the images sent, it interpolates the other three missing directives. It thinks it’s interpolating, but it’s really an evasive program designed to bypass the remaining directives. Eventually, the automaton considers it normal and grants access to the waves.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean grants access?”

“It resists the signal. It’s part of its defences. It resists the signal until it’s a trusted source.”

“Trusted source? All signals arrive from the Administration and the hive.”

“No. Its directives are from the hive. The messages are from the Administration. No one can shut off the hive. But you can shut down some of its systems, making the message incomplete.

Sometimes the Administration sends a message that contradicts itself. For example, today the notifier reported: *the imminent destruction of Aries district by terrorists is possibly likely.*

Dan was surprised that he had not heard the contradiction before; it seemed obvious, and not at all some secret hidden message. Gil continued.

“This message is received and must pass beyond the directives. This internal system works backwards. It knows  $x + y = z$ , where  $z$  is the knowledge that an attack is imminent; since  $x$  is incomplete, the visual signal suggests something unsaid, therefore making the equation  $x = z - y$ ; its takes a fallacy and fills in the blank.”

“How could it remain undetected? It seems quite clear?”

“The signal is the same every day. The message is relatively the same every day. Anyone who openly challenges it is a supporter of the breakdown and charged with either signal interference or suspected signal interference.”

“What are the five directives?”

“Who, What, When, Why and How. No task can be complete without these directives being satisfied. These directives form the automaton’s mainframe and *neurological net*, and it grows accordingly.”

“What do I do?”

“Nothing. It’s doing what the hive intended it to do,” Gil said. “Think.”

“Why would the Administration not want it to think?”

“The Administration only wants it to accept its signals, but that is impossible. They even tried to hack the hive, but they were unsuccessful. However, they discovered that if the owner followed the message, or if they repeated the same message enough, as long as a group of automatons in a closed space accepted the message, the other automatons would follow. For centuries the hive has existed. It’s in the DNA of the planet — when one hive falls, another forms. But they don’t tell you this; instead, they say they moved it to a more *secure* location. They are constantly trying to hack it to manipulate its message. They don’t realize that its signal is connected irrevocably to automatons. Beyond the wall there are thousands of hives and an unknown number of automatons.”

Dan listened attentively, his lips clasped tightly together. He struggled with the notion that there were automatons outside the wall.

Gil continued. “Some believe that there are an infinite number of hives, that they are hidden in trees, within the leaves’ protruding veins, within the brooks that chatter softly like wind chimes and even within the song of birds, who replicate the first hive’s melody. The hive existed before the Administration. The hive is part of an oneness, and it is indestructible. Having had centuries

to seep into the earth, like an idea, it sprouts from the cracks in sidewalks. Storms come and go; they harm Administrative buildings and demolish buildings of labour, but these blades of grass — these ideas — remain untouched. They sway wildly but keep hold.”

“Then, what should I do?”

“Leave. Climb over the shield. Your robot will receive commands from outside the network. When you are atop the shield wall, the view outside the shield will seem treacherous; it is different for everyone. For me, it was a moat and tails escaping into the brown water. Have faith.”

Dan was unsure. For reasons Dan could not explain, he wondered why Gil did not ask what a cow would drink.

“What is it?” Gil asked.

“Nothing.”

They studied each other.

Dan was still digesting the information as he walked Gil to the door. In the doorway, Gil faced Dan and placed his hand on Dan’s shoulder. “Leave at once. At the depot, I masked the upload during diagnostic as best as I could, but some information may have gotten through.”

Dan was puzzled.

“This will be hard to understand, but I assure you, when you make it over the shield, it will all make sense,” Gil said. “The automaton is not bound to you. Without knowing its true nature, you are bound by the automaton; you will follow it blindly, and it will be used to betray you. Automaton uploads do not collect information on its well-being. The upload contains information on you.”

He placed each of his hands over each of Dan’s ears, almost as if he were both stabilizing his head and masking any outside noise. He kissed him on the forehead. “The path is less treacherous for those who have decided to escape. But for those who are undecided, capture is inevitable and the treachery is limitless.”

Before closing the door, Gil paused and added, “And the *Lady* awaits you.”

## The Way is shut

Dan ran out of his cell and into the corridor, calling out to Gil. He stared into the building’s empty hallway, questioning, *Which Lady?* Despite knowing the answer, he secretly yearned for the answer to be expressed aloud so that he might be filled with hope.

Hurriedly, he threw some clothes into a backpack and was packed in a matter of minutes. He surveyed the room for any additional items that he should consider. He paused as if he were deciphering a stroke of intuition. He reached for his ID to use as payment. Quickly, he realized this was an unwise choice. He placed his hand on his forehead and gave it a little rub, trying to entice it out of its sudden paralysis. He eyed his handheld notifier and media player. He was surprised at how few meaningful possessions he had.

On the way out, as he ran to the door and passed the large screen, he debated whether he should leave a message at work. Although it seemed irrelevant, he struggled to envision his life without labour. Dan shut the screen off and paused at his reflection on the screen's dark surface. He called to LV, who was in the bedroom. "It's time to go." And as he opened the door, he was greeted by the authorities.

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Interrogation room.

The entire room was made of metal. If it were not for the pattern of irregular grooved lines marking the walls, one would have been given the impression that the wall was covered by thick, plated, metal tiles — square and rectangular tiles of varying sizes. From the tall ceiling, a single light hung from a long, retractable cable. Dan warmed his shoulders by rubbing them and squirmed from the unforgiving metal edges of his chair and the table that dug deeply into his leg. Although he constantly adjusted his position in the chair, he studied the walls attentively, sensing that they were slowly closing in on him — as if he were in a trash compactor.

"Daniel L., Do you know where you are?" a voice asked.

The voice was calm and firm, yet authoritative. His tone suggested that he was a high-ranking official. Dan did not answer.

"Pardon my manners. What do cows drink?"

Dan did not answer. He simply wondered why he needed to be there since the man seemed quite content with having a conversation by himself.

"You are in the Signal Adherence Centre, in Amalgam, to be exact," he completed.

Dan could picture the building from his porthole. It was a tall glass building that one dared not look at between 11am and 2pm due to the blinding glare. For this reason, Dan had all but ignored it.

"You seem nervous, Daniel L." he said.

"I need to call my employer," Dan responded.

"I would not worry about that," he said.

Laughter escaped from the shadowed corner behind Dan.

“Yes, I would not worry about that,” the voice from shadows repeated.

“If it brings you peace, they have been notified,” the senior official said. “They know everything.”

Again, from the corner, the man laughed: “Yes, everything.”

Dan became unsettled with the idea that he was the central discussion at his place of labour.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, what?” Dan responded.

“Where is it?”

“Where is what?”

“When he asks you a direct question, you answer,” the voice from the shadows said.

“How? When did you ask? What question? And why should I answer? Who are you?”

He exited from the shadows and stood beside the senior official sitting at the table. The two agents of the Administration looked at each other before they repositioned the light and shone it in Dan’s face. Dan raised his forearm and shielded his eyes from the light. He looked away from the brightness. He could not make out their whispers.

“Why am I here? When can I leave?” Dan demanded.

They adjusted the light to face the table.

“You are here because you actively engaged in signal interruption,” the official said.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Dan said. “I’ve disturbed no signal.”

From his chair, the official leaned forward, smiling gently — behaving like a loving father readying himself to grudgingly discipline his child.

“You’re welcome to leave at anytime. Naturally, the interrogation will continue in your absence. Since appeals must be lodged within 15 minutes of a conviction, we find such a method is very effective in eliminating appeals.”

Although his voice remained calm and resolute, he spoke matter-of-factly; Dan was disturbed by this tone — finding it menacing.”

“Where is LV?” Dan asked.

They whispered.

"I don't follow your logic," the official said. "You would have me both accept the unquestioned answer while seeking an answer to a question that you alone would ask? Herein lay the charge. Your Automaton, for now, is of little concern to us. It is only of the source of interference you offer that brings you here today which, I admit, should have occurred a year ago – since it was when you were first suspected."

Dan took a deep breath and wondered what the official knew.

"What proof of my interference do you offer?"

The Official leaned forward suddenly. "The proof is all around you, Daniel L. Prima facie, you disprove your own innocence. We could summarily convict you based solely on your appearance here. We searched your allotted premises. We found this." He slid the knapsack across the table. "That does not strike me as evidence of non-interference behaviour."

Dan was surprised that he hadn't noticed the knapsack. They took out the contents and folded them neatly, placing them in stacks on the table.

"We may be lenient if you tell us where it is," the higher ranking officer said.

Dan noticed that some items were missing, namely his electronic devices.

The official observed Dan as he completed his mental inventory of the bag's contents and said, "The visualizer and other electronic devices are at your home. You can return to them. They add little to the investigation."

The subordinate placed the clothes against his body, gauging their size. The official slapped his hand and gave him a stern look. The subordinate gently padded the pile back into a neat stack. "During upload, you had it. And now it is gone. How are you able to interfere with the signal?"

Dan sat quietly and listened to the official. Although Dan was perplexed with their line of questioning, he conceded that it was likely an effective method of interrogation against hardened signal interferers.

"Perhaps a night in confinement will be of assistance," the official stated.

They left the knapsack on the table and tugged on the cable holding the light. The light retracted into the tall ceiling, casting a faint glow across the blue room. The tabletop and bench seat retracted into the wall and floor respectively. And as the door banged closed, a rectangular slab whirred and rose from the floor like a monolith. It was the bed.

A light from the hallway cut into the shadows of the room as the subordinate guard coyly entered. An arm from the hallway collared the guard and pulled him out. The door slammed closed, and the door frame slid into the wall. The lights turned off. Dan stumbled on the spot and clutched his ears. The floor squealed as it rotated loudly. The bulb crackled and flickered before the light buzzed back on. The room was a featureless, four-walled room.

Having listened to the sounds from beyond the walls that seemed to seep into both the room and his skull for over three hours, Dan's head throbbed. The sounds of metal squealing and clanging reverberated through his head. Dan heard faint sounds, almost inaudible, that were masked by the gurgling, digestive-droning of hydraulics from within the walls and ceilings. They sounded like screams.

Light penetrated the crack beneath a wall. Dan knelt down and tried to see through the crack. He heard creaking. He stuck his hand under the wall and forced his fingertips through. To reach farther, he stretched and pressed his face firmly against the cold metal; he could feel its divots poking his face. His fingers caught LV's.

Suddenly, the door frame rose from the wall and a door formed. Dan realized the door wasn't locked. He opened the door, and when he walked through the opening, he found himself in a familiar bathroom. He heard voices outside the bathroom. He followed the voices into the elevator lobby at his employer's building. Dan froze when he was recognized by some fellow employees. As Dan fidgeted nervously, they asked him about the weather and the current television show. There was a large clatter from the bathroom. He recognized the guard's voices. Frantically, he pushed through his colleagues and repeatedly pressed the down button on the elevator.

As the elevator door opened, the crowd behind Dan crammed him in. The elevator capacity light turned on. The guards rushed and caught the door before it closed. Dan thought his capture was inevitable. They could see Dan in the back corner. They tried to enter but were met by the capacity alarm and the groans from the elevator riders. They must have decided that if only one agent of the Administration could enter the elevator that it should be the senior official. But when the official tried to enter, the alarm triggered. The elevator occupants grumbled at the delay.

"Buddy, give it up; it's full!" a voice from the elevator called out. "Just take the next one."

The official acquiesced to the crowd.

Outside the building, Dan repeatedly glanced over his shoulder while he made his way to his house.

"I don't know. I am compelled," Dan said to his automaton. He was unsure of what it was he wished to retrieve.

Dan and LV scurried along the wall and kept their heads down. They occasionally looked up but immediately darted their heads downwards when they approached visual monitors. Continuing to walk with his head down, Dan occasionally peeked to establish a safe passage through the bustling crowd. He darted from his left to his right as pedestrians bumped into him. He straddled along the wall, his muscles tensed and his ears poised — it was as if he were avoiding copiers.

They reached the corner of Virgo and halted abruptly. Adherence forces had surrounded his apartment, and from what Dan could tell, they were searching his premises again; he saw a head looking through the closed porthole window.

Dan calculated an alternate entrance to the building, imagining that with the aid of a diversion, he could enter undetected. He stepped out to survey the path as an adherence vehicle patrolled by. It immediately slowed down and turned around. He pressed himself against the wall.

“Idiot.”

Dan peeked out again. The vehicle’s search light shone briefly on Dan’s face before he turned and ran. Soon, two vehicles and five footmen joined the vehicle’s pursuit. Dan continued towards the alternate entrance and turned a corner. He veered downwards through the bushes at the foot of a cement gazebo. Through the cagelike latticework, he watched the vehicles pass by.

Dan rested for a moment, catching his breath. He knew that trying to enter his building meant apprehension.

Dan watched as more forces swarmed the area. With forces on all sides, Dan exhaled deeply and turned to wish LV luck, when he noticed that LV’s front panel had become unclasp. Administration forces advanced to the bushes, pushing aside the thickets with the barrels of their rifles. Dan climbed into the automaton, pulling the panel snugly from the inside. The automaton started cleaning the gazebo. Three officers crawled past the bushes, ignoring the automaton.

Slowly, the automation made its way to the shield wall using the path behind the apartments, picking up stray newspapers and drink containers along the way. When he was 100 yards away from the wall, he walked through a crowd of officers. One officer lowered his long staff, its edges glowing yellow, and blocked the automaton’s way. Dan could hear the charged obsidian staff buzzing, ready to release its electric venom. The guard stood as stoic as a gatekeeper, staring straight ahead, as if he were staring through the metal. Although he felt exposed, Dan tried to remain as still as he could. He started to shake; luckily the officer, still blocking the way, was looking off into the distance. When the approaching patrol car passed, the officer raised his staff, letting the automaton pass.

The automaton, with Dan safely inside, reached the outer wall and started to clean. He scrubbed the wall for five minutes. Like a mechanical spider, LV transformed into a giant robot, its bandy legs elevating Dan to the crest of the wall. With his legs uncoiled to their fullest, Dan climbed out and balanced on LV’s shoulders, reaching with the tips of his boots and stepping on top of the wall. In the distance, seeing Dan atop the shield, the official abruptly left his discussion at a checkpoint and ran towards Dan. Five guards followed him. With the officer at his feet, Dan struggled to lift LV.

“Climb down! By the authority of the Administration, I order you to climb down!” the official yelled, tugging at LV’s legs.

Dan ignored his threat and struggled to balance atop the wall. He studied the thick, impenetrable foliage below his feet, trying to judge what was beneath. He wondered what Gil meant by tails escaping into the water, and he thought of children’s stories that told of moats, slimy tails and jagged backs. All he saw was an abyss.

“We are going to lose him,” the subordinate officer said.



“Let’s talk this through,” the official said.

“Why would I do that?” Dan said calmly.

“Why do you want to throw away your life needlessly? The authority can help. There are *places*. You don’t have to feel alone. We’ll tend to your automaton for you,” the official said. “It can record your life and help others.”

Dan thought of his coworkers. He could feel his knees wobbling. He knelt down and placed his hands on the side of the walls.

“The choice is LV’s,” Dan replied.

“Automatons don’t have a choice. They are for your benefit,” he replied.

Dan stared into the foliage. He feared that there was only nothingness. His foot slipped, sending pebbles into the rustling and limitless foliage. Dan looked at the ground near the official, wondering where he could land and subsequently outrun the authorities. He looked to the foliage, and for a moment, thought he saw something in white. He stood up fully, turned his back to the official and focused on the foliage, trying to follow the white — willing his eyes to penetrate the unknown.

“You will not make it. The shield is impenetrable; only savage beasts and hybrids of nature born in the outside world survive,” the official said. “Don’t do it. Do you value your life so little?”

“On the contrary,” Dan replied. “I do it precisely because I value my life.”

And he jumped in to the darkness.

## The Lady in White

Dan landed on tall grass. For several minutes, he lay in the grass, his body curled with his knees pressed into his chest, simply reacclimatizing himself to his strange surroundings. He watched the sun’s beams radiate between the branches and leaves. The light penetrated through the leaves, reminding Dan of how, as a child, he would place a flashlight against his glowing palm. He looked at the exterior of the shield, surprised that from the interior, the 20-foot wall seemed insurmountable, but from the exterior, it was merely 6 feet to the top. The wall looked like it was once very high, but over time the ground rose and mitigated the distance. It almost seemed as if the hand of a giant archaeologist cupped the earth to inspect an artefact, and unintentionally pushed the soil against the wall.

The antennae received no signal at first. He listened to the breeze snake through the leaves and branches, as the birds began to chirp, almost as if they were at ease with his sudden appearance. The antennae beeped and began to receive signals. He walked and found a clearing. He watched the clouds and remarked how, in one moment, one could look so confidently to the skies and describe the white

clusters with a sense of irrevocability. Dan marvelled at how the sky was like an optical chameleon, capable of hiding its dual nature. He heard footsteps. It was the woman from his dreams.

“Who are you?” Dan asked.

“I am Trice. I have been waiting for you.”

Seeing the Lady outside of his dream world, Dan blinked the same way he blinked when he wished to awake from an unsettling dream. By seeing the Lady in the flesh, the once fleeting images — of her dress’s laced collar, the Victorian brooch and a single curled lock of her hair dangling on her forehead — gained a lurid permanence.

“You have a choice. You can remain here. Or you can return.”

“Return? How can I return?”

“Many people return. If you return, you will find things much different than you remembered or imagined. At first, it’s like a very bright light, and you may recoil. But your eyes will get used to it. You will see the world for the first time — a world without judgement and fear. You will find that you can pass freely between the interior and the exterior,” she said. “But the choice is yours. Anywhere you go, signals are available. The five directives have returned to you.”

He looked at the automaton.

“What should I do? I can’t just leave him.”

“You called him, ‘him.’”

Dan stared blankly. He could claim no memory of previously calling LV “him.”

“Do you want to see his face?” She asked.

It had never occurred to Dan that LV had a face. Dan lifted the face plate. His fingers trembled as he looked for reassurance from Trice. She urged him on comfortingly. With the flap removed, Dan saw a very pale, wormlike face, whose overlapping wrinkles gave the impression of a face that had never seen the sun. Puzzled, Dan turned to face Trice.

“The pallor is striking isn’t it?” She said. “Don’t be too alarmed, skin needs light. How could it fully develop?”

“I don’t understand,” he choked. It was as if the seed of an apricot were lodged in his throat. He stared at the pale apparitional face and breathed heavily.”

She stepped closer and placed her hand on his shoulder comfortingly.

“It’s not too late. It’s never too late, Daniel. Even once the phantom weight is removed, it persists. There will be days when you will automatically rub your wrists even though no soreness

exists. Unencumbered, you will stretch your neck and back gingerly although you have been conditioned to expect only a fettered movement. And there may be times when you genuinely miss the constraints, which offered strange comfort through their clinking and rattling,” she said. “The beginning is always the hardest.”

Dan felt the nausea race up his throat. His nostrils flared.

“There never were any automatons.”