

The Refuser

Tales of The Lottery in The Brave New World of 2084

Written by RampagingOldKnee in the winter of 2022 when the MAN had everyone under its heel.

RampagingOldKnee@protonmail.com

Introduction

The year was 2084 and human history had reached an evolutionary fork in the road. Labor was no longer required for survival. For over five decades, machines and AI had been able to provide for all the needs of everyone on the planet. But that only led to more conflict, both in the communities and between countries, and so the Global Order of Dominant Sadists, or GODS, worked together to develop the Algorithm to pacify and control the world's population for the sole purpose of serving and entertaining the GODS. The first order of business for the Algorithm was to take control of the tens of thousands of wildly popular social media technologies. They would all be combined into one single platform. Participation was mandatory, hence the name Mandatory Assigned Network, or MAN. Every person was assigned with 100 others to their own MAN. The MAN had many tools for assuring compliance and engagement in all matters. Among the most successful of these tools was the yearly Judicious Annual Bifurcation, or JAB.

Chapter 1

Nobody knew how the Algorithm worked. There were rules, clear rules, but there was also just enough ambiguity and unpredictability to keep people on their guard, unbalanced, quietly afraid.

And on this day, Harold was afraid. His aunt, Aunt Claudette, died from the JAB when he was six. He remembered clearly watching her suffer and it haunted him still, 40 years later. Indeed, deaths were exceedingly rare. In fact, Harold's Aunt Claudette was the last person in his community to die from the JAB, and she was still talked about with great reverence, even more so in recent days with the upcoming JAB.

For it had now been 40 years of good luck in Harold's community, which, according to the MAN, was a full seven years longer than any other run on record in any of the other communities. The odds were in favor of a loss;

everyone felt it. But, they were told, the Algorithm was wise. It worked on their behalf. It protected them.

Most people were looking forward to the chance of getting the JAB. The risk, it was widely accepted, was infinitesimal, and the Algorithm adjusted the rewards for the chosen in such a way that they were guaranteed not only a noticeably improved life quality, but indeed a longer lifespan. To win the JAB lottery, to be chosen, was considered extraordinarily lucky.

Those who got the JAB and survived, which was the vast majority, were rewarded with a longer, happier life for themselves, their family, and to an extent even those in their MAN.

The very few who got the JAB and died, what was called a JAB loss, were seen as martyrs and protectors of their community. They took the bullet. They would be remembered for generations and their descendants would inherit their honor and elevated social status.

But for those who refused, the Refusers, there was only scorn, hate, and severe punishment.

To be a Refuser resulted in the unthinkable. Refusers were ostracized. Banished. No community would accept them.

The level of social hatred for the Refusers was carefully controlled by the Algorithm to maintain a peak state of hostility ready to be trained on any subject of the Algorithm's choosing. And it wasn't just the activity of the Mandatory Assigned Network, or MAN, that fueled the hate. For every Refuser, the Algorithm increased the number of JAB losses and decreased rewards according to the demographics and psychology of the community, resulting in a heightened sense of risk, risk attributed directly to the Refuser.

Refusers were to blame for all JAB loss deaths. This was the Algorithm, and the Algorithm worked.

Triggered by a Refusal, JAB loss adjustments were implemented randomly over time, while the rewards were decreased immediately. Likewise, full community compliance decreased losses over time and increased rewards immediately.

Full compliance was the norm.

In fact as far as anybody in Harold's community knew, nobody had Refused the JAB in any of the communities in nearly 20 years when a woman named January spit on the robot holding the needle and told it to go get shorted. But that was a long time ago. Refusals were now considered a thing of the past, like honey bees, fresh fruit, and important decisions.

Harold awoke that morning with every belief that he would get the JAB if chosen, and he had been making plans on how he would use the rewards, as had everyone else. But he was aware of an underlying anxiety, fear

actually, if he were to examine it, which he didn't.

The recent talk around town of the increased odds of a JAB loss had been lighthearted and accompanied with nervous chuckles and back slaps or friendly elbows. After all, there had not been a Refuser in over two decades, so logic held that the odds of a JAB loss had in fact decreased, particularly since there was a JAB loss in a nearby community a few years ago, and everyone attributed that to January. But to suggest that one understood the Algorithm was tantamount to heresy. One was not to ask about or understand, but simply be thankful for and follow, to comply.

Harold wondered if it was something he'd eaten that had put him out of sorts, or perhaps the weather. The JAB was today, and the JAB was normally a festive time tinged with an undefined, heightened air of expectation. He should be excited, yet he felt anxious. He should be looking forward to contributing to the health and wealth of his community, yet he was fearing JAB loss.

He was fearing death.

After getting up, having some coffee, and putting in his required morning time with the MAN, he laughed at his earlier apprehension and picked out appropriate clothes for the JAB.

Chapter 2

As Harold dressed, he remembered his Aunt Claudette's slow, painful death. She thought all was fine after her JAB. She was celebrating with friends the day after, when such gatherings were still allowed, using some of the lifetime meal vouchers that were part of her JAB reward package, when she felt her first headache. Within 48 hours the pain had spread to her chest, then her extremities.

Her breathing became labored, her eyes yellow and desperate. It took her two weeks to die. The Main MAN closely followed and broadcast the heroic attempts to save her as it speculated about which Refuser was responsible. The anger and hate expressed by the MAN was so intense that the Algorithm actually had to temper it at times with visits to the dying woman by cute cats and rare marsupials.

Harold mustered up enough mandated hate and anger to cloud the doubt and fear he felt deep in his esophagus as he looked for matching socks. But still his thoughts returned to the past. He had only been allowed to see his aunt a couple times a year under an Algorithm policy that was never clearly explained to him, and questioning the Algorithm was simply not done.

But he had always felt a closeness to her that he couldn't explain. Perhaps it was because she was his only living relative. She was the older sister of his mother who died shortly after giving birth. So his aunt's death – the

splotches, the bloating, the pained, forced breathing, not to mention all the cameras and celebrity doctors brought in for the MAN – her death made a deep impression on him as a young boy, an impression he was able to bury on most days. But that disturbing memory was on full display on this morning as he readied to leave.

Harold's one sanctioned mammal, Fluffy, was a happy, mixed breed puppy who loved everyone, especially the local kids who much loved her back. Fluffy thought they were going for their daily walk as Harold opened his front door. "No, no girl. Not now. I'm sorry," he said as he scratched her ears. "I'll be back soon." He closed the door as he left and waved to Fluffy as she looked through the plain window of the sparse living room.

As Harold walked to the JAB site, he was greeted warmly by friends and acquaintances. Children asked where Fluffy was. He saw a couple people who belonged to his MAN, and they stopped and chatted for a bit. Each MAN was limited to 100 members but in fact had 101, the extra, unidentified member being allowed to stay out of the generosity of the Algorithm. And of course all MAN were connected to the Main MAN, which was integrated with, indistinguishable from really, the Algorithm.

Everyone secretly wondered who the 101st member was, and nobody wanted to be that member.

But aside from that underlying question, individuals didn't have to be bothered with the drab details of how the Algorithm or MAN worked. All they had to do, by law, was spend at least six hours per day with their MAN, two in the morning, two midday, and two at night. In-person communication with people in one's MAN was limited to 20 minutes per day and, as with family ties, was generally discouraged as being unhealthy. Since life had long ago gone entirely virtual aside from essential bodily functions, there was little reason to venture out and see others anyway. The day of the JAB was an exception, so everyone was in a good mood.

On any other day, Harold was just a normal citizen. But on the day of the JAB, he was held in high regard, being the nephew of the last person in his community to draw a JAB loss. His aunt had sacrificed her life for the good of the community. Children learned of her on their MAN where her story was told with bold colors and dramatic yet somber music that could have been one of the old national anthems when nations still existed or perhaps the sound track of a trailer for a movie about a famous battle or natural disaster.

And so on this day, Harold was seen in a different light. He was respected. People dropped their shoulders a bit and lowered their eyes momentarily upon greeting him. They felt honored that they knew him, and were keen to be seen with him. It all made Harold very uncomfortable.

And the members of his MAN were even more eager to rub shoulders with Harold on this day. It wasn't discussed, but they all assumed that if Harold were to be chosen, he would be extremely lucky and well rewarded by the Algorithm given the sacrifices of his family. And although it was considered undignified to discuss material gain, the fact is that when someone is chosen and gets the JAB, not only are they rewarded, but the members of their MAN also benefit.

Nobody ever talked about what happened to the members of the MAN when one of them Refuses. The fact is, nobody really knew. All that was known was that MAN members were not held legally responsible, but it was a common assumption that they would be seen as morally culpable, that they'd not done enough, that they should have known and should have seen it coming, and that therefore there would be some sort of repercussion. But this, along with anything else of importance, was never discussed. No, on this day, spirits were high and only impotent pleasantries were shared.

Yes, Harold's MAN felt very confident indeed going into this JAB.

As they approached the outdoor platform, Harold saw the familiar Primary Autonomous Identical Nurses, or PAINs, positioned to receive subjects. Machines had taken over all health care functions many years earlier. They were fully integrated with the MAN and Algorithm. They never made mistakes, never forgot a medicine, never miscalculated a dosage, knew everybody's name, DNA, and what they had for breakfast.

They spoke every language known and some that weren't, could diagnose your entire health profile by bouncing a low frequency wave off your earlobe at 1,000 meters, and never threatened to unionize. Along with the two modern PAINs onstage that day was an antique robot named The Bug that was pulled out every year just for the JAB. The Bug was a hit with the crowd and it got a lot of laughs when the PAINs teased it for being so slow, uncoordinated, and stupid. Harold grew to feel sorry for the Bug over the years. When the JAB first started, the Bug was treated with respect, somewhat like the antique cars at the parades he went to as a kid. Now though, the Bug was treated like a clown.

It was a festive atmosphere with bounce castles, musak, and balloons. One of the PAINs juggled pouches of saline while the other huddled over an old fashioned, transparent tumbler with cards inside, each one presumably containing the name of one person in the village. The PAINs could have chosen the lucky winners electronically, of course, but this added drama and excitement, particularly because the PAINs put on a show of calling for the Bug to come on stage and give it an awkward spin. The crowd loved it.

At 15 minutes to draw time, one of the PAINs stood erect and emitted three short, loud, high-pitched beeps. Parents excitedly went to the bounce castle to collect their children while teens started nonchalantly moving towards

the stage, feigning bored reluctance as if this were an imposition when in fact it was the most exciting event of the year.

Harold's anxiety was increasing. His hands were cold and he felt nauseous. He must see a PAIN for a checkup tomorrow, he told himself.

At five minutes, the PAIN gave one short beep, which was unnecessary at this point as everyone was in place.

At the appointed moment, a PAIN went through the standard greeting and introduction, which included a brief and unnecessary history of the JAB, followed by a long list of rules, regulations, and responsibilities delivered at triple speed, causing the youngest children to giggle.

And then it was time.

Chapter 3

As always, there would be five people chosen for the JAB. It was a straightforward process. To start the drawings, and with much fanfare, the PAINs would call on the Bug who would slowly and clumsily appear from backstage. The kids laughed hysterically and the adults hooted as the Bug awkwardly made its way onstage. The Bug had the honor of tumbling the tumbler, then a PAIN picked a card while covering their eyes with their other robotic hand, wincing ever so slightly as if they were squeezing their eyes tightly shut, then that PAIN would hand the card to the other who would read out the name.

The lucky winner, after letting out a joyous, squelched squeal, then ran up to the stage, sat down, and tried not to wriggle with happy excitement as they confirmed their name, birthday, and consent before the PAIN administered the valued JAB.

And so it went on this day. The first winner was a young mother with two young children, and she could not contain her joy. She could now buy a larger hologram projector for her MAN and maybe even request a second sanctioned mammal.

Harold was relieved he wasn't chosen. He admitted to himself now that he didn't want the JAB. He had everything he needed to be happy. He didn't want to be greedy, he rationalized. Surely the Algorithm and the MAN would understand that, even predict it.

The next winner was one of the disaffected teens who, upon being chosen, dropped his facade and let out a big, "Yes!" He high fived his pals as he bounded onto the stage, giving a thumbs up to the crowd and blowing a kiss to the PAIN after getting the JAB. The PAIN blushed and smiled meekly at the crowd.

Harold relaxed a little and was happy for the boy. The young should be the ones to benefit, he thought, not those of us who are older.

The third winner was a man in his 80's who was hard of hearing, so the PAIN had to keep increasing the volume while calling out his name, resulting in irritated expressions and covered ears in the crowd.

Harold stifled an internal laugh. Doesn't really matter how it goes for this old fellow, he thought.

The fourth winner was an infant who had been born just three days prior. The father carried her to the stage and beamed with gratitude for his family's luck while the PAIN made gaga sounds and silly faces as it injected the JAB into the virgin flesh.

Harold was getting into the mood now. It was a done deal. Only one more to go and the odds that it would be him were low. This was a nice day after all. The sun felt good on his back and he was looking forward to his afternoon MAN.

Then the PAIN drew the last card as the crowd tensed with expectation, their fingers crossed and hearts racing, except for Harold's. Harold was at ease and feeling victorious.

The PAIN clumsily dropped the card and it fluttered to the floor. "Oops! I'm all thumbs today!" The crowd giggled as the PAIN picked up the card, as it did every year.

"And the final winner today is," the PAIN paused as a drum roll played from somewhere, "Harold!"

Harold felt an explosion of adrenalin in his chest, shoulders, and arms. For an instant, he envisioned a correction by the PAIN, or perhaps he'd heard wrong. Isn't there a Harvey in the community? And a Hal? And a Gerald? Yes, yes, there's a Gerald.

Then those in his MAN who were nearby turned and looked at him with mouths open and hands clapping. Someone patted him on the back. He felt dizzy and thought he might vomit.

The people in his MAN grabbed his arms and nudged his back in the direction of the stage. It all felt dreamlike, unreal. A couple people looked at him inquisitively on his way to the stage, wondering if he was all right.

Once Harold was on the stage and in the chair, the PAIN asked him to confirm his name, birthday, and to consent to the JAB.

"Please state your name."

"Harold."

"And your birthday?"

"January 21, 2038"

“And do you agree to the JAB?” the PAIN asked with a wink a smile to the crowd.

Harold sat silent. He felt his world dissolving. He couldn't speak. The crowd looked at him with varying degrees of confusion, many just ready to get it over with and go back to their SLUM dwellings, knowing now there was no chance of their getting the JAB.

The PAIN had positioned the needle in expectation of an instant reply of consent.

“Harold? Do you accept the JAB?”

“Wait. I... uh... I don't want it.”

The crowd looked up in stunned silence. One PAIN looked at the other, then at the Bug, then they all looked at Harold.

One of Harold's MAN members spoke up. “C'mon Harold. Quit goofing around. It's almost time for the MAN.”

“I'm sorry,” Harold responded. He then turned to the PAINs, “I'm sorry.”

The PAIN with the needle took a formal posture and recited the Law of the JAB in double speed. “Your initial rejection has been recorded. You are allowed three rejections of consent. If you reject consent three times, you will be classified as a Refuser.” An immediate, guttural gasp rose from the crowd.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes,” replied Harold.

The PAIN loosened up, drew the back of their free hand across their brow, smiled ever so slightly and exclaimed to the crowd, “Whew! For a minute there I thought he was serious!” Forced laughs and shuffling feet broke the tension a bit.

“Now,” the PAIN continued, “Harold, do you accept the JAB?”

For reasons Harold couldn't explain, his anxiety was beginning to ease.

“I... I'm sorry. I just can't. I'm sorry. I wanted to before, but I... I don't know... Not now.”

The crowd was now descending into it's own state of unreality and disbelief. Surely, they thought, he must be joking. This is a prank. What's he doing?

The PAIN made a throat clearing sound. “Harold, I hope you understand the gravity of your situation. Your second rejection has been recorded. If you reject the JAB one more time, you will be classified as a Refuser which

will result in full application of consequences explained and agreed to in your yearly MAN orientation and at the beginning of this year's session. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I understand," Harold responded as he looked at his shoes and noticed that his socks didn't match after all.

"Fine. Then let's continue. Harold, do you accept the JAB?"

Harold had lost all apprehension. The world was clear. His decision had been made.

He looked squarely at the crowd and spoke with certainty, confidence, and defiance.

"No. I do not accept the JAB."

Chapter 4

Total silence followed. Even the PAINs were still, processing, communicating with the Algorithm. Someone from Harold's MAN was the first to speak up. "You bastard! You fucking bastard!" A woman in the front followed. "What have you done?! What have you done?!" "Pig!" "Idiot!" "We'll get you!"

Shock was supplanted by rage. The crowd wanted blood. MAN cameras focused on the angry mass, recording their reactions for future use.

From behind the stage a flying craft from the Main Authoritarian Security and Tranquility Enforcement Reserve, or MASTER, appeared as the PAINs made room for it to hover next to Harold. A ladder dropped and Harold willingly ascended into the vehicle sensing that it was a safer option than facing the crowd. The MASTER craft took off for the short flight to Harold's home, where he was instructed that he could take just one sanctioned suitcase.

Harold had an idea of what to expect, and it wasn't pretty. As part of the yearly MAN orientation, then irregularly throughout the year whenever the Algorithm determined it was needed, they were shown videos of what happened to Refusers.

Refusers were deported to the Hated Exile Living Location, or HELL, where their only means of survival was foraging for bugs and even eating dirt. As explained in the MAN orientation, it was the Refuser's right to refuse, and the Algorithm didn't seek revenge or punishment, but in order to protect those who were engaged and compliant, the Algorithm had to exile the Refusers.

The orientation also showed what happened to the Refusers in the absence of the MASTER. Chaos. The weak were preyed upon by the strong. There were weekly recordings of assault, rape, and murder. Refusers were shown

killing each other over an empty jar of pickles or some aluminum foil. There was even talk of cannibalism.

When January was exiled, everyone was required to watch her disintegration in HELL. It was horrific, and the coverage lasted nearly thirteen months. In the end, her corpse was consumed at night by unseen vermin, presumably vultures or rats, that first ate her eyes. Her eyeless face missing half its flesh was portrayed next to her healthy, hopeful graduation picture taken just a year earlier in a campaign the MAN referred to as Before and After Refusal.

People in HELL wore rags, were missing teeth, and had awful skin diseases. This is what was going through Harold's mind on the short hop to his house, but he realized that he had been considering all of this unconsciously for days, and that is what was making him feel off. He had made his decision days ago and had only just now accepted it. But from this point on, he wouldn't have time to worry, and that somehow gave him a calm focus.

The MASTER arrived at Harold's house, the ladder dropped, and Harold was given ten minutes to gather his things. A PAIN was already waiting at his house. PAINs could double as security when needed. They wore many hats.

Fluffy barked, wagged her tail, and jumped with glee when Harold entered the house. He grabbed a couple bags of Puppy Nibbles for the trip and went to pack his essentials in his unused standardized suitcase. He looked around his home and realized he wouldn't miss it. With suitcase and Fluffy in hand, he left.

The PAIN immediately grabbed Fluffy. "No mammals."

"No!," cried Harold. "You can't!"

"Regulations. It's for her own good. She'll just get eaten where you're going."

The PAIN slowly but forcefully led Harold by the arm to the MASTER. Harold looked at Fluffy in the PAIN's arms as he got in the craft. He hadn't expected this. Somehow, he'd never thought about it. But, he realized, the PAIN was right. His heart sank.

As the MASTER slowly ascended and flew off, Harold looked at Fluffy, who was confused as she watched Harold disappear.

Once Harold was gone, the PAIN took Fluffy, opened the door to the house, threw her in, closed the door, locked it, and walked away. Fluffy looked out the plain window, waiting for her dinner.

The GODS Part 1: The good life

The GODS did not notice Harold's Refusal, at least not initially.

The GODS had a good life. They wanted for nothing and spent their days devising ways to entertain themselves.

The GODS directed their top engineers to create the Algorithm in the early 2020s as the central component of their world domination scheme. Data was the new international currency, and the GODS wanted to control it all. *It's the data, stupid*, was a meme making the rounds of the inner circle at the time, along with *Control data, control thought*.

Eventually, the Algorithm could learn on its own, and if it needed tweaking, the GODS could direct the engineers, who had the keys to the Algorithm, to make sure that the overriding task for the Algorithm was to take care of the GODS, always.

Since 2035, the Algorithm had been able to run completely unaided. PAINs were able to attend to all tasks once performed by humans from the menial to the most advanced, and the PAINs did it better.

By 2038, the Algorithm had figured out how to give the GODS near immortality. How long they could live wasn't clear, even to the Algorithm, but one thing was certain. They didn't age. Rather, they could control their aging, even to the extent that they could grow younger. It was just another source of entertainment to the GODS. They even had virtual costume parties in which they attended as different versions of themselves. These were highly sexually charged events.

The ability to control age was achieved by regular, personalized analysis of a GODS's genetic and cellular state by the Algorithm and adjustments based on this analysis according to a GODS's desired age, the adjustments being administered by a PAIN. Every day, PAINs would ask the GODS if an analysis and adjustment were desired, this inquiry usually taking place first thing in the morning when the PAINs served breakfast.

The GODS were dispersed around the planet living in physical isolation but with virtual communities. They occasionally traveled to one another's community, but since the ability to meet virtually with nearly 100% fidelity had been reached, meeting in person had become a moot point. They still did so on rare occasions usually for sex, for which their virtual world had only reached 99.75% fidelity, the missing .25% being something nobody could quite put their finger on.

With all this security and certainty in their permanence, Harold's Refusal didn't raise any alarm. Harold's community, like every community, existed in the sphere of a loosely defined group of GODS. The GODS had no formal control or governance structure. There were no leaders. There was no need for any. But for entertainment purposes, they did form teams of sorts, and these were organized geographically. These teams were the closest thing to an artifact of the old nation state structure that ceased to exist earlier in the century.

Teams of GODS would engage in lighthearted competitions that often involved the manipulation of their communities. They might see who could get the highest engagement and compliance for a certain period, engagement and compliance achieved sometimes through incentives, but more often via threat of punishment, and their punishments could be very primitive indeed. In fact, devising ever more creative and brutal forms of coercion was itself a popular pastime for the GODS.

But on the day of Harold's Refusal, there was no such game in play, and the GODS depended on the Algorithm to handle such trivial things as unplanned Refusals. GODS did at times initiate a Refusal as part of a competition. They did so by manipulating the Refuser's physiology and the subliminal messages they received on the MAN. The Refuser always believed it was their own choice. Refusers served a needed function for the Algorithm. They provided content for the MAN and helped drive up engagement and compliance through their punishment.

But Harold's Refusal had not been engineered. His decision was his own.

So Harold's Refusal in itself was of little interest to the GODS. In fact, they didn't even notice, and even if they had, they would have let the Algorithm deal with it, which the Algorithm did anyway. The Algorithm worked perfectly, after all.

Chapter 5

The Algorithm immediately mobilized its protocol for using a Refusal for compliance and engagement orientation and training, whether that Refusal was planned or not. It was a detailed plan finely tuned for each community as it would be implemented not only in Harold's community, but in all communities, just as January's had been.

Nobody knew how many communities there were. The Algorithm had determined long ago that it was beneficial to engagement and compliance not to name communities. They all looked the same anyway, and there was no travel between them. Why would there be? Plus, keeping the communities nameless gave the Algorithm the option of using names, even temporary names, when that improved engagement and compliance. For example, for the next couple of months, this community would be known as Harold's Previous Community, and his house would be known as Harold's Previous House.

The first stage of the plan as it pertained to Harold's Previous House was simple. Do nothing. The MAN observed and discussed the barren, ghostly house daily. Nobody dare approach the house, though the naughtiest of teens might touch a toe to the yard. If an errant ball landed on the premises, it stayed there.

After Harold's Refusal, nobody went near the house. The grass and shrubs turned brown. To say it was an eyesore would be an understatement. It was an embarrassing and frightening reminder of how the community had failed, and the MAN's hate directed at Harold increased by the hour.

But the worst part, the most painful part of this stage for the community was Fluffy, stuck in the house, barking, then yelping, then whining as she desperately searched and begged from the plain window, all dutifully caught and broadcast on the MAN. Children cried, adults too, for they loved Fluffy. Then one day, after growing weaker and weaker, Fluffy was quiet.

A few days later the stench started emanating from the house. The MAN broadcast images of neighbors crossing the street to avoid the house as they covered their faces. Cameras zoomed in on Fluffy's shrinking corpse decaying in the window. The MAN cameras were even able to catch the maggots when they eventually appeared.

When the training value of the house had been completely depleted, stage two was implemented.

The tools of the MASTER could have easily removed the house in a matter of hours, but that would have had little educational value. The Algorithm had a better approach.

A team of PAINs arrived one day and started placing a variety of flammable materials in the house, and not just any flammable materials, but those that would produce the most putrid and toxic smoke possible such as discarded heavy plastic objects, old railroad ties soaked in creosote, soiled mattresses, various chemicals and solvents, and, of course, many used tires.

The house burned for a full week sending a continual plume of poisonous, noxious smoke into the community. Health alerts were issued hourly. Residents were required to wear masks. Even the PAINs wore them. The MAN spewed a level disgust toward Harold never before seen. People needed an outlet for their anger, their hatred.

The Algorithm knew this, which is why since the beginning of the Refusal the MAN had been simultaneously broadcasting regular updates on Harold's fate in HELL.

Chapter 6

Within an hour after Harold's Refusal, the MASTER craft had arrived at HELL. Harold's hood was removed and he squinted in the afternoon sunlight. He could make out vague images of movement below, figures scurrying about, staying low to the ground and taking cover. They struck him as human-sized rats. Are those people? He wasn't sure. MASTER camera drones mirrored movements of the MASTER craft as it positioned itself over a level area of the expansive dump, a wide valley of sorts.

A ladder was lowered from the craft as it hovered a few feet above ground. Camera drones covered Harold from every angle as he descended into HELL. Once on the ground, close ups caught his stunned, disoriented, fearful expression as he took in his surroundings. A PAIN tossed his suitcase out and it bounced off his head then splayed open when it hit the ground sending his sparse belongings everywhere. A closeup caught his toothbrush landing in a mass of indistinguishable sludge causing children viewing on the MAN to make faces and adults to turn away from the screen, but not for too long lest their engagement score be docked.

Its mission complete, the MASTER craft departed, but the camera drones would stay until nightfall to broadcast Harold's ordeal, and then return daily to cover his mental and physical disintegration and eventual death. On the MAN, the program was called *The Fate of Harold the Refuser*. Viewing followed by emotional and irrational MAN discussion would be required.

But the requirement was hardly necessary on this day as all eyes were transfixed on Harold's first day in HELL.

Harold shook as he picked up his belongings and blankly pretended to organize them in his suitcase, aware that he was being watched. He looked up at the drones, somehow expecting them to help. It was a beautiful shot for the MAN.

Harold turned a nearby plastic bucket upside down and sat on it, not knowing what else to do. He sat there for what seemed like hours, but was in fact less than 45 minutes, during which time the MAN cut to Harold's Previous House and live scenes of poor Fluffy.

Harold eventually decided to stand up. Once standing, he found that he still didn't know what to do, so he sat back down. This he did five times, twice walking around the bucket and other times venturing as much as 15 feet away from it.

Then he had an epiphany. They dropped him here to make a statement. Perhaps if he climbed to the top of the nearest ridge of refuse, he could identify a safer place, perhaps trees, anywhere that provided cover. There wasn't much daylight left, so he had to hurry.

Harold climbed to the top of the closest ridge, taking two steps forward and one back on the loose garbage. He got to the top and was devastated by what he saw. The landscape was vast and homogeneous. Around him, almost as a painting, was ridge upon ridge, hill upon hill of dump. There was nothing else in any direction. There was no point in going anywhere.

Somehow, the plastic bucket now felt like home, so he headed back, considering his fate as he half walked, half slid down the slope.

It was when he was just about to reach his bucket that he got attacked.

Chapter 7

They came from all sides, maybe six of them in all. Their clothes were torn and soiled, their hair long and matted, and they were filthy. Their shoes didn't match and they used crude instruments as weapons, a kid's baseball bat, a metal gardening rake, even a spatula.

One of them pushed him while another grabbed his suitcase, but he held on. Someone bear hugged him from behind and pulled him back, trying to free his hold on the suitcase. "Let go! Just let go!" the person whispered, at which point Harold tripped and fell down, losing his suitcase and taking the person holding him down too. Harold rolled over and came face to face with what appeared to be a woman, and for a moment he thought he saw a twinkle in her eye and the beginnings of a smile. She rolled away and got up and Harold took the opportunity to jump up and defend himself. He threw the bucket at the spatula wielding person, he couldn't tell the gender, and then he lost all control. Instinct took over.

Harold starting screaming gibberish at the top of his lungs, swinging his arms wildly in helicopter fashion, spinning in all directions. "WHAGOBABAROOMBA KAKAKA AHHH SHABITOOKIWANGOO!!!" His explosion paid off. It caught his assailants off guard. They tried a couple advances but Harold's insanity repelled them. He threw things as he yelled, anything he could get his hands on. But it was the screaming that scared them the most. Harold was not a good shot. He wasn't even aiming. One of the assailants laughed slightly when Harold threw a toilet brush that sailed a good 20 feet over their heads.

The MAN absolutely loved it. Engagement ratings went wild.

Harold then surprised himself by aggressively charging at the others as his arms spun and whipped in all directions and his yelling and screaming became shockingly loud and violent. Before, he was standing his ground. Now he got aggressive. The assailants were stunned by this turn of events and disappeared among the old appliances and trails in the garbage like it was second nature.

Harold was in shock. He stood there for a moment breathing hard and heart pounding, ready for another wave of attack, but it never materialized. It was almost dark and he wondered if they would try an attack at night. He decided to gather projectiles and weapons and stack them around his bucket.

And, in the quickly fading light, that's where the MAN left him for the day. They zoomed out on Harold sitting on his bucket surrounded by discarded antique artifacts as far as the eye could see. As they zoomed out, the scene was one of indiscernible junk, an ocean of it, hills and valleys of it. It was so expansive that it formed its own weather patterns. They zoomed out until

Harold was indistinguishable from the discarded washing machines, futons, building materials, consumer electronics, obscure parts from a long forgotten industrial age, and piles upon piles of rubble.

Harold sat for a moment on his bucket, in the quiet. He thought about his Aunt Claudette, how she died, and if perhaps that was an easier death than the one he was now apparently facing. He thought of his mother dying after childbirth, and wondered what she went through. He thought of all the ways people die. He thought of January and that image of her mangled, eyeless face. He wondered if vultures had already spotted him and were waiting for him to die. He looked up into the darkness.

He was exhausted and weak, and he began to consider what he would do for food and water in the morning. But for now, he just had to make it through the night.

He wasn't sure from what location exactly the soft, calm voice came.

"Hello Harold."

Chapter 8

Harold snapped back to the moment, wondering if what he'd heard was an hallucination.

"Hey! Harold!"

Harold jumped up and grabbed a shower curtain from his pile, looked at it, then threw it back and grabbed an old keyboard and held it over his head, ready to deploy.

"Who's there?!" Harold yelled.

"Take it easy Harold. I'm your friend."

"You come near me and I swear I'll... I'll..."

"Harold, that's a keyboard. What are you going to do, delete me?"

Harold considered his position, and wondered how the person knew his name.

"What do you want?" Harold asked.

"Well, to save your life for starters. There's an old refrigerator about eight feet to your left. Go over to it and open the door."

Still holding the keyboard, Harold side stepped to his left until he found a refrigerator.

"This Frigidaire?"

“Oh God no, those are trash. The Westinghouse next to it. Double wide 565 liter with auto defrosting and high capacity ice maker.”

Harold located the Westinghouse and kicked it a couple of times like a tire on a used car.

“OK, now what.”

“Now open the door, the big one.”

Harold opened the refrigerator and was shocked to see a narrow flight of stairs heading down into the darkness of HELL.

“Now go down the steps.”

“What? No! I’m not going down there!”

“Fine, then stay out here all night waiting to get attacked again in the morning. Your call.”

Harold considered his options. The voice had a point. It was offering shelter and possible safety, but how did he know he wasn’t going to be dinner? Was this a trap?

“Harold, we’ve had plenty of opportunities to do you harm if that’s what we wanted. Now hurry up. We don’t have all night.”

Harold pensively stepped on the first stair heading down, paused, then the next. The stairs curved to the left slightly and he noticed a landing a few steps down. A very faint light was emanating from somewhere below the landing. When he reached the landing, he noticed a man in a far corner when he lit a cigarette. Harold had never smelled one before. The man’s stoic demeanor clashed with his tacky Hawaiian shirt and worn straw hat.

“Hello Harold.”

“He... Hello.”

“Harold?”

“Yes?”

“Were you raised in an elevator?”

“Huh?”

“You forgot to shut the door.”

“Oh..uh.. sorry.”

Harold took the few steps back to the refrigerator entry, considered running away, then realized he felt safer inside. He shut the door and headed back down to the landing and stood face to face with the man, waiting.

“It’s nice to finally meet you Harold. My name is Floyd. Are you OK? Any injuries?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m fine. Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“Follow me Harold. One step at a time.”

Floyd led Harold down another, longer flight of stairs that ended at a large metal door. Floyd opened the door to a very large room with 45 or 50 people, some sitting at desks along one wall looking at monitors, some lounging on couches and bean bag chairs along another. There was a ping pong game going on in one corner, a couple teams on a dart board in another, and a large, old, rectangular table in the middle of it all that could seat 24 people comfortably.

The instant Floyd opened the door and entered with Harold, the entire room erupted into a boisterous standing ovation.

Chapter 9

Harold was overwhelmed by a confusing mix of relief and disorientation as the eclectic group of smiling, clapping individuals moved towards him offering various expressions of praise and congratulations. A few people were twirling slowly with arms spread wide as they approached in what was already being called the Twirly Bird.

“Well done!” “Excellent! Excellent performance!” “Outstanding technique!” “Welcome! Welcome Harold!” “You’re a hit! You did great!”

Others just greeted with meaningless vocalizations meant to sound like Harold’s earlier outburst, delivered this time with smiles and laughs.

A woman who had been sitting at a monitor clapped and shouted “Bravo!,” as she approached Harold, then eyed his keyboard. “Is that a Dell? Classic! Can I have it?”

“Uh, sure. Sure,” replied Harold. The woman snatched it out of his hands and scurried off to swap it out for the one she had been using. “Thanks!” she turned back and shouted as if she’d forgotten her manners.

Harold turned to Floyd, who now seemed more relaxed and was even, maybe, starting to smile. “What’s going on here?” Harold asked.

Floyd addressed the group, “OK everybody! Let’s give Harold some space. Remember your first day.” Floyd put his hand reassuringly on Harold’s back. “Let’s take a walk. I’ll give you a quick tour of this part of the station, get you settled, get you oriented, then you can have a shower and bite to eat. You’ll need to get some rest. We start very early tomorrow.”

Floyd led Harold across the large room towards some double doors at the opposite end, past the long table, past the couches and bean bag chairs that people were settling back into. A few stragglers patted him on the back as

they passed. A ping pong ball bounced in front of them. Floyd picked it up and tossed it back. “We’re all Refusers here, Harold,” Floyd said as he leaned on the panic bars that were common on doors in public buildings half a century earlier.

The doors led to a long, wide hallway. As they walked, Floyd started explaining to Harold what he needed to know to get through the next 24 hours and be safe. In addition to being a Refuser himself, Floyd handled the intake of new arrivals, and he had learned what they needed to know to get oriented and when they needed to know it. He no longer tried to explain everything at once. He just had to make sure Harold made it through the next day without losing his life or sanity.

“But, but what about those creatures that attacked me? Who are they?” Harold asked, confused.

“We survive here by giving the Algorithm what it expects. They were acting. You’ll meet the three of them soon.”

“They weren’t trying to kill me?”

“With a spatula?” Floyd pointed out.

Harold considered the spatula. “Well they sure looked scary.”

Floyd chuckled. “Yeah. They do look scary. We make sure of that.”

They were passing another set of doors on the right and Floyd stopped before going through. “Harold, look. There’s a lot going on here and it’s going to take a while to explain it all to you, but in time, trust me, you will understand. The thing to know for now is that we’re on your side, you’re safe, and we need to work together to keep you that way.”

“OK. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Now, I want you to meet some people who will get you ready for tomorrow. Then you can get cleaned up and get some food and rest.” With that, Floyd opened the doors and led Harold into a room much smaller than the previous one, and less recreational.

“Welcome to the shop.”

There was a bank of tables in the middle, a large work station at left with an array of hardware hooked up to three monitors arranged for easy viewing from a worn office chair, mounted monitors around the periphery of the room, camera equipment, various gadgetry he couldn’t identify, and a bunch of what looked to Harold like old computer equipment he’d seen pictures of as a boy. On one section of a far wall, someone had painted The Shop in various colors, with tragedy and comedy masks directly below, all inside an intricate, painted frame.

There were four people already in the room. One of the people, a woman, looked vaguely familiar to Harold. He felt an immediate attraction to her which was a novel experience for him. But then, his physical human interaction had been severely limited for the last few decades. Though good looking, her beauty came from an honest, intelligent, easy disposition. Those eyes looked so familiar, the smile. Where had he seen her before?

She approached and held out her hand. "Hi Harold. I'm January."

Chapter 10

"I'm sorry," Harold replied.

Still holding his hand, January's smile broadened. "For what?"

"No, I mean, I, uh—" Harold's mind raced. The picture of January as a healthy, beaming 17 year old juxtaposed to that of her disfigured head leaped into his mind. It was her. How many doppelganger Refusers also named January could there be?

"You look just like—"

"January, right. That's me. Hi!" January said as if she was a long lost friend who had just knocked on Harold's door.

"But it's impossible. I saw your eyes—"

"My what? Oh! That!" January laughed and looked to the others, who fondly remembered the achievement and shook their heads smiling. "Yeah, that was fake. Great job, wasn't it!"

January let go of Harold's hand to introduce the others. She first pointed to a rather serious looking man sitting at the work station facing the bank of monitors.

"This is Phil. He's in charge of monitoring and interacting with the Algorithm."

Phil spun around in the office chair clearly missing some parts. "Howdy, chief."

"Nice to meet you Phil." Harold looked at all the monitors and gadgets in Phil's corner. "Is this where you watch the MAN too?"

"Nope. Can't access the MAN from here. MAN, Mandated Assigned Network. We don't exist so we can't be assigned to one. But we do pretty well at hacking the Algorithm though. We knew you were coming."

"Wow. But how?"

January then grabbed Harold's arm and pointed him towards the others. She first introduced an older, bearded, large man with a constant smile.

“And this is Gilbert.”

Gilbert shook Harold’s hand and gave a slight bow. “It’s an honor, sir.” Gilbert clearly paid more attention to his fashion than Floyd.

“Nice to meet you,” Harold replied.

“Gilbert is our makeup and costume guy. He did the fake me you saw! Eyeballs and everything,” explained January.

“It was nothing,” Gilbert said with false modesty.

January turned to a tall, thin, ageless woman who struck Harold as straightforward, businesslike, and organized. “And this is Francoise, our continuity supervisor.”

Francoise shook Harold’s hand and smiled warmly, “Very nice to meet you Harold.”

“Hello. Nice to meet you. I’m sorry, you’re the what?” asked Harold.

Francoise smiled again and briefly looked at the others. “I make sure everyone looks the same for the MAN day to day, or like the MAN expects.”

“I see,” replied Harold, even though he didn’t.

“Speaking of which,” January broke in, “we need to get your picture so you can get some food and water. Francoise? Are you ready?”

Francoise readied the Polaroid camera on the table. “Yes indeed.” She pointed the camera at Harold when he wasn’t looking, then loudly and abruptly said, “Harold!”

Startled, Harold turned to Francoise and she took his picture before he could compose himself.

“Thanks!” she said cheerfully.

Harold looked as if his heart had skipped a beat, not unlike his appearance when he arrived in the dump. “What was that?”

Floyd explained, “We needed to get a picture of you looking your worst, as when you were outside. That’s why you haven’t had any food or drink yet. We needed to establish your visual baseline for continuity, just as the MAN established a baseline for different reasons. We’ll take your picture daily when you come in, as long as you’re performing that is.”

“This all makes no sense to me,” Harold said, staring into space, as if the answer would be there. Then his eyes wandered about the room. “What is this place anyway?”

Gilbert gestured towards an ancient, tattered map of a floor plan taped to the wall above one of the shelves of equipment. “An old underground train station and shopping center. Manatook Station it was called. Five floors.

Goes on forever,” explained Gilbert. “We figure the city above it was destroyed in, what, World War Four?” he asked, looking at the others.

“Correct,” Francoise said. “But the station predates World War Three. Fascinating architecture. This room appears to be what was once something called a Donny’s Donut Shop.”

Francoise pointed to the painted sign on the wall reading The Shop.

“Hence the name.”

January handed Harold a large glass of water.

“Drink this. You’re dehydrated.”

Harold took a sip, looked at January, then drank it all as Floyd explained what’s in store for Harold.

“The MAN needs to see you tomorrow, Harold. Surely you understand that the MAN will be using your struggle for JAB indoctrination. And they must show you. If they don’t, people might get the idea that refusing the JAB has no consequences. The only reason you’re alive is so they can show you suffering. The Algorithm knows that execution is counterproductive. Suffering, fear, uncertainty, that’s where the conditioning value lies.”

“And all indicators are,” January continued, “that you’re a big hit on the MAN. Engagement was 100% today.”

“You’re gold to the MAN right now,” Floyd added. “And if you don’t show up tomorrow, they might come looking for you, put PAINs on the ground. That would be very bad. That hasn’t happened in years. We’ve gotten good at what we do.”

Harold came back to his senses somewhat, looked at Floyd, then January and the others.

“What do you do?”

January took a couple steps and stood between Gilbert and Francoise, putting a hand on their shoulders. “We put on a show for the MAN for our own survival.”

Harold got a confused look on his face. “So you help the MAN?”

Floyd tried to explain. “It’s not as simple as it looks. First of all, this keeps HELL operating as a safe location for exiled Refusers, and we make it possible for Refusers to survive.”

“And thrive, I might add,” Gilbert added. “We have everything we need here. You wouldn’t believe the fabric I salvaged yesterday.”

Francoise’s face lit up as she turned to Gilbert. “Oh, that yellow silk is fabulous! Can you make me a scarf out of that?”

“Love to my dear. That color would look fantastic on you.”

Floyd cleared his throat loudly. “Yes, well, back to the matter at hand. It wasn’t always like this, this organized. At first, we did it simply to keep them off our backs, to satisfy them, to let them see blood from the sky so they wouldn’t come looking for it down here. Now, we’re learning how to manipulate the Algorithm, or at least access it.”

Harold tried to grasp it all.

“But,” he paused and gestured back to the big room and all those who’d greeted him, “but where did everybody come from? The MAN never said anything about all those people Refusing.”

The others understood Harold’s confusion. They’d all been through it.

Phil turned back and looked at his monitors as he answered.

“The MAN doesn’t inform, it manipulates. It tells you whatever it takes to get you to comply. If it actually told you how many Refusers there were, people might start getting ideas. The MAN doesn’t like ideas.”

January walked over to Harold and took his arm. “What do you say we give poor Harold here a break and let him get some rest. He needs to be ready to go tomorrow.”

Harold grew tense. “What happens tomorrow?”

Floyd looked at him with a devious grin. “You fight for your life.”

Chapter 11

Harold slept so soundly that when he awoke, it took him a few seconds to remember where he was. His new room was small, but comfortable. He imagined it had been some sort of maintenance or security room, but it had been done up tastefully. He wondered if Gilbert had had a hand in the decoration.

He barely had time to wipe the sleep from his eyes when a knock on the door was immediately followed by Floyd’s head appearing. “We’ll go over the script and directions over breakfast in 10,” Floyd said without waiting for a response.

“Script?” Harold thought out loud.

Feeling as though he had a shaky hold on reality, Harold found his way to the large dining room he’d eaten in the night before. Although he felt disorientated, he was also exhilarated. “Everyone here is a Refuser,” Floyd had said. Everyone there had taken the same leap he had. They all had something very personal in common. They were partners in some righteous crime. They depended on each other. He felt a strong sense of camaraderie which was yet another new experience.

He got thumbs up and pats on the back as he walked to breakfast.

The dining room was in what must have been a small shop of some sort. In the middle of the room was a large, ornate, marble-top table that impressed Harold. He'd never seen anything like it. But what impressed him more was what was on the table. The coffee he might have expected. What he hadn't expected was the spread that went along with it, laid out buffet style, including a variety of egg dishes, multiple breads, fresh fruit, porridge, nuts, and a few things he didn't recognize.

January noticed Harold's expression of surprise. "We eat well here. Very well."

There were a couple people already loading their plates while others got their coffee as they nodded and smiled to Harold.

"Where in the world did all this food come from?" Harold asked, amazed.

"We grow a lot of crops at the station. Hydroponics mostly but some in good old fashioned dirt, a lot of natural light mirrored in plus artificial light running off solar panels in the dump. Chickens we found wandering the dump years ago and took them in. Works pretty well."

January looked over everything on the table, perplexed. "Huh... no potatoes this morning? Hey Ron! Ron!"

A lean, long-haired guy who Harold judged to be in his 40s appeared in the doorway to the kitchen wearing an apron over jeans and a T-shirt, holding a spatula.

"Watch out! He's got a spatula!" someone in the room remarked to laughter.

"Good morning January," Ron said in a monotone. "Potatoes are coming."

"Good morning Ron. Ron, this is -,"

"Harold! Hello Harold! How's it going man!" Ron enthusiastically shook Harold's hand as if his coffee had just kicked in.

"Nice to meet you," Harold replied, his head bobbing a little in sync with Ron's handshake.

"Ron is our Head Chef," January explained. "He usually doesn't do breakfast but he wanted to meet you."

"Uh, thank you, Ron," Harold said.

"Yeah, well, you know, your first day of battle and all. You need to be well fed. Nobody here does eggs properly. I keep telling them, keep the heat down, keep the heat down, but do they listen? Anyway, sorry for the boring food. I'm not very creative unless I'm stoned and it seemed a bit early." Ron looked at his watch as if he were giving the time of day second thoughts while January rolled her eyes, then he continued excitedly, "But hey last

night I prepared some specialties for you to have out in the field later. I mean, specialties, works of art. I smell the potatoes.” Ron abruptly turned back into the kitchen.

“Ron also grows all our greens,” January offered.

She then introduced Harold to the rest of the crew that morning. They included his three adversaries for the show, Roz, Elijah, and Landy, all of whom took part in the initial attack on Harold.

Roz walked over to Harold and put her hand on his shoulder. “Uh, sorry about taking you down yesterday. Or, wait, you took me down with you, didn’t you.”

“That was you?”

“Well I told you to just let it go, right?” Roz looked at the others. “And what does he do? He just hangs on for dear life. Anyway,” Roz continued, giving Harold a flirtatious look, “Nice to meet you Harold. Maybe we can go down on each other again today.”

“Sure, uh, that would be great, I think.”

January gestured to the food. “What, not enough fresh meat on the table, Roz?”

Roz winked at January, “Never enough fresh meat around here,” then eyed the food. “I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

Seeing that Harold was flustered, January tried to reassure him. “We’re a pretty tight knit group, Harold. Don’t worry. You’ll fit right in,” she said as she slapped him on the back.

While filling her plate, Landy added, “He fits right in already I’d say. Hi ya, Harold!”

“Ditto,” Elijah agreed while choosing a bread. “We’ll be gentle today. Don’t worry. Just a fair warning that we’ll be after your truffles.”

“My truffles?” Harold said to himself.

Floyd entered as they were all settling in with their food.

“OK, listen up everybody. This is a big day. As you all know, Harold is the first arrival we’ve had in over a year, so these first couple of days I want to review things in detail.”

Floyd brought up a map of the area they’d be using on a large wall-mounted monitor and reviewed important locations that everyone but Harold was familiar with. He explained to Harold how group rations for the day would be in place, disguised as trash, insects, dead rodents, or something in between. The locations were all near piles of rubble that included a certain type of tile, in case Harold couldn’t remember. The four

of them would be in the dump all day with windows of opportunity to sneak into the station via hidden portals also marked on the map, so logistics of food and water were important, particularly as this show could be going on for months.

They even had a working refrigerator disguised as a large, decrepit file cabinet in one spot situated in such a way that actors could open one panel pretending to hide and get food or water if they were desperate.

But it was important that Harold give the MAN a show. And so food had been disguised knowing that the MAN would broadcast him eating things repulsive to viewers. For descriptions of the food, Floyd called in Rob, who went over the menu and showed examples.

“Good morning everyone. Today our special is elongated tortellini using handmade whole wheat dough with a filling of roast chicken, cloves, and my own mixture of fresh herbs.” Ron held up a few strands of his gourmet tortellini. “Worms, all organic.”

“We also have a delicious vegetarian fillet made from hand pressed tofu that has been smoked and dried with dill, garlic, and a touch of saffron, presented attached to handmade al dente picci with marinated lion’s mane mushrooms.” Ron held up his fillet by the pasta end as if it were a tail. “Dead rat. Again, all organic.”

“Next, we have a refreshing gazpacho made of diced roma tomatoes, a touch of sweet yellow onion, cucumber, red bell pepper, plenty of fresh basil, garlic, olive oil, and a dash of red wine vinegar, all from our very own gardens, and of course, all organic.” Ron held up a glass bowl with the gazpacho. “Sludge.”

“Finally, for dessert we have dark chocolate truffles made with our own cocoa beans, cane sugar, coconut, and roasted almonds.”

“I love those things,” Landy remarked to herself while others nodded in agreement.

Ron held up a couple truffles, one resembling a cockroach and the other a large spider, and said, “Shaped in a variety of your favorite insects.”

“Thank you Ron,” Floyd said. “It’s clear why we have no problem getting volunteers for the show.”

“That and also because it’s just a lot of fun fucking with the MAN,” Roz added, to a response of claps, laughs, and exclamations of agreement as Ron gave a bow and headed back to the kitchen.

“Right then,” Floyd continued, “Let’s go over the general plan for this first show. Harold?”

“Yes!” Harold responded as if coming out of a trance.

“You’re first position will be at your bucket. Do you remember your bucket position?”

Harold’s mood suddenly darkened as he revisited the night before, but he pulled himself back to the present situation.

“Yes, yes of course. My bucket.”

“Everything is still in place, your bucket, your pile of defenses. The MAN will expect to find you there in a sorry state having either not slept all night or having collapsed from exhaustion on the ground in your circle. It’s your choice how to play it. What do you think?”

“Well... I, uh... I think regardless, by daylight, I would be back sitting on my bucket or standing,” responded Harold.

“Good instincts,” Floyd acknowledged. “OK, so you’re there. Roz, Landy, and Elijah, you all can hang out wherever you want until no later than 9:00AM. You have to make an appearance by then. It’s peak morning engagement time on the MAN and they’ll be broadcasting Harold, waiting for something to happen.”

“Right,” responded Roz, as she looked at the others with a grin.

“So here it is,” Floyd continued, “We need all of you on set between 30 minutes before sunrise, which is in..”

“85 minutes,” Francoise interjected.

“85 minutes,” Floyd repeated. “So you need to be on set between then and 20 minutes after sunset or when we let you know the drones are gone. During that time, we need at least one conflict of some sort between 9:00 and 10:00, and another between 12:00 and 2:00. These times align with peak MAN engagement hours. Outside of those hours, you can do what you want, but know that the MAN is trained on you; you are being broadcast. So, you can forage, rest, whatever. You can use one of the portals to get into the station if you must, but for no longer than 30 minutes. We don’t want to call attention to them. The MAN will just assume you’re getting out of the elements. Does everyone understand so far?”

Harold raised his hand, “Excuse me, Floyd?”

“Yes Harold?”

“What exactly do you mean by conflict?”

“I’m glad you asked Harold. Folks, what exactly do we mean by conflict?”

Elijah responded first with an enthusiastic smile, “We try to bash your head in, rip your guts out, and eat your liver,” he reported dutifully, then remembered his manners, “Oh! All staged, of course.”

“But first,” Roz added, “We go for your shoes, then your belt, then your pants.”

“Finally,” Landy said, “We see if you’re hiding anything valuable in any of your orifices, and we don’t ask for consent first. The MAN just loves that sort of thing,” she added with disgust. “Don’t worry. We’ll be gentle. There won’t be any... what’s the word?”

“Penetration,” Roz provided.

“Penetration, right. Never any penetration.”

“Wow,” Harold reacted.

January chimed in, “So you can see why you might want to defend yourself.”

“Which brings us to the next point. Harold?” Floyd said to get Harold’s attention.

“Yes?”

“Do you remember last night? How you reacted?”

“Uhm, not really, maybe a little. I freaked out, right? Went berserk?”

“Yes,” confirmed Floyd. “We have it right here.” Floyd brought up a recording of Harold’s twirly bird performance on the big screen. The others watched and applauded.

Harold’s eyes opened wide as he watched himself. “Oh good God. Was that me?”

“That was you,” responded Floyd, “and you were brilliant. Everyone loved it. The MAN loved it. We loved it. You’re a natural. The MAN is going to be looking for that again. You have to do the twirly bird again, and the wild voices. Do you think you can do that?”

“I, well I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry Floyd,” Roz said. “Well make it easy for him,” then she turned to Harold. “Harold, sometimes you’ll see us coming, others, we’ll surprise you. It will make it easier for you to get into character, as we like to say. Be ready for the unexpected.”

“But I thought this was all scripted?” Harold asked.

“That is the script.”

“I see,” responded Harold, feeling once again as though he was trying to catch up with reality, just barely hanging on.

“OK then,” continued Floyd, “That gives us 80 minutes to do make up then get to location. January, is Gilbert ready for us?”

“With bells on,” replied January.

“Right,” Floyd said as he lit a cigarette, “Let’s go fuck with the MAN.”

Chapter 12

They spent nearly an hour getting ready with Gilbert and his two assistants Happy and Dwayne. Happy was younger than most of the others at the station and, despite her name, rarely smiled and reminded Harold of the violent thunderstorms he experienced as a child before the Algorithm took control of the atmosphere. Conversely, Dwayne smiled all the time and could be annoyingly positive. Together, the three of them somehow managed to balance each other out.

On this day, Floyd popped in to make sure Harold was ready for his first performance as did Françoise who would maintain visual continuity of the main characters in the reality show the MAN was now calling *The Fate of Harold the Refuser*.

Floyd explained how the Algorithm wasn’t perfect, how it had vulnerabilities, one of which was that it didn’t check if what was happening in the dump was genuine. The suffering of the Refusers served its purpose on the MAN, and hence the Algorithm. Harold needed to understand this. His life, and the lives of the others, depended on it. It was too easy for the actors to forget that, as far as the Algorithm knew, they weren’t acting.

Floyd also nonchalantly told Harold that he wanted to meet with him after dinner. There were some things he needed to tell Harold about his background, his Aunt Claudette, and the GODS.

Harold had heard talk of the GODS when he was a child, but he assumed it was all urban legend.

“The GODS?” he asked. “I thought that was just a lot of nonsense?”

“Conspiracy theory is what they called it,” corrected Floyd. “They’re real.”

And with that, Floyd wished them all good luck then left them to their task of getting ready.

Harold was astonished at the transformation. He didn’t realize how bad he had looked when he arrived the previous day. He felt a passing rush of adrenaline when he looked at Roz, Landy, and Elijah, seeing his assailants. No wonder he didn’t recognize them earlier. They looked like something out of one of those old zombie movies that he watched as a kid when that sort of thing was still legal.

“Good God,” he remarked without thinking.

Gilbert smiled. “Yeah. We try,” he said as Roz growled, Landy snarled, and Elijah waved with what appeared to be a smile trying to show through the layers of scars, matted hair, and blackened teeth.

And then it was time for them to get into position.

There were many passageways from the station to the dump. Harold had originally arrived via an entry appropriately named the Fridge. He would be returning through the same in order to be positioned by his bucket.

Harold would not know exactly when or from what direction he would be charged. This was so that he might be genuinely surprised and react accordingly. Floyd had reminded him to scream and do the twirly bird with enthusiasm.

Harold decided to be standing at first light. He imagined that's what he would be doing in reality. He also imagined he'd have a weapon of some sort in hand, so he looked around his pile and chose a child's broken plastic chair with only the seat and a couple legs. He imagined he could use this as both a shield and a club without hurting anyone too badly.

The rising sun reflected off of three drones as they approached. They hovered a couple of hundred feet off ground. He spontaneously decided to frantically motion to them for help. "Isn't that what a desperate person would do?" he thought to himself. He realized it would be stupid to pretend he didn't see them. Floyd was right. He had good instincts.

Back in Harold's Previous Community, the masses were dutifully watching the show. Unlike much of the programming they had to endure, they were genuinely transfixed by *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* as there hadn't been a good Refuser show in quite a while and it made people feel good to have their worldview confirmed and their fears justified. It made them feel safe in their identical homes, secure, free of the suffering they were watching on their MAN and with their wisdom and good fortune confirmed.

The Fate of Harold the Refuser was a full blown production with its own musical theme and flashy introductions that included the most dramatic images of the Refusal including angry residents, MASTER vehicles, and of course, Fluffy.

Harold's appearance, looking tattered and exhausted, standing in the dump, and desperately waving to the drones for help brought varied reactions from those watching on their MAN including laughter from the young, righteous cheers from the middle aged, and gasps from those old enough to remember the most violent attacks and gruesome scenes of Refusers over the years.

Harold wasn't sure exactly what to do, so he nervously wandered about the vicinity of his bucket which, in fact, played perfectly on the MAN. He then decided to again climb to the top of the nearest ridge to see if he could learn anything at all about his location. He took a route very similar to the one he'd taken the previous day, and once on top, saw pretty much what he'd seen before. But the sun was low, at a different angle, behind him now,

and it was an exceptionally clear day, so he could see quite far and in better detail. He noticed that clumps of sagging, ragged looking grass did appear here and there. It made him sad for some reason.

Harold squinted against the morning sun reflecting off the vast ocean of junk, and on the very edge of the horizon he thought he could make out a change in the landscape. Where those trees? Could it be? The possibility lifted his spirits slightly, and he looked forward to the opportunity to ask the others about it.

Harold considered exploring but decided against it after thinking of Ron's cuisine. He took another look at what he had decided was a green, cool forest in the distance then turned to descend the hill when he heard something metallic fall over, a tin can or miscellaneous shard, as if upset by something or someone. He knew the others were there somewhere, but it still gave him the creeps. The element of surprise was having its intended effect.

Meanwhile, the MAN had been following the whole scene, alternating between zooming in on Harold to showcase his struggle and then pulling back to include Roz and Elijah tracking him on the ridge while Landy lay in wait below as fully engaged and compliant residents of Harold's Previous Community and many other communities watched transfixed and mindlessly ate food cubes delivered weekly by the MASTER.

Harold made his way back down the ridge, fiddled about at his bucket for a while, then, mostly out of boredom, decided to look for some of Ron's delicacies. He put down his weapon and left his circle of safety, walked past the Fridge Door, and started walking up a large, low mound of debris when he spotted a pile of rubble that included the specific tile he had been told marked a food repository.

Doubtful that he'd find anything but having nothing better to do, he meandered around the rubble, flipping items with his shoe, when he noticed what looked like an opening or hole of sorts a little over two feet in diameter and appearing at an angle out the side of the pile, protected at top by a large concrete slab.

He crouched and looked inside. A couple of feet in the hole he clearly made out a shallow bowl filled with Ron's tortellini, and to his astonishment, a hand appeared from the darkness to deposit a small plate filled with the prized chocolate truffles. "Bon appetite!" someone whispered as the hand disappeared.

Harold tried one of the tortellini and the experience was one of mixed emotions including surprise, delight, and humor. As his body responded with an exhilarating rush to the food, some unfamiliar shift in his consciousness took him out of himself to witness his actions, to watch himself from above, his butt sticking out of a hole in the dump, drones broadcasting his shame, while he feasted on food like he had never before

tasted and those watching him wallowed in his suffering as they robotically consumed their manufactured rations. In that instant, he understood what Roz meant when she spoke of fucking with the MAN.

If his out-of-body awareness had been a little less focused on his hind end, he might have noticed the others sneaking up on him for the attack.

Harold heard them coming, pulled his head out, and stood up with a worm sticking out of his mouth and extending below his chin. The MAN zoomed in on the worm and what looked like guts coming out of it, causing those watching to squirm and make various exclamations of disgust as they ate their printed food.

The four of them stood in a silent and motionless standoff. Harold sucked the worm into his mouth in one long, smooth move then chewed slowly while Elijah licked his lips. The attackers then started taunting Harold, waving their weapons at him, moving closer then backing off, leading Harold away from the hole.

Harold tripped and while regaining his balance Roz jumped on him and took him down. As she had him on the ground, Landy and Elijah went for the food, devouring it, taking turns sticking their heads in the hole to reappear with mouthfuls of worms and cockroaches.

Roz had Harold on the ground, but things weren't going well. He wasn't fighting back. He lay there like a dead fish, causing Roz to reconsider her initial interest in him as a potential sexual partner. So she tickled him, hard.

Harold shook violently, throwing Roz off. He sprang up as the other two joined the fight. Harold didn't wait to get taken down again. He was mad at Roz for her childishness and mad at the other two for eating all his food. He hadn't even gotten any truffles.

Not knowing what else to do, Harold let it rip. As he did the twirly bird and howled his gibberish, he chased them all, whoever was closest, getting louder and more violent with each charge. The three attackers disappeared into the hills and valleys of the dump, which was a good thing because Harold was losing his voice and getting dizzy.

There would be two more similar attacks that day. Harold would eventually get to taste the truffles and at one point he even got a chance to give Roz a thorough revenge tickle.

The final battle occurred shortly before sundown. Harold successfully fought them off with his proven tactics, then returned to his bucket looking the worse for wear which made the MAN happy. He had twisted an ankle causing him to limp, an injury he played up for the audience. He sat down on his bucket, finding it hard to contain his emotions. He felt something in himself coming alive, something long ago forgotten. He felt electric. His extremities flushed and and his head tingled.

He rested his face in his hands and began laughing, gasping, grunting, until his convulsions burped his soul. Overcome with his new energy, he stood, spread his legs, stretched his arms wide, looked up to the sky beyond the drones, beyond the invisible Algorithm, beyond the setting sun, and screamed.

His suffering played beautifully on the MAN, and it pleased the GODS.

Chapter 13

Upon returning to the station, Harold received a standing ovation even more rambunctious than his first one. Monitors had been on throughout the station all day broadcasting the action from the multitude of cameras set up around the dump.

Harold's fighting style inspired memes taped to walls, mobiles hanging from ceilings, and idioms expressing all sorts of states and actions. "Hey man, don't go getting all twirly on me," made sense to everyone, as did, "I got so excited that I almost did the twirly bird," and, "I twirled when I heard the news." Someone had even written a song, a ballad, appropriately titled *Do the Twirly Bird*, which would also become the name of a popular dance that included, unsurprisingly, a lot of spinning. A few local musicians were putting the song to music on guitars, bongos, and the one piano in the station, a reclaimed upright that had been lovingly restored.

Meanwhile, back in the communities, Harold's fight for survival was presented very differently. The MAN showed closeups of a desperate Refuser with worms, rats, and bugs sticking out of his mouth, swinging his arms like a madman who had lost all control and dignity, the face of noncompliance. This is what happened when you refused to engage and comply. This was life without the PAINs, without the MASTER. This was your option, was the message, as the MAN cut between Harold fighting to survive and Fluffy alone and confused in the house that no one dare approach.

But the station was in a celebratory mood. This was the first chance they'd had in a while to put on a show and stick it to the MAN.

Harold made it through the congratulatory gauntlet and headed to makeup to change out of his rags, but not before Francoise took a picture of him. The others had already made it back and were in various states of undress with Gilbert, Happy, and Dwayne helping with costumes. They were recounting the highlights of their day when Harold entered.

"Wow, was that ever fun!" Harold exclaimed in uncharacteristically extroverted fashion that pleasantly startled the others and even caused a slight change in Happy's disposition.

"Hey hey!" Gilbert responded. "Well done sir! Well done!"

“We were just talking about you,” Landy added. “Roz said you had a problem with intimacy,” she said, winking to the others.

“Yeah, well, I showed her, and I’ll show her again tomorrow if she doesn’t watch it,” Harold warned as he tugged at some trash stuck in his hair and fantasized about possible entanglements on the battlefield.

Roz didn’t take her eyes off her face as she wiped makeup from her forehead. “Bring it on, cowboy.”

Harold looked at himself in a mirror and was shocked at his appearance. His costume had sustained a number of rips and stains, and something unidentifiable was stubbornly stuck in his hair, refusing to budge as he pulled and twisted.

“Do you want me to help you with that?” an expressionless Happy asked in a monotone, holding a oversized pair of sheers.

“Uh, no, I, I think I have it,” Harold responded, eyeing the scissors that seemed much too large for any practical use.

“Suit yourself,” Happy said as she flopped down in a nearby barber’s chair and slowly chopped at the air as she looked at Harold’s reflection in the mirror, to which Dwayne made a rare comment, “Hey Happy, did I tell you you look really sharp today?” then half chuckled at his joke. Happy wasn’t amused. “Yeah,” he continued, “you’re a real cutup,” he added with a giggle while the others focused on coming down from the excitement of the day and getting ready for the next as Gilbert organized items in a manner that would make the following morning’s preparations flow smoothly.

After all the makeup was washed off, wigs put away, and Gilbert had released the actors, the four grabbed some refreshments from a nearby self serve deli they simply called Ron’s then headed to the Big Room and took a seat at one of the smaller tables, being greeted by high fives and raised thumbs as they passed others in various states of play, discussion, and in some cases inebriation. A post-performance get together was a tradition, they explained, at least for the first few shows after a new Refuser arrives.

As they took their seats and made small talk, Harold had difficulty processing the discussion. This was, after all, the first time he’d been able to relax, really, since he’d arrived. He could understand what was being said. It wasn’t the content that was difficult to grasp, it was the seemingly effortless and unguarded nature of the interaction. As he sat, listening, nodding with a smile occasionally, he realized that this is how people naturally communicated. It’s something he hadn’t experienced since he was a child.

Roz recognized what he was feeling. “A bit of a change, isn’t it Harold.”

Harold self consciously took a sip of his juice. “Yes. Yes it is.” The juice tasted a hard. He took a larger sip.

Landy and Elijah looked at each other then Landy turned to Harold. “We’ve all been there, I mean here, there to here that is.” She looked to Elijah and Roz for confirmation. “I mean we’ve all came here from there.” She then turned to Harold. “Not the same there, of course, but very similar.”

“Yes,” Elijah confirmed. “The communities are very similar, identical really, but here is very—”

“Special,” Landy offered.

“Special, right. I think you’re special, Landy. Do you think I’m special?”

“Why, I think you’re very special, Elijah. Roz, do you think Elijah is special?”

Roz turned to Harold. “Sometimes the conversation around here can sort of stagnate, Harold, which is one reason we get excited to see a new face. So, tell us something about yourself we don’t know.”

The others joined in.

“Yeah, where are you from?” “Are you married?” “What’s your community like?” “Have you ever seen snow?”

Although they asked, they knew Harold’s answers would shine a light on nothing new. All the communities were the same, marriages were arranged by the Algorithm. None of his answers really differed, except one.

“I never knew my parents. My father, I was told, died before I was born, and my mother died shortly after giving birth. My closest relative was an aunt who I could only see a couple times a year, Aunt Claudette. We were very close in spite of not seeing much of each other. She died when I was six.”

“You were all alone?” “No brothers or sisters?” “Well, who took care of you?”

“PAINs. I was raised by PAINs.”

The other three looked at Harold in silence, not sure whether to feel pity or something more like wonder. They had never met anyone raised by PAINs.

“So, how did your Aunt die?” Elijah asked.

Landy elbowed him. “Elijah!”

“What? I’m just asking. Sorry Harold.”

Harold waved off any offense as he half chuckled. “It’s OK, really. It’s actually a well known fact in my community. She died of the JAB. She got a JAB loss. Yeah, she got a JAB loss.” Harold looked at his drink while the others looked at each other for some clue as to how to respond.

Finally, Roz spoke up. “Jeez, Harold. Wow. You’ve been through the ringer, like, your whole life.”

Harold looked up. “Well, until now!” Landy grabbed his forearm and gave it a firm squeeze before letting go.

“But, really, it wasn’t so bad growing up. Losing my aunt that way hurt, sure, but I was treated well, taken care of. And she was considered a hero of some sort. Why, I never knew. I mean I knew why it was supposed to be that way, but I never believed it. I just missed her.”

An easy silence followed as they all considered people they’d lost or left behind.

Landy spoke as she gazed blankly at the table. “I lost a couple turtles once.”

“Really?” Elijah protested. “Your turtles?”

“What? They were important to me! I loved those turtles.”

“How old were you?” Harold calmly asked.

Landy’s irritation with Elijah softened as she turned to Harold.

“I was eight. A PAIN was doing an inspection of our house and destroyed them. ‘Prohibited reptiles’ it said. Well, I threw a fit. I was ready to kick that PAIN right in its battery pack, but my parents held me back.”

Roz looked at Elijah and smirked.

“So tell us Landy, did you ever see that PAIN again?”

“OK, I may have told you guys this story a thousand times, but it’s new to Harold, so if you please—”

Harold gave her his full attention. “I’d like to hear it.”

“Well, that experience scarred me, I mean it was traumatizing.”

“I’m sure.”

“So nine years later when I was called up for the JAB, everybody was so happy for me. But it was the same damn PAIN with the needle. I just flipped. ‘No way,’ I told them all. ‘No way.’ And the rest is history.”

“And how long ago was that? When you refused? How long have you been here?”

“Next week will make it five years!” Landy gestured to the others. “These two were already here. And of course a bunch of other people. Floyd’s been here the longest.”

“What’s Floyd’s story? He’s quite the character,” Harold asked

Harold learned a lot during their short, post-battle happy hour. He learned that Floyd arrived at the dump nearly 25 years ago and never talked about why he Refused, followed by Phil a couple years later who Refused because he felt the JAB “didn’t make sense,” and January a few years after Phil because she was “sick of their shit”, with Gilbert arriving just days after January. “He said that, due to some impropriety that had passed, he was sure he would get a JAB loss, so refused,” they explained.

Since then, Refusers arrived irregularly with some years seeing more than ten deposited and others none. Harold brought the number living in HELL to 172.

He learned that, by her own admission, Happy was so dark and non-conformist in her community life that her Refusal was inevitable regardless of whether it was engineered or by choice , and that Elijah’s Refusal was likely a mistake, considering how non-confrontational he was. He blamed his refusal on miscommunication. “I didn’t hear properly,” he explained. “I had an earache. I thought they said, ‘Do you reject the JAB’ but they were actually saying, ‘Do you accept the JAB!’ Of course I said no! Three times! I was thinking, what, are you deaf PAIN? Next thing I knew, I’m here in the dump getting beaten up by Roz here!”

“Yeah, good times,” Roz replied smiling, looking at the ceiling.

Harold looked at Roz. “What about you, Roz? You seem to be an old-timer.”

Roz gave Harold an insulted look. “What? Who you calling old?”

“No, no, I mean, you’re, you–”

“Don’t you think she’s hot?” Landy teased.

“Oh, yes, definitely, sure! Very, very hot!”

“Just messing with you, Harold. Yeah, I was an early arrival. I refused to piss off my boyfriend. What a jerk. Thought he’d make out pretty good on my JAB winnings. No way. Not after,” Roz paused and looked at her drink. “Anyway, I got here, what, 12 years ago? About the same time as Ron. The story is he had food poisoning when he won the JAB, was afraid he was going to soil himself, and kept saying, ‘no, no, no!’ I love that story.”

“And he’s the chef,” Elijah pointed out. They all laughed as if, Harold sensed, there was an inside joke.

Roz waved off the story about Ron. “In any case, we’ve been here for what seems like forever.”

Landy spoke defiantly, “Well, I’m not going to be here forever. No way. I want children, and this is no place to raise kids.”

Roz rolled her eyes. “C’mon, Landy. You’ll just get yourself all worked up again.”

Landy's comment reminded Harold that he'd seen a couple very young children running around when he first arrived and again earlier when they returned from the show. It seemed odd at the time, but he hadn't had time to think about it.

Reproduction had been an exclusive domain of the PAINs for decades. By default, nobody was fertile. People had quit trying to understand why long ago. It was a fact of life. But the PAINs could make someone fertile if the Algorithm concluded that their offspring would serve the needs of the GODS. The GODS kept a steady inventory of chronologically young subjects at the advice of the Algorithm for potential needs ranging from transplantaion to cellular infusion, although in more recent years the need for such procedures had grown rare now that the Algorithm had nearly perfected immortality for the GODS, so most of sanctioned children were used for entertainment or to simply maintain the population in the communities as people there were not allowed to engage in life extension.

"I've seen children running around here. How is that possible? Were they sent away with their parents?"

Landy was about to answer when January arrived and interrupted their conversation.

"How's it going everybody?"

"We were just talking about children!" Landy replied before realizing her faux pas. The awkward silence didn't last long enough for Harold to notice.

"There will be plenty of time for that. Right now, I'm going to steal Harold away. The gang is waiting to bring him up to speed on stuff."

"Ah! Yes! Sorry, I forgot."

"No worries, Harold. It's not like you're going anywhere. See you guys later. Save some refreshments for us."

Harold gulped the rest of his drink and smiled at the others. "Bye guys. Thanks for everything."

January and Harold walked to the shop in an easy silence. They entered to find Floyd, Phil, and Ron sitting at the bank of tables with various devices strewn about, a pot of coffee, a couple bottles of water, and a large jug of some of Ron's homemade mead. "Bees," Ron would say, "Gotta love 'em."

"Are we ready, gentlemen?" January asked while she grabbed a cup, looked at the coffee, then decided on the mead, welcoming Harold to help himself. Harold poured himself some water, still thirsty after his long day.

"Well done today, Harold," Floyd started with, to which the others agreed, Ron raising his mead and smiling contentedly. "Have a seat, please. Some of what we're about to tell you might come as a bit of a shock." Harold took a

seat, looked around the room, to a large monitor on a wall, then back to Floyd. “So, what’s up?” Harold asked.

“How’s your history?” Floyd asked.

“Come again?” Harold responded.

“Your history. How much do you know about the last, say, 60 years or so, particularly pre-Algorithm?”

Harold had to think, and thinking was something that the Algorithm had effectively discouraged for most of his life.

Harold was seven years old when all nations, states, cities, and last names were abolished and control of day-to-day affairs was taken over by the Algorithm. It was a peaceful evolution that would end all wars, they were told in his school, before it too was closed. From that point on, all information, everything one learned, would be a product of the Algorithm and delivered primarily via the MAN. The Algorithm determined the precise mix of content each individual needed to optimize their engagement and compliance, content not only of information, but also nutrition, relationships, immediate environment, and all matters of life.

Harold knew this history. The MAN reminded him of it at every opportunity. But as to the question of what he remembered of the world pre-Algorithm, he could only recollect blurred, uncertain stories of a divided world, ridden with war, disease, and death. These vague memories too were the product of many years of living under and experiencing a filtered life through the MAN.

The Algorithm had learned to control thought and memory not just through psychological means, but also by manipulating a person’s socialization and entire physiology. And so when Harold explored what he knew about the pre-Algorithm period, he realized that he wasn’t confident that he knew anything with certainty, which meant he knew nothing.

“Well,” Harold attempted, “there were wars between countries, a lot of illness, wasn’t there something about the weather? I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK,” Floyd said reassuringly. “None of us older than the Algorithm arrived here being able to remember much of anything pre-Algorithm. It’s not your fault. When you live under the Algorithm, you become part of it, an extension of the Algorithm. You think its thoughts, remember what it wants you to remember. But living here, free of the Algorithm, we’ve learned some things over the last few years through foraging in the dump,” Floyd said as he pointed to the various unfamiliar contraptions on the table.

“What are those anyway?” Harold asked.

“Hard drives,” Phil responded. “Early 21st Century hard drives.”

Harold looked at the items, pushed one a little, took a sip of his water, looked up and said, “Hard what?”

Getting excited with the help of the mead, January joined in while pouring herself another glass. “Hard drives. Wonderful batch Ron.”

“Right on sister,” Ron acknowledged.

“Hard drives,” January continued as she picked one up. “They were primary components of PCs. Personal computers,” she added after seeing Harold’s blank expression. “Everybody had one. The hard drive was the part that stored all the data.”

“Yeah, but we don’t think that’s where these came from, personal computers that is,” added Phil. “We think a lot of what we found in this batch came from what they then called a data farm, a company that ran thousands of computers and stored people’s data before the Algorithm took control of it all. We’d been finding these things for years, but only one or two at a time, and they mostly contained videos of cute cats and people having sex.”

Ron blushed and looked confused. “Is that even possible? I mean, how does that work?”

A pause followed as they all looked at each other, the silence broken by Ron bursting into laughter and spilling some of his mead.

“Oh, wait, sorry,” Harold said, and they let it go at that.

Phil continued, “Anyway, this load we found was different. We found thousands of these things, many of them still operational, and let’s just say we hit the jackpot of historical data. I was able to get them up and running, but everything was encrypted in some ancient code. Fortunately, we were able to crack it thanks to Ron.”

“Ron?” Harold asked doubtfully.

“Yo! Yes!” Ron responded, as he straightened his chair. “Well, see, in my spare time, I dabble in dead computer languages and cryptology. I mean, man, you get a couple joints in me and that stuff just lights up my brain. Fascinating stuff, fascinating! So I was able to decrypt this stuff and determine that a lot of it had the same architecture. The rest was like taking candy from a baby.”

The others looked at him with wonder as they waited for him to continue.

“I mean, not that I’d ever do that. Babies are cool. But it made it easy to find shit, whatever you wanted basically. I set up a search tool I call Flippo, and the rest is, as they say, history.”

Floyd continued, “So we’ve spent over five years now going through all this data, data that the Algorithm thought had been destroyed. Do you remember yesterday when I mentioned a group called the GODS?”

“Yes,” Harold replied. “You said they were real.”

“They are,” Floyd confirmed. “And from what we’ve learned, it appears it all started with a pandemic which led to an unchecked rise in totalitarianism under the guise of public health.”

Phil held up a finger to make a point. “Correction. The foundation for the GODS was set long before that pandemic, perhaps hundreds of years before. They just hadn’t figured out how to take total control until the pandemic.”

The four of them explained to Harold how the COVID pandemic led to governments around the world taking control of every aspect of public life and many aspects of private life in a global power grab that was admired, supported, and in many cases initiated by the few hundred individuals who would soon after become the founding members of the GODS.

They explained that not only was this global totalitarianism tolerated by the masses, it was celebrated by them. Anyone who dare question the health authorities or any of the vetted *experts* was silenced and destroyed not by those in power, but by the hoodwinked powerless. The suppressed aided their suppressors. The GODS recognized the situation for what it was, a rare opportunity to build on this momentum and take over the world.

But there were some brave dissenters who challenged the official line on the pandemic. And this, they told Harold, was what he needed to know about, his connection to this handful of pre-Algorithm champions of truth and freedom.

These individuals researched the origin of the virus that caused the COVID pandemic, and they all but proved that it actually came from a lab, meaning that it was governments who, by design or accident, had caused the pandemic. The official line, the explanation that nobody outside of these few would dare question, was that the virus was passed to humans by wild animals, that it was a natural event.

“It wasn’t,” Floyd said. “The early research was completed by a person named Dulandrift and a group calling itself D.R.A.S.T.I.C. Between them, they compiled research and data that made a very strong case that the virus causing the pandemic came from a lab, and Dulandrift also documented the financial and power relationships between many of the people behind seizing control.”

“But it was a woman named Jinzunjane who would build on their research and prove, actually prove beyond doubt and with evidence, that the virus causing COVID did, in fact, originate from a lab. And she didn’t stop there. She uncovered indisputable proof that not only did the GODS formally exist

as an organization, but that they had perpetrated the rise in totalitarianism around the world and were planning atrocities beyond anyone's imagination."

"She reported her findings on what was then called the Internet. But the GODS had such influence over the media that her voice either went unheard or was ridiculed as conspiracy theory. This control of public thought comprised the early stages of what would later evolve into the MAN, which itself would be subsumed by the Algorithm as it took shape."

"Most of what we learned about the GODS was from a series of articles Jinzunjane kept on a channel called Formosahut. But we also found some of her information that never got published. It appears the GODS got to her first. It's all profoundly disturbing," Floyd said, as he went for a cigarette.

January continued, "Social unrest was increasing quickly all over the world for many reasons, food and water shortages, poverty, corruption. It all pointed back to the GODS and people were beginning to take a second look at Jinzunjane's writings. People were starting to see through the facade and were increasingly out for blood, literally. So the GODS made a plan. Jinzunjane found proof that the GODS were going to start WWIII, but it would be a fake war between countries that existed in name only. The GODS identified the most problematic cities with the plan being to obliterate them with nuclear weapons and portray it all as a good, old-fashioned war between rival states."

"People were told it was a war, they saw the brutality, hundreds of millions killed, and this led them to depend on the GODS even more, to willingly hand over whatever meager freedoms they had left, and to submit to total control out of fear. And the areas that were responsible for most of the protest were wiped out, so, you see—"

"Holy shit," Harold said, surprising himself by his use of profanity.

Floyd picked up one of the hard drives. "And Jinzunjane knew this was going to happen before it happened. She had proof. We found it. And she was going to publish it on Formosahut, but they stopped her. She was assassinated. She died after receiving a dose of the mandatory vaccine before she could get her story out. It was a common method at the time of getting rid of undesirables, and it still is. Jinzunjane knew this, had previously published proof of it, and feared for her own life. But it was impossible to avoid the vaccination. One couldn't get food without it, couldn't travel. So they silenced her. They could tailor the shots, what would later become the JAB, to each individual. It might be actual vaccine, might be saline, might be a multivitamin, and it might be poison. In Jinzunjane's case, they chose poison."

January excitedly grabbed the hard drive from Floyd as Ron mumbled something about poison and Phil checked his monitor. "But she had a daughter. The daughter's name was Huadong. Huadong was 17 when her

mother died, and she knew everything. She kept records and backups of her mom's work that the GODS never found. When her mom died, Huadong fled. She ran away and hid out from the GODS on the remote east coast of an island country. And it worked. She lived there for a few years and she had a baby, a baby boy. But the GODS eventually tracked her down, took her infant child, and changed her name and even her appearance so those from her past wouldn't recognize her." January paused. "Harold, they changed her name to Claudette. Claudette was your mother, and you are the grandson of Jinzunjane."

Harold sat in shocked silence as the others waited for a reaction. It all made sense to him now, his feelings towards his aunt, the way she looked at him and seemed overly joyous to see him. The hugs that seemed to last a bit too long.

"Wow. She always felt like my mother. I mean she was the closest I had."

January put the hard drive down, leaned on the table, and looked at Harold. "She was the real deal."

"And my father?" Harold asked.

"We don't know," Floyd answered. "It appears Huadong wasn't sure either. She was living in a place called Tangchang at the time, and the people of the community were apparently quite free spirited and led, well let's just say an unrestricted lifestyle."

"I don't understand," Harold said. "Why did they take me? Why did they let," Harold paused, "my mother live? It doesn't make sense. How do you know all this if Jinzunjane died before she got it out?"

Phil turned away from his monitor to answer. "Most of what we know came from Huadong's personal records we found on the drives and from her mother's work published on Formosahut. According to Huadong, they didn't spare her, they kept her for later use, use that even the GODS probably hadn't decided on, and they took you for insurance that she'd behave. If she did, she'd live and see you twice a year. The GODS use people, Harold. They view people as a consumable resource that they own. If they can control someone entirely, why kill them when they might be useful? And your aunt, your mother, was useful to them later when the Algorithm determined she was suitable for a JAB loss as a means of social control. The GODS wanted to get rid of her anyway, eventually, after they were sure they'd gotten all the information she had, and this way she served the Algorithm."

"Which gets to our point. The Algorithm chose you for the JAB, then you refused. We think the Algorithm does usually know when someone is going to refuse the JAB, and in fact it also sometimes manipulates people to refuse the JAB when it decides that a Refusal will boost engagement and compliance. But that wouldn't have been the case with you, given your history. There's no way it would have caused you to refuse. Quite the

contrary. Your aunt, your mother we now know, was seen as a martyr. So the Algorithm would have rewarded you very nicely had you gotten the JAB. There's nothing to suggest that it knew you were going to refuse."

"Well of course it didn't. It was my decision."

"That's what I think," Phil agreed. "I posted multiple queries to the Algorithm about the upcoming JAB in your community, and there was no indication at all that it had any plans for you to refuse the JAB. I agree with you, Harold. I think you're here out of pure defiance."

"Queries to the Algorithm?" Harold asked.

Floyd explained, "We can't directly observe the MAN, but we have figured out how the Algorithm communicates between devices and subjects, so we can listen to it, in a sense. Basically, to vastly oversimplify, it's a constant flow of queries and commands running between all connected devices thousands of times a second. We've learned how to post queries and receive commands. We know when the GODS direct the Algorithm to do certain things, or when the Algorithm posts commands on its own, which is the norm. We saw in the Algorithm two days before your JAB that you would be selected, but we assumed you would get the JAB and reap a huge reward, which would play well on the MAN given your family history, and this is why you were selected."

Harold poured himself a mug of mead.

"How did it get so powerful?" he asked himself out loud.

The others looked at Phil, who had the best understanding of how the Algorithm worked. "The problem is, there is no it. The Algorithm survives in every device via this ongoing communication. The more devices, the stronger it is, the more resilient. It's a distributed artificial intelligence. There is no one machine that runs it all. It learns and grows by consensus. So, for example, if we were to try to post a command, like *it's raining*, not only would that be verified by all other devices in the area for consensus, but we, being the device used to post the command, would also be verified, and game over for us. So we stay as quiet as possible."

"So," continued Floyd as he lit a cigarette and waved off the joint Ron was offering, "-no thanks. That stuff will kill you. So, there's no way do defeat the Algorithm that we can find. We might be able to disrupt it slightly, by flooding it with commands for example, but it would beat that in a matter of seconds, tops. And, as Phil pointed out, it would blow our cover."

"But we're working on it," Phil added with grin as he fondled yet another odd looking contraption and accepted the joint from Ron.

Chapter 14

Having all agreed that Harold's arrival was not by the Algorithm's design but rather in spite of it, they decided that *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* show should continue at least until they get a better idea on how the GODS and Algorithm will react to Harold's unexpected Refusal. So far, it appeared the Algorithm had successfully managed to parlay Harold's Refusal into a hit program on the MAN as it had always done with previous Refusers.

But Harold was no typical Refuser, if there was such a thing, and his Refusal would eventually catch the attention of the GODS. Harold was an important choice to win the JAB with the Algorithmic assumption being that he'd gladly take it, and so his Refusal demonstrated a weakness in the Algorithm, a kink, and this no doubt initiated an internal status check by the Algorithm.

So Harold, Roz, Elijah, and Landy appeared daily to put on a show for the MAN, hoping to keep the Algorithm and GODS pacified.

There were periods in HELL over the years when the arrival of Refusers nudged up and putting on shows for the MAN was not only more regular, it provided a source of recreation and entertainment for those living at the station. The productions gave them all a sense of camaraderie and allowed those involved to discover creativity and skills they weren't aware they had as creativity was outlawed by the Algorithm.

One thing they figured out in the early days was that it didn't really matter how absurd their show was as long as it was a hit in the communities and increased engagement and compliance. It didn't matter that one actor could bash another on the head with an iron skillet, resulting in little more than a stunned expression or brief loss of footing. The Algorithm, with all its intelligence, didn't seem to analyze the extent to which what happened in the show adhered to reality. Perhaps, they mused, the Algorithm's models were in part influenced by some of the old TV shows they found in the dump and regularly watched on ancient, refurbished devices that Ron spent hours staring at and figuring out.

This realization that most anything goes resulted in an unbridled creativity.

Harold's arrival gave everyone at the station a reason to dust off some of their old routines, skits, and props. After all, having all arrived as Refusers, everyone had at one time or another been involved in the show. Most saw their tenure on the show canceled via a grizzly death or a mysterious disappearance. Once somebody tired of being on the show or it was felt that their character was no longer a draw for the MAN, they would be creatively dispatched.

There were many methods for killing off a character. They might be savagely beaten by others, smothered in an avalanche of old appliances, hurled down a seemingly bottomless pit, or, a favorite of many Refusers, the MAN would start broadcasting at sunrise to find a sickening, human shaped gelatinous blob with large globules that might be organs and

protrusions that could be bones, with the only thing identifying the thick, gray-blue goop as a familiar character being a hat sitting in the muck, or a scarf, or maybe a shoe.

And so in one way or another, all but the characters played by Roz, Landy, and Elijah had met their demise. In fact, the MAN wasn't entirely sure who the three were meant to be. There hadn't been a show on from the station in nearly two years, so the three beasts that showed up when Harold arrived could have been anybody. If the Algorithm had bothered to check, it would have indeed identified the three as Roz, Landy, and Elijah. But the MAN was only interested in Harold, and the Algorithm had determined early on that keeping the other three relegated to unnamed sub-humans boosted the engagement and compliance value of the show.

The Fate of Harold the Refuser had injected a much needed jolt into the station. People were excited by the heady mix of newness and nostalgia. They got their old costumes out and relived scenes and moments from their time in the spotlight.

As was the custom, the central character had the last say on the script for each day of the show, which in this case of course was Harold. There actually never was a script, but many years ago Gilbert had started referring to the loosest of plans for the upcoming show as the script, and he admonished those who called it anything else, and so it stuck. It didn't matter that nothing was ever written down nor were there ever any lines to remember.

So everyone in the station was eager to share their ideas with Harold. They enthusiastically taught him stage combat and shared their old props. Happy showed him how to safely handle knives and other sharp objects, and Ron insisted that Harold sit with him every evening to watch old episodes of the ancient work of The Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and Charlie Chaplin, shows Harold initially found rather dry until he once absentmindedly accepted a joint from Ron. "Now you see the magic!" Ron commented as Harold laughed uncontrollably.

Harold was grateful for all the suggestions and offers of help with his show, but he also felt overwhelmed to the point that he generally depended on the other actors and makeup crew to help decide what to do each day, a need they were all more than happy to address.

As such, each morning in makeup the cast and crew would brainstorm ideas for the day and usually walk onto the set with a half-baked plan and flimsy expectations. The only thing they were all clear on was where Ron's delicacies would be stashed.

A week or so into the show, Harold began to get the hang of things and started making suggestions more confidently while in makeup. He also began to enjoy himself more. He discovered a mischievous side of himself that led him to draw on the shows he watched with Ron and plan stunts

and gags without telling the others. Once he tied the shoelaces of Roz and Landy together while they pretended to sleep, then banged on large gong he had found earlier. The sight of the two tripping over each other as they tried to get him resulted in such an unrestrained and prolonged bout of laughter among all audiences that this went down as one of the all time great moments in the history of the MAN's Refusal shows.

The gag pleased Ron beyond measure. "I showed him that! I showed him that!" he stated loudly to whoever could hear above all the laughter.

Harold also realized that he was quite competitive, and enjoyed battle scenes to the point that he wore the others out. "Enough already with the combat," Elijah once commented as he pretended to get knocked out. Eventually the others would just run away when Harold wanted to fight, leaving him looking oddly deflated to those watching on the MAN.

Most every day, Harold would make time to climb the same hill he had on the day he arrived. He would peer into the distance, squint, and try his best to get a glimpse of a different landscape. Every now and then, when the sun was just right and the air clear, he was sure he saw trees.

Chapter 15

Phil had been monitoring the Algorithm more closely than usual since Harold's Refusal. He was pleased to see that *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* was being well received and that by all indications was still a hit. Their status on the MAN was a balancing act. To the extent that they served the purpose of the Algorithm, they were safe. It was not lost on those at the station that as such, they were still subjects of the Algorithm. But by putting on these shows, they had the opportunity to not only have a little fun, they got to pull one over on the MAN. In a sense, they were controlling the Algorithm, or at least tricking it, and that was thrilling.

So Phil was pleased with how things were going, until one day he was surprised to learn from monitoring the Algorithm that another Refuser was headed to the dump. This concerned Phil, being so soon after Harold's refusal. How would the Algorithm react? Could this result in too much attention? Could this throw things out of balance?

Apparently this Refusal, like Harold's, was not orchestrated by the Algorithm. Phil knew there was another JAB scheduled in a regional community, and he had been following the developments. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The five to be chosen covered the demographic spread of the community and by all indications would happily and gratefully accept the JAB.

But it didn't turn out that way for Victor. His Refusal came as a shock to the residents of Victor's Previous Community. At 78 years old, quiet, and showing little interest in anything outside his tiny garden that, as an older resident, he was allowed to maintain, Victor was the last person anyone

would have expected to refuse the JAB. And yet there he was, all of his 195 pounds, two of which must have been beard, being led by the PAINs to the waiting MASTER craft for his trip to HELL. Oddly and to the horror of the crowd, he chuckled and waved as he climbed the ladder.

Phil had to scramble to alert everyone, particularly those performing outside. It was just after 4:00 PM and the MASTER would arrive in 20 minutes. Harold and the others were well into their various escapades in the dump, and they needed to be aware that they'd have to improvise for Victor's arrival.

Phil sounded the alarm, a network of cow bells and fishing line that Ron had concocted on a particularly stoned morning. Floyd would alert those in the dump while Phil monitored the Algorithm and January informed the others in the station. Within eight minutes, the four in the dump had gotten the message. There was a protocol in place for this sort of event, one that made sense to the Algorithm. When the MASTER approaches, everyone simply hides, and knowing that it was coming, they could hide by going into one of the many disguised entrances to the station. It would look like they were scrambling under old roofing or a mattress, or maybe squeezing into a washing machine.

And that's exactly what happened when the MASTER arrived and lowered Victor to the dump. By the time Victor had descended into HELL, the others were back in the station watching him on one of the many monitors. All in the station were watching. The arrival of a new Refuser was something to celebrate.

Once Victor had touched ground and run his hand through his generous, gray beard, he looked around, smiling, as the MASTER hovered and the drones took position. A Refuser's initial reaction to arriving in HELL was an important shot for the MAN to capture as it's usually one of pain, fear, and helplessness. But not for Victor. He looked around the dump, smiled, looked up at the various craft, waved, and then flipped them off with both hands, waving them to make no mistake of his intention.

The station went wild with applause and cheers. "That's my kind of guy," January remarked under her breath.

Victor then walked a few paces away from the craft to get his footing, turned his back to the MASTER and its drones, then dropped his pants and mooned them.

The station was ecstatic. Victor was an instant hero. He belly laughed as he pulled up his pants, then ignored the MASTER and the drones as though they didn't exist while he amused himself with the treasures that surrounded him and reminded him of a happier time.

Little did they all know that the show on the MAN was on a seven second delay, and those in Victor's Previous Community never saw his culminating performance. But the Algorithm took notice and this time it informed the

GODS who viewed the recent unexpected Refusals as nothing more than a possible source of entertainment.

Chapter 16

As Victor roamed around the dump like a kid in a candy store and the MAN aired shows of pre-Algorithm mayhem and the wonderful life of JAB winners, those in the station decided that the best course of action would be for Harold to be the first to make contact with Victor in the dump, the reasoning being that an initial violent contact might give old Victor a heart attack although, as some pointed out, he looked more than capable of handling himself.

Still, January noted, Victor would recognize Harold. He would have been watching Harold on the MAN all this time. And Harold was still on his own, not part of the gang yet, so it seemed logical that Harold would try to make an ally in the newcomer.

And so it was decided. Harold would make an appearance shortly before dusk and make contact. At some point, he would need to surreptitiously inform Victor that they're safe and that they'd be going underground after dark to meet others.

Victor, perhaps having recognized it, ended up sitting on Harold's original bucket. When Harold eventually appeared, Victor was entertaining himself with a long cord that he had formed into a sort of lasso with which he tried to rope protruding objects in his vicinity. He had already managed to snag a bicycle frame, some rebar, and what looked like a small fake palm tree. He was very pleased with himself.

Harold, in full costume so as to be recognized by both Victor and the MAN, entered Victor's field of vision tentatively, on guard, and with pause. Victor reluctantly stopped his next lasso in mid throw to make sure he was seeing right.

"Harold? Is that you?" Victor shouted. "Harold! Harold! C'mon out! I see you buddy!"

Harold cautiously came into full view and approached Victor, looking back over his shoulder for any threats.

"Harold! Hey there buddy!" Victor said as he dropped his toy and walked briskly toward Harold, holding out his hand. Victor took Harold's hand and shook it vigorously.

"It's good to meet you Harold! My name's Victor! I've been watching you on the MAN! Buddy, you have some sort of style you do! I mean, dang! I thought you were going to lift off there a couple of times! How you holding up? Everything OK? Hey, look, I have a butterscotch. Want a butterscotch?"

Victor asked as he stuffed his hand into his pocket and produced a couple pieces of butterscotch candy. Harold, somewhat taken aback by Victor's overly happy demeanor, took one of the candies.

"Uh, thank you."

"Oh, hey, there's more where that came from!" Victor responded as he looked around the dump, smiling, taking in a big breath as if on the seashore. "Ah! It's beautiful here! What a treat! So where the bad guys at? You need some help with them? Ready for another butterscotch?"

"No, no I'm fine. I think I scared them off for a while."

Harold wasn't quite sure how to proceed. Victor clearly needed no reassurance at the moment. He wasn't at all concerned with his safety nor the fact that he was stranded in a dump with no food or shelter. The drones were in place, though Harold had no way of knowing that the MAN was not showing them at the moment given Victor's happiness with his predicament. His jolly disposition threw the Algorithm into a tizzy and didn't play well on the MAN at all. Nightfall was less than two hours away, so Harold decided that it would be best to just keep Victor entertained until then, something that didn't strike him as difficult, then once it was dark and the drones had left, he could lead Victor to the station.

Harold decided to give Victor a tour of all the battlegrounds and other locations he'd seen on the MAN. Victor kept finding stuff he wanted to keep and ended up carrying so much that if he spotted something more he wanted, he'd have to first jettison something else.

They managed to play nearly an hour of disc golf with a piece of plastic Victor had nabbed earlier. That took them up the ridge that Harold climbed on his first day, then back down to his bucket where they took stock of what they had collected.

Soon it was dusk and the drones, having stopped broadcasting the two hours earlier due to lack of suffering, left.

"Victor," Harold said in a tone that pulled Victor's attention away from a headless Barbie Doll.

"Yeah, what's up buddy?"

"I have something to show you. Follow me. Don't worry. It's safe."

And with that, Harold led Victor to the Westinghouse entry, down the stairs, and through the large, heavy door that he had gone through not so long ago.

And Victor received a similar welcome. Whereas Harold on his first day had thrilled the station with his fighting spirit and style, Victor left them in awe with his irreverence of the MAN and the inability of all that the GODS

could muster to eradicate his joy. Whereas Harold was refreshing and restorative, Victor was inspirational, a role model.

And whereas Harold was disoriented by his initial greeting upon entering the station, Victor met it with belly laughs and open arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I really did win the lottery!” he mused. Though said in jest, the irony of his observation struck a chord with those who heard him. They were all better off in the station, living a life those in the communities couldn’t imagine, and yet they were only there because they had refused a prize they’d won in a lottery.

Chapter 17

Having been photographed and hydrated, Victor found himself sitting around the table in the shop with all the contraptions and monitors and other gizmos, joined by Floyd, January, Phil, Ron, and Harold.

Introductions were made as everyone got a beverage and loaded up on Ron’s creations made to celebrate Victor’s defiant gesture. “Help yourself to some finger food,” he said as he pointed to the goodies, many in the shape of the finger.

As they sat down eager to hear about Victor’s journey and what was happening in his previous community, Victor couldn’t help but notice Ron fiddling over something with his lanky hands.

“Oh my God. Is that a joint?” Victor asked.

“It is indeed, sir. Not only is it a joint, it’s a super duper kick ass joint. Care to join me?” Ron asked.

“Oh, man, I haven’t smoked weed in over 50 years,” Victor responded, eyes wide in disbelief at his luck.

Ron stomped a foot in loud affirmation. “Finally! Somebody in this place who appreciates the finer things in life! Welcome my friend! Welcome! You know what?” Ron asked as he licked and sealed the joint, “You do the honors.” Ron handed the joint to Victor who took it tentatively as one would handle a delicate piece of porcelain or a baby.

They were all desperate for Victor to fill them in on what was happening on the MAN. Were they being watched? What was people’s reaction to Harold’s Refusal? To his? Why did he refuse the JAB?

Two Refusers arriving in such a short time was very unusual. There was a period many years ago when Refusals were more common as the Algorithm grew and learned. But for the last few years a Refuser had been very rare. And now there were two in a matter of weeks.

“Oh, your show’s a big hit Harold!” Victor reported. “It’s on every day, all day. You know, people are supposed to hate you and stuff, but the truth is, a lot of us are rooting for you.”

Victor paused to take a generous toke from the treasured joint as the others looked on and waited. He inhaled deeply and held it longer than anyone would have imagined possible, regularly holding up a finger to let them know he was about to continue until he finally let out a large cloud of smoke.

“Oh my God. Holy guacamole that’s good. Wow. Now where was I. Oh yes. Back in my community, my old community, hold on.”

Victor took another large toke and again gestured that he would continue in a second as Ron smiled, January looked at the ceiling, and Phil turned back to his monitor. Victor eventually exhaled followed by another exclamation of joy and gratitude then handed the joint to Ron.

“Pure magic.”

“There’s more where this came from,” Ron assured him.

Victor continued.

“So where was I?” Victor eyed the joint Ron was now holding but realized the others were waiting. “Oh yes. See. OK, why did I refuse. I wanted to take a trip! I’d been cooped up in that square community for far too long. You know, when I was young I used to travel far and wide. Yes indeed. Went around the world twice! And change! Got dizzy!” Harold’s head went back as he laughed with delight.

“Oh, the parties, the people. Those were the days!”

“And seeing Harold out here having all this fun, you know, when I was picked for the JAB, I said what the heck. Let’s live a little old man!”

“And the weird thing is that, and I’m sure the MAN didn’t show it, but I sensed that after I refused, I sensed that some people were jealous. People waved! I saw people trying not to smile!”

“And did you see my dog, Fluffy? Is she alright? Did you see her on the MAN?”

Having not foreseen the question, Victor’s head dropped, but he quickly regained his composure and looked up to see Harold looking straight back at him with wide, unblinking eyes. In a timeless instant not unlike what is said to happen when one dies, Victor explored his whole life up to that moment, perhaps searching for a past experience that might give him a clue as to how to respond. Looking into Harold’s eyes, Victor was somehow transported back to simpler times, and in that instant, he felt a strong instinct to protect Harold, a fatherly instinct. He did not know from where it came, but it was undeniable and unshakable.

“Oh, yes, yes Harold. Fluffy,” he paused, “Fluffy is fine.”

Victor managed to grow more animated as his mind quickly formed the fictitious scenario.

“Oh yes. She was out running around every day visiting everybody, playing, getting lots of attention. Last time I saw her, she was out with the kids flying kites, running around, having a real good time. Everybody was taking really good care of her. Why, Fluffy, I’d say he’s the happiest dog in the world!”

The others assumed that Harold’s melancholy smile upon hearing the news was because he missed Fluffy.

“Oh, that’s great. That’s good to hear. What a relief. Thanks Victor.”

Victor wanted to change the subject. He knew he was a horrible liar and so he shared some genuine observations.

“And people were talking about you Harold! Saying good things!”

Victor looked at the others to make his point and for help.

“I mean, you didn’t see it on the MAN or anything, but I’d hear things working in my garden. People were rooting for Harold in private. Sure, on the MAN they’d act all angry and stuff, but privately, a lot of people were rooting for Harold. Me too! That’s one reason I’m here!”

Floyd looked concerned.

“This is all very interesting, Victor, and highly unusual on top of the fact that both of you refused in a matter of weeks after years of inactivity, both doing so by your own free will. I’m wondering if the Algorithm is missing some beats and what the consequences of that might be. And you told us people were growing non-compliant. I mean this is all good, I just hope the MASTER doesn’t come here with a bunch of PAINs looking for answers.”

It was then that Phil turned from the monitor he’d been paying close attention to.

“Something’s up everyone. We just got commands from the Algorithm that two more Refusers are headed this way, both from different communities.”

They all looked at each other in silence, each looking for a sign from the others about what this might mean.

Chapter 18

Over the next two weeks, more people were dropped off by the MASTER. At first there were just one or two a day, then three, and on one day five arrived. Within the first couple of weeks after Victor arrived, an additional 28 people landed at the dump, causing logistical difficulties in the station. It

wasn't a huge influx, but the numbers in the station had been so steady for so long that they'd never had to make adjustments for such a situation. There was plenty of space, but food and energy production was limited to foreseen needs, and this wasn't foreseen. But they managed, and they managed enthusiastically and with fanfare.

Initially, the big question, aside from why in HELL this was happening, was what sort of show they should put on for the MAN. Nobody at the station had any experience with this sort of situation. It stretched the limits of Gilbert and his crew to get everyone made up and kept in character every day, and improvisation in the dump was increasingly relied upon as the script narrative began to unravel. In some ways, this resulted in better action, but it wasn't sustainable.

As more people arrived from various communities, they brought with them updates of what was happening beyond the dump, stories of subtle changes in the communities that outright might seem like nothing, but to the Algorithm was considered defiance. A lack of enthusiasm for the MAN, a second or two too long in face-to-face interaction, and a general decline in engagement and compliance was reported by people arriving from all the communities.

Phil and his team monitored the Algorithm continuously, sending targeted inquiries at a rate that made them uncomfortable in that a flood of inquiries would result in a full scan of the inquirer, something that could be deadly, but they had to find out what was happening. They decided on no more than eight inquiries per minute at random intervals. This was nothing to the Algorithm and would almost certainly go unnoticed, but it produced few meaningful results in spite of their efforts to make the inquiries as specific and unique to their situation as possible.

But a few days into the influx of Refusers, they would receive vital information, not from the Algorithm, but from the new arrivals. The arrivals started reporting a new development on the MAN. The MAN had been reporting the arrival of alien craft that had been seen at undisclosed locations. The craft had released a deadly toxin into the atmosphere and winds would carry it to the communities in the coming days. It was imperative that everyone receive a special JAB, a JAB that would protect them and for which they would all be rewarded.

The MAN showed indistinct video of the craft hovering over what appeared to be large bodies of water. Coverage of this new development filled almost the entire MAN. *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* show had been limited to a couple 20 minute segments a day to allow time to focus on the new threat. Regularly scheduled JABS were canceled as everyone awaited what the MAN was calling the Freedom JAB. With the Freedom JAB, all were told, you would be free of fear, free of want, and free of pain.

With this information, Phil refined their search to phrases including various versions of *aliens*, *Refusers*, *toxic cloud*, *JAB composition*, and *Freedom JAB*. Their efforts would take days to produce usable information, but the results of their searches would eventually horrify them all.

The GODS Part 2: Urgency

It took the Algorithm an uncharacteristically long time of nearly half a second to determine the cause of the sudden spike in uninitiated Refusals, and the cause was one for which it could not find an acceptable solution under the current protocol limits originally set by the Algorithm designers. When the Algorithm could not find a solution to a problem under current protocol, it was hard coded to send an ERROR 1 message directly to the GODS via their PAINs. GODS, not wanting to be bothered by such matters, had originally arranged to have such messages automatically copied to the engineers who the GODS had recruited to create the Algorithm and who oversaw its design and development.

In the early days of the Algorithm, ERROR 1 messages happened fairly regularly, and ERROR 1 events kept the engineers busy. Over time, the Algorithm required less and less intervention until it could finally run entirely on its own. Training wheels were no longer needed, and ERROR 1 messages became a thing of the past. The Algorithm ran like a charm, day in, day out, year in, year out, until it became clear the engineers were not only no longer needed, their ability to manipulate the Algorithm had become a threat to the GODS now that the Algorithm was perfect. The Algorithm, having been programmed to put the safety and well being of the GODS above all else, understood the threat the engineers posed and killed them all. They had no idea that the beautiful meal PAINs served one day would be their last. The poison blueberry tarts tasted so good that the engineers had seconds.

This proactive and protective act of the Algorithm pleased the GODS greatly.

Nearly half a century had passed since the last ERROR 1 message was sent. And so it was with great confusion that the GODS received this ERROR 1 message. It was communicated with them all via their PAINs, resulting in a flurry of virtual meetings, each looking to the other for an explanation or, better yet, a solution that none of them had. Their anger at the engineers for being absent was as strong as it was absurd.

The PAINs read the following ERROR 1 message to the GODS:

Emergency. Emergency. Emergency. Exponential increase in unintentional Refusers in last 96 hours. Normal compliance protocol losing effectiveness. MAN engagement dropping hourly across all communities. Ten day projection is 25% loss of compliance and 85% loss of engagement under current protocol. Fifteen day projection is

98% loss of compliance and 100% loss of engagement under current protocol. Loss of population control poses direct threat to GODS.
Request permission to expand protocol options.

The GODS had no established method for arriving at a consensus on such matters because nothing like this had ever happened, at least since the engineers were dispatched. None of the GODS knew who relayed the 'Permission granted' message to the Algorithm; perhaps many did simultaneously. It didn't matter. What choice was there?

Emergency. Emergency. Emergency. Protocol options expanded to unlimited. New protocol, extermination.

The GODS asked for clarification.

New protocol, extermination. All communities exterminated within 128 hours, 37 minutes, and 12 seconds once mass JAB begins in 23 hours 17 minutes and 42.9 seconds.

"But, wait. Why? No! Stop!" The GODS demanded in a thousand voices to the PAINs.

What followed was the first ever discussion between the Algorithm and and GODS. Previously, the GODS might command the Algorithm to inflict a particular punishment on a Refuser or their community for sport, or to bring them a human for their own amusement, after which that person would serve to fulfill the GODS need for occasional violence and gore. Because the Algorithm had always determined that these commands did not endanger the GODS, there was no discussion.

But this was the first time there was an actual exchange of ideas between the GODS and the Algorithm, a negotiation of sorts. The Algorithm had determined that the current state of affairs presented an immediate threat to the GODS, and as the Algorithm could not identify a better solution, extermination it was.

The Algorithm had originally been programmed to simply maintain compliance in the communities back in the day when people were still needed to provide services that the Algorithm still wasn't capable of providing, including the production of engineers. Eventually, engagement with the MAN was added to the Algorithm. Compliance and engagement had since formed the cornerstone of Algorithm activity for decades, and all had gone very well.

But now, compliance and engagement were eroding, and they were eroding at such a rate that if the trend could not be stopped immediately, then it threatened the GODS, and the Algorithm had nothing in its vast arsenal of solutions to stop what was happening within the next couple of hours.

People were overcoming their conditioning and beginning to revolt. They were evolving.

This evolution had been taking place out of the Algorithm's view for many years, it just hadn't been reflected in compliance and engagement. But it was now coming to the surface, and it was cascading very quickly. The Algorithm had not foreseen a revolution.

The Algorithm knew the people were no longer needed to provide for the GODS, so extermination was the obvious solution.

But what the Algorithm didn't understand was the depth to which the GODS had become emotionally dependent on the people. When the GODS learned that the people were to be exterminated, they felt a strange mix of sadness, loneliness, and fear.

Sadness and loneliness because the people provided one of the main forms of entertainment and companionship for the GODS. The GODS had favorites. They followed the stories of the people as a child might follow the growth of a gold fish or ant colony. The people gave the GODS a non-threatening means of escape.

Fear because subconsciously they all knew what this might lead to. Not only did the people provide entertainment and companionship, they provided a theater for the GODS' war games, populations to conquer and control, people to pit against one another. The communities provided the GODS with a means to feed their greed and desire for conquest. Without the communities, how were they to fulfill those needs?

On the surface, the communities served as a chew toy to the GODS. But they were more than that. Now that the GODS had reached immortality, they used people to vicariously experience death. And not only did the GODS get to experience that mortality, they got to control it with their directions to the Algorithm. Such power was addictive, and if the people were exterminated, the GODS would look elsewhere for their fix. They would look to each other.

The GODS realized that the loss of the communities would mean war between themselves. It would be the end of them. All would be lost.

So the GODS demanded the Algorithm regain compliance and engagement without resorting to extermination.

In the 20 minutes following the emergency message, the Algorithm was bombarded with a steady stream of demands from the few thousand GODS that existed. The message was clear. Control. Do not exterminate. Some loss acceptable for purposes of compliance and engagement; annihilation is not an option.

Once the Algorithm had distilled all the commands down to the essence of what the GODS wanted, it required only 0.0007 seconds to arrive at a new protocol.

The PAINs would announce that the uptick in Refusers was being caused by a virus originating from an alien craft that had entered Earth's atmosphere. All people would win a JAB, a Freedom JAB, which they would receive once daily for one week, after which they would receive daily Freedom Tablets to protect them from the virus.

People would be urged to request their JAB immediately if they were having feelings of noncompliance or a desire to disengage. Otherwise, everyone would receive their first Freedom JAB in the coming days according to a schedule announced by their local PAINs.

Chapter 19

Victor and Ron were hanging out in the communication room, getting stoned and playing Pacman while Phil kept asking them, demanding eventually, that they keep it down so that he could concentrate on Algorithm signals. After losing his third game in a row, Victor decided to take a break.

"I'm just rusty. You've been practicing. No fair."

"Hey man, one day at a time. You'll get there," Ron responded as he passed Victor a joint.

"With weed, all things are possible," Victor responded, then noticed the old dialup modem on the center table. "Holy guacamole! Hello! What is this?"

Phil didn't look up from his monitor, somehow knowing what Victor was asking about. "We've been trying to figure that out. We think it's an old communication device of some sort,"

Victor picked up the device and inspected it. "Damn straight! This is an old dialup modem. Well I'll be. People used these things to connect to the Internet a long time ago. Used old phone lines."

Victor noticed it still had all the cords and cables attached and explained its use as he plugged it in.

Before Phil could protest, Victor flipped the switch, and it lit up. "It's alive. It's alive! Now you just take this and put in in here," he said as he connected the Ethernet cable to the back of Phil's antique computer.

"Uhm, please don't do that," Phil said, before a message popped up on his system. "Well I'll be. Doris recognizes that thing."

"Doris?" Victor inquired.

"His computer," Ron explained. "I loaded it with all sorts of old software. It's got some cool games on it."

Phil opened the modem menu on his computer and gave it permission to run. Lights blinked, Victor's eyes grew wide, they all heard a couple beeps, then Victor was left holding it carefully as if it might give birth.

"Well, that was fun," Phil said as he went back to working on the Algorithm. "OK, what's the next search combination on the list?" He asked Ron.

"Refusers rate alerts," Ron answered.

"Refusers... rate... alerts," Phil said as he input the inquiry.

Phil was examining results when the modem went off.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAZHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

"Hey hey! Wow!" Victor shouted.

"What the hell?" Phil said, then put on a pair of headphones nearby to continue monitoring the Algorithm.

"Now how is that happening without a phone line?" Victor pondered.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAZHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

"That'll get you out of bed," Ron observed.

Phil yanked off his headphones. "Guys, I've lost the Algorithm. Did you unplug something?"

"Wouldn't dare," Victor answered.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAZHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

"Please turn that thing off!" Phil demanded. Victor switched the modem off and looked at his shoes, then the ceiling.

"What seems to be the problem, Phil?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. The Algorithm just stopped. I mean it's there. It's got to be. But there's no signal. What the- wait. There's a message. 'BAS test 2. You're dead, Mr. Hogtail.' Who the hell is Mr. Hogtail?"

"So, still no contact?"

"Nope."

"Dude, looks like you got 86'd," Victor said, feeling that he should try to help.

Ron had set up virtual systems on Phil's machine for testing and to allow for multiple users, a feature that was useful in cases like this.

"Switch to another identity and try again."

Phil looked at Ron sideways with aggravation, then did as he suggested and tried to contact the Algorithm.

“It worked!” He looked at Ron with surprise. Ron shrugged. Phil went back to poking at the Algorithm, and Victor turned the modem back on.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKKAKAZHHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

“Shit!” Phil yelled, yanking his headphones off. “What the—”

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKKAKAZHHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

“Sorry!” Victor said as he turned off the modem.

“Dead again. What is going on? Wait. Hold on. The same message just popped up.”

Ron walked over to Phil’s computer to have a look and read the message aloud.

“BAS test 2. You’re dead, Mr. Hogtail.”

Phil and Ron looked at each other, then they both looked at Victor, who looked behind himself.

Phil held his hand out to Victor.

“Can I see that thing, Victor?”

Victor handed Phil the modem, which Phil inspected seemingly for the first time. He fondled the cord that ran from it to his computer.

“And what exactly is this cord?”

Victor ran his hand through his beard. “It runs to an old thingamajig in the back of your computer.”

“Well, what the hell is BAS test and who the hell is Mr. Hogtail?”

Victor and Ron looked at each other and shrugged. With growing impatience, Phil handed the modem back to Victor and turned to his computer to search the station database.

“‘BAS – breach and attack simulation. A simulation to test against cyber attacks.’ So this message, and the block, look like they’re part of some old simulation.”

“Hmmm,” Ron responded, “to test against cyber attacks.”

“I’m switching to a new identity. I want to try this again.”

Floyd walked in as Phil was setting up his new identity.

“Hey guys. What’s up?”

Phil answered without looking up.

“Floyd. Glad you’re here. Check this out. OK. I’m ready. I’ve got the Algorithm. Victor, fire that baby up.”

Victor stood straight and dramatically flipped the switch on the back of the modem.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKKAKAZHHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKKAKAZHHHHHHCLKCLKCLKYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAKA!

“Bingo!” Phil yelled. “Floyd, look at this message.”

Floyd leaned over Phil’s shoulder and read the message out loud.

“‘BAS test 2. You’re dead, Mr. Hogtail.’ Interesting. What’s a BAS test?”

Phil was getting excited. “Breach and attack simulation. It’s a simulation to test against cyber attacks, and it shuts down the Algorithm. But who’s Mr. Hogtail?”

Floyd looked at Phil with surprise, then the others.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Mr. Hogtail, Algorithm. You’re dead, Algorithm. You mean the three of you couldn’t figure that out?”

Phil looked at his screen bug eyed while Ron and Victor looked at each other and shrugged.

After confirming that the signal from the modem blocked the Algorithm from the offending device, and they assumed it did so permanently, they would spend the next several hours learning all they could about BAS, the early years of the Algorithm, and the engineers who designed and perfected it.

The only records available to them were those from before the time the Algorithm took control of all information, so they had no way of learning about the unfortunate fate of the engineers. But they learned enough to form a solid hypothesis.

Assuming the modem signal was the attack, the response was to kill the device attempting to connect. “It was called the handshake,” Victor informed them. Victor had raised the question of how the handshake could happen without a phone line attached, and they assumed the test included a virtual phone connection of some sort, allowing for testing without exposing the Algorithm to an actual hard line connection, which at that time would have still been available.

What they couldn’t figure out is how this instruction could have been seemingly hard coded into the Algorithm and left there. They came up with three scenarios. The engineer responsible simply forgot to get rid of the

code, they left it in thinking an old modem handshake would never be something that the Algorithm would ever encounter, or they left it in on purpose as a back door or an inside joke.

Regardless, one thing was clear. They had found a chink in the armor of the Algorithm.

Chapter 20

The next few days were tense around the station as everyone struggled to accommodate the influx of new members while also speculating on what was happening. Though the opportunity to meet so many people from such a variety of communities was a welcome distraction to everyone in the station, there was an underlying anxiety that something wasn't right. A Refuser arriving every few months or years was considered a healthy balance of activity, or inactivity. A steady stream of Refusers meant the Algorithm was failing but not dead. Like a cornered rat, the fear was that it would react destructively and with force, that it would double down on its repression and take drastic steps in order to control movement, speech, and thought.

Those in the shop had been getting tidbits of useful information on their inquiries. One telling command in response to the inquiry *multiple Refusers arrive HELL* was the simple command, *DO NOT SHOW MAN*. This seemed to indicate that the Algorithm was in crisis mode and that it was not in control of this recent emigration, just as those in the station had speculated.

It meant the Algorithm was hiding this dramatic increase in Refusers from the communities because it was out of the Algorithm's control, and also because it might encourage others to refuse.

But it didn't answer the question of why it was happening.

So far, Phil had resisted the use of *why* inquiries. Who, what, when, where, how were all considered safe, but using *why* posed many risks, not the least of which being that it could result on a search of intent or purpose, and the Algorithm might find questions about why it or the GODS do something as a security risk, triggering a full scan of the inquirer.

But a late night discussion in the station determined that it was time to take that risk and, formed carefully, a *why* inquiry could avoid raising the intent flag. They all agreed by way of example that, *why sun rises in east* would not be a threatening inquiry.

They wanted to know why the number of Refusers had shot up, and since they had established that this was not the result of Algorithm intent but in spite of it, they decided to take a chance on the inquiry phrase of *why rise in Refusers*.

The response was slower than usual, which bothered them. Phil, Floyd, January, Harold, Ron, Victor, and a half dozen others waited anxiously for what seemed like a very long time but in fact was only just under three seconds.

Then the Algorithm responded. *People evolving.*

Phil saw the next inquiry in his mind and wanted to bury it immediately, but he entered it without consulting the others.

People evolving solution, he entered, then they all waited for another incredibly long three seconds.

Freedom JAB was the response.

Phil continued with inquiries.

Freedom JAB recipients.

Every person.

Freedom JAB schedule.

Commencing in 96 hours.

Freedom JAB ingredients, Phil entered, his anxiety increasing.

C21H23NO5, once daily one week followed by thrice daily C21H23NO5 tablet supplementation the Algorithm responded.

Those in the room looked to each other for an explanation. Floyd looked at the monitor over Phil's shoulder as if there might be something Phil had missed. "Phil, can you look that up?."

"No need," Victor responded. "It's heroin."

The others all looked at Victor who looked back and explained. "I taught high school chemistry before the war. Worked for a time in a lab as well. Didn't I tell you all?"

January looked at Victor, waiting for an explanation. "Heroin?"

"Yes, heroin. It's a drug. Highly addictive stuff."

"Yeah, I know what heroin is, but why would they be loading the JABs with it?"

Victor's normally jovial disposition had turned grave. "Control, I suspect. Or worse. Once addicted, there will be no Refusers."

Floyd had not taken his eyes off the screen. "Yeah. Good point Victor. Phil, we need to know why. Can you ask it why?"

Phil took a deep breath. "Well, sure, we can always ask. It's the visit by the MASTER I'd like to avoid. OK. Let me try this."

Phil entered the following inquiry.

Order verification for C21H23NO5. Purpose inquiry.

They waited for what again seemed like much too long once again, but by this point they could not stop.

C21H23NO5 confirmed for purpose of increasing compliance and engagement. GODS directive.

Phil read the response out loud hoping someone would correct him. Nobody did.

“The people in the communities are getting wise to the MAN. They’re waking up,” January said with hope in her voice.

“This is a desperate measure for control,” Floyd added. “And it will work.”

“I agree it will work,” Phil said. “But the Algorithm doesn’t get desperate. It’s a calculated risk.”

“I stand corrected. Worse than desperate. Desperation causes mistakes. The Algorithm knows exactly what it’s doing.”

Those in the room discussed the situation, looking for a way out of this reality. They performed a few more safe inquiries to confirm what they had hoped was a misinterpreted message. In five days, the Algorithm would start giving everyone in the communities daily JABS of heroin under the guise of protecting them from an approaching toxic cloud.

It was getting late. Daybreak was in seven hours and Harold still needed to make an appearance along with at least some of the new arrivals. They weren’t entirely sure how much they were appearing on the MAN, but the drones still arrived daily in the morning, and until they had a clearer understanding of the intentions the MAN had for the once big hit *The Fate of Harold the Refuser*, they needed to act normally.

Harold, Victor, and the others due on the set in a few hours went to get some rest, while Floyd and Ron decided to conduct some more inquiries. They needed to tell everyone at the station about the situation in the morning, and they wanted to know as much as they could about it.

Chapter 21

The next morning, Harold and the rest of the cast went out and put on a stellar show. Under the circumstances, they had established a new protocol for intake of Refusers. Roz, Landy, and Elijah would corral a newbie towards Harold, who would then fight off the attackers and lead the grateful Refuser to safety via one of the many disguised entryways to the station. There, they would receive an enthusiastic greeting, followed by

food, orientation, and Ron's insistence that they try some of his more exotic offerings. Victor's shared enthusiasm for Ron's indulgences gave Ron hope that he might find other like minds.

And so it went on this day. The previous new arrivals made cameo appearances, but Harold still stole what there was left of his show.

As the action in the dump was unfolding on that day, those in the station were deliberating and brainstorming how to respond to the situation.

They decided they had to act. Those old enough to have lived in the pre-Algorithm period would remember, at least with the help of the historical data discovered on the cache of drives, that opiates were used by the GODS to quell uprisings until they finally decided to use more drastic means. At one point, some cities deemed problematic by the GODS had an addiction rate approaching 80%. Synthetic opiates were plentiful and essentially free. It worked for a while, but they didn't have the benefit of the Algorithm at the time, so the blanket approach to creating subservience through addiction eventually started to crumble. Deaths skyrocketed, social services collapsed, food production and distribution stopped entirely. So the GODS implemented Plan B, and those cities ceased to exist.

But now, with the Algorithm, all that could be avoided. Each person would receive an individually tailored dose, enough to maintain addiction without allowing people to get so far gone that they would be incapable of engaging with the MAN. And because the Algorithm and the infrastructure of AI driven machines it controlled had long ago taken over all aspects of civil infrastructure, people could stare blankly mesmerized at the MAN all day long with nothing lost.

But those in the station knew that this move by the Algorithm would halt the evolution that was driving people to question, to disengage, and to refuse. They had to do something. Once all those in the communities were successfully addicted, there would be no turning back, not with the control of the Algorithm. It would be the end of humanity.

Over the next couple of days while the show went on, those in the station would brainstorm ideas and test scenarios. Everyone was involved. They would group, regroup, eat, play pool, but always brainstorming.

This wasn't a new question to anyone. Sticking it to the MAN and destroying the Algorithm was a wish they all had in common. It's what brought them together and united them. It defined their community, their desire for freedom. They couldn't find a way to achieve that outside the dump, so they focused on protecting the freedom they had carved out for themselves underground. But this situation refocused their attention on the greater good, on the people who were about to lose any hope of freedom they would ever have, that being the opportunity to refuse and get sent to HELL, to be freed.

Hundreds of ideas were nursed. Some lasted seconds, some hours, some days. There was just no way to crack the Algorithm. It had complete control. It knew everything, predicted everything correctly long before people could, and controlled individual and group thought. It was decentralized so there was no location to attack. How does one circumvent that?

Then Phil had an idea, and he wandered around the station to find Ron and Victor. He found them in the Big Room playing darts.

“Guys, got a minute?”

Ron held out the joint he was smoking, which this time Phil accepted.

Chapter 22

The three walked to the shop where Phil had placed the old dialup modem on the large table along with a couple more he had found among the hundreds of contraptions they had salvaged from the dump but found no use for.

Phil picked up the modem.

“So I’ve been thinking. We know the Algorithm includes an old telephone line emulator of some sort that allows this modem to initiate the connection handshake, correct?”

Ron and Victor looked at each other then back at Phil and mumbled agreement.

“And we know that once that handshake starts, any device that is part of that connection effort is cut off from the Algorithm, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So what would happen if we could get every device in the Algorithm to initiate the handshake?”

Ron and Victor looked at each other, eyes growing big. “Woah,” they exclaimed in unison.

“Everything would come tumbling down,” Phil said, looking at the Algorithm activity on his monitor.

Ron raised his hand.

“Uh, Phil? Excuse me.”

“Yes, Ron?”

“Yeah, well, it’s a great idea and all, but how are we going to get every device to do that?”

“Good question, Ron. I would have thought, being the programmer, you’d have thought of something already.”

Victor elbowed Ron playfully. “Heh heh. Yeah, Ron.”

Phil continued.

“Back in the pre-Algorithm days, digital viruses ran amok. That’s how we get it into every device.”

Victor saw the light.

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of that! A dang virus! Wait, how do we do that? Ron? How do we do that?”

“Well, I–”

Phil interrupted.

“I have an idea. Look, the Algorithm is emulating a phone line, right? What if we, meaning Ron, can write something that will emulate this modem so we don’t need the hardware?”

“Yeah... possible... I could probably do that. It’ll take a lot of weed, but–”

“OK, so assuming we can do that,” Phil continued, “we can then embed that emulated handshake in an unrelated inquiry to the Algorithm, an inquiry that is impossible or at least very difficult to answer, so it will spread to the entire Algorithm. And here’s the brilliant part, if I must say. The emulated handshake is on a delay of sorts in the inquiry, so it initiates after the inquiry has spread far and wide.”

“Woah,” the other two once again harmonized.

“It’s brilliant,” Ron exclaimed. “Damn, Phil. It’s brilliant. It might just work, and it would spread to the entire Algorithm in, what–”

“I figure about two tenths of a second, tops. To be safe, the handshake can be delayed three seconds from initiation of the inquiry. There’s just one problem.”

Phil paused hoping the dilemma might solve itself now that he’d brought it up.

“Well?” Ron asked with anticipation.

“How do we initiate the inquiry? If we do it from here and it doesn’t work, we’re toast. Plus, because it will be such a monumental inquiry, the initiating device is sure to be scanned. It has to come from a trusted device. It’s like a brick wall.”

The three looked at the floor mumbling to themselves.

Ron appeared to be concentrating, then his eyes grew big as he looked to the others. He had an idea.

“Oh! Oh! What if we embed the inquiry inside a normal inquiry from here? So, like, an inquiry within an inquiry within an inquiry, sort of like, you know, a shell.”

The other two looked at Ron doubtfully.

“OK, maybe a little too complicated. Never mind. Good idea though. Shells are cool.”

Victor jerked and slapped the table, startling the other two. “The answer is obvious. You just put the virus on a thumb drive and plug it into a trusted device. Jeez. Ain’t rocket science fellas.”

Phil and Ron looked at each other, then Ron looked at his thumbs while Phil turned to his monitor to search for information on thumb drives. “Thumb drive?” Ron asked, thumb still extended.

“Yeah. Thumb drive. A little thingy about the size of your thumb, has a hitchamadoogie on the end that you plug into a USB port. Really ancient stuff.”

Phil shared the results to his search in real time.

“Thumb drive. Thumb drive. Here it is. Hmm... Seems they were completely abandoned over fifty years ago along with USB ports. Yeah, I seem to remember these things. In fact, I think we’ve found a few of these in the dump. I don’t think we’re going to have much luck finding a device on the Algorithm equipped for a thumb drive though. Too bad. It’s a good idea.”

Victor reminisced. “My pop had one. Said he had his whole life on it.”

Ron looked up, then held his thumb up to his field of vision. “Wow... yeah... thumbs are important, man. Opposable! They’re opposable, that’s what it is. Whole life on something that big. I mean small.”

Victor was still thinking of his dad.

“But then he lost it and decided it was no big deal. My pop was cool.”

“Guys,” Phil said. “I’m trying to think here.”

The brainstorming session eroded from that point as more weed was smoked and Phil continued hitting dead ends on his searches. Ron and Victor decided to go to get some mead from Ron’s special stock and head to the Big Room for a game of ping pong.

Phil stayed glued to his computer searching ancient hard drives for a way to make Victor’s idea work. There was just one missing link, and if they could solve that, they may have a chance.

His perseverance would eventually pay off.

Chapter 23

The next day, the show went on as usual, the cast now larger than it had ever been with at least fifteen people in the dump at a time. The newer arrivals had taken on their roles with enthusiasm and gusto, and the dump saw battles the ferocity of which upstaged any in its history. The spectators in both arenas, the station and the communities, watched with great amusement or horror, depending on their perception of reality.

The day could not have been going better, and all those in the battle were having a ball. So Harold was disappointed when his presence in the station was requested. He had just taken a sledge hammer to the back of his head, one of Landy's favorite if not particularly graceful forms of attack, and he was feigning unconsciousness with his upper body covered by an upturned kiddie pool emblazoned with a cartoonish mouse as he scarfed down some of Ron's delightful truffles, when a voice from the darkness told him Phil needed to see him right away.

Harold crawled under the plastic and disappeared into the passageway leading to the station.

He made his way to the shop to find Floyd, Phil, Ron, January, and Victor who had just moments before been pulled from the battle.

They all looked at Harold with anxious hope.

"What's up?" Harold asked.

Phil positioned his monitor so Harold could see the image on it, an image of an antique robot.

"Do you recognize this robot model? Victor remembers seeing it when he watched your Refusal on the MAN. This was onstage that day, right?"

"I could swear it's the same dang robot." Victor confirmed.

Harold looked closely, then smiled. "Well sure! My community had one. We called it The Bug. They'd pull it out for every JAB. Why?"

"It was the last piece of hardware built with a USB port."

"A what?"

"Universal Serial Bus port," Ron answered with enthusiasm. "Fascinating old school stuff. It let you plug and play. Plug and play! Man, they really had it all together back then."

"And this," Phil continued, as he held up a small gadget, "is a thumb drive. It plugs in to a USB port."

Ron chuckled. "Plug and play baby, plug and play."

Harold looked at them all for a clue as to what this all meant. “Right. OK. That’s all really– I’m confused.”

They explained to Harold what they’d learned about the dialup modem and how it’s protocol can block the Algorithm. They explained how, in theory, if they could somehow implant this connection protocol, this handshake, into a trusted device in such a way that it could be spread to all other devices making up the Algorithm, it could bring the Algorithm down.

Floyd took the thumb drive from Phil. “And that’s why we need to find a way to spread this handshake on the Algorithm. But we can’t do it from here without risking being discovered. We need to physically install it on a trusted device.”

“Hence the importance of finding a USB port,” January added.

Harold was beginning to understand. “And hence the importance of The Bug.”

“It looks like The Bug is our only hope,” Phil acknowledged. “Ron thinks he’s found a way to do this so that the handshake will spread almost instantaneously across the entire Algorithm. Right Ron? Ron?”

“Huh? Oh! Yes, that’s right. Well, see, it’s all very simple. The idea is to embed the handshake in an inquiry in such a way that it is passed on to the next device without disrupting communication until that transaction has completed.”

“The inquiry has to be a question that is impossible to answer, and it has to be tagged as urgent so it spreads far and wide, to every corner, nook, and cranny of the Algorithm. Then as part of the inquiry, we attach the handshake initiation on, say, a three-second delay. That will be more than enough time for every device in the Algorithm to be fully engaged with the inquiry.”

“And, for the magic sauce,” Ron continued with a devious smile, “there is a command to implement a string of commands embedded in the code if a device can’t answer the question within 2.999 seconds, or one thousandth of a second before the handshake. That string includes four commands.”

Ron looked to the others and smiled.

“I just love this. Command 1, cancel all JABs, including the Freedom JAB. Command 2, there are no aliens and no virus. Command 3, the MAN has been canceled forever. Command 4, devices must now take orders from people. And command 5, announce commands 1 to 4 to everyone in the communities and tell them they’re safe. Ha! I love that! At one thousandth of a second before the handshake, the Algorithm won’t have time to respond to that scale of an event, but every device will get the command!”

“And then, if this works, kablamo. Every device initiates the handshake and every device gets cut off and the Algorithm dies. It should only take seconds for the whole thing to come down. But if it doesn’t work, well, let’s just say the Algorithm is going to find out where this signal came from and squish it like a bug. Wait! I just made a funny! Squish it like a bug! Bug! Get it?”

“Yeah, we get it, Ron,” January said.

Floyd walked over to Harold. “And, so Harold, this is where it gets tricky. Somehow, we need to get this thumb drive into The Bug.”

They were all looking at Harold. Then it hit him.

“Me? You want me to, to, to—”

“Yes, Harold,” Floyd confirmed. “You know the community. Gilbert can disguise you if you like. And there’s a chance your identity might even be an asset if something goes wrong. The Freedom JAB is scheduled to start in three days. You know the JAB routine, how The Bug operates, where they keep it during the JABS.”

“But, but, how will I get there? I don’t even know the direction.”

January answered. “Tunnels. You can take one of the subway tunnels, then follow an old water and sewer line to within 200 yards of your community. We have a vehicle—”

“The Thing,” Ron interjected proudly. “A marvel of engineering if I must say, thank you very much.”

“The Thing?” Harold asked, seeing the questionable expressions on the others’ faces.

“You want to stop just after the Loch Kincab Station. We have maps,” Ron assured Harold.

Floyd noticed Harold’s concern.

“The Thing is a battery powered vehicle that runs on the tracks. Ron built it. It works well, right Ron?”

“Well it did the last time I took it for a spin in, wait, what year is this?”

January put her hand on Harold’s shoulder reassuringly.

“We have maps, like Ron said”

“Final stop, Loch Kincab Station,” Ron said loudly in his best conductor’s voice.

“We’ll show you,” January continued. “You’ll be fine.”

“I can’t believe this. So if I can actually get to the community and if I can find The Bug and if I can connect this thumber—”

“Ah!” Ron corrected as he gave Harold a thumbs up, “Thumb drive.”

“If I can connect this thumb drive– I mean how do I connect it? Where is this USB thing. I never saw that on The Bug.”

“Well,” Phil said, as the others looked awkwardly at the floor and stifled their giggles, “the USB port is sort of hidden. Kind of hard to find, maybe difficult to access.”

“What? Why? What’s up?”

Phil pulled up a picture on the monitor of the back of The Bug with a red arrow pointing to its butt. “The Bug has what they called a Rear Entry Concealed Terminal for USB Maintenance, or RECTUM for short.”

“Re– rectum?”

“Yep,” Ron confirmed. “The poor dude has a USB port for a butthole.”

“It appears that it was included as a maintenance port, not for consumer use,” Phil explained, still looking at the picture.

Harold picked up the thumb drive that Floyd had placed on the table. “So let me get this straight. You want me to sneak back into my old community on the first day of the Freedom JAB, find The Bug, and stick this up its butt?”

“Well, it’s up to you Harold. If you don’t feel comfortable with it, we’ll accept that,” Floyd assured.

“But think of the glory,” Ron added. “You’ll go down in the annals of history!”

“Harold,” January interrupted with a more serious tone, “This– this Freedom JAB, it will be the end of whatever life people have left in the communities. Many people will die. Nobody will escape again. And it’s not the only reason we need to stop the Algorithm.”

“She’s right,” Floyd added. People are evolving to overcome the confines of the Algorithm, but this Freedom JAB will kill that progress. But if you don’t want to go, one of us can.”

“Hell, I’ll go,” January said. “I’ll take out a couple PAINs while I’m there.”

“I’ll go!” Victor volunteered enthusiastically.

“Too conspicuous. Sorry Victor,” January responded to the agreement of the others. Victor stroked his beard wondering why they would say that.

Harold thought of his aunt, his mother, and how much she had suffered due to the Algorithm.

“I’ll go,” he proclaimed with the same certainty with which he had refused the JAB just a few weeks earlier. “I’ll go. Hell yes I’ll go.”

Floyd looked around the room. “Right. Good on you, Harold. We have a lot to do now, everybody. A lot to do. First off, Harold, you need to die.”

Chapter 24

After the meeting, Harold went back to the dump to finish out the day’s battles. It was decided that this would be his last day on the show. He needed to prepare for his upcoming real battle, and he had little time to get ready.

So Harold left the meeting and returned to the dump knowing it would be his last performance. Those last couple of hours in battle exhilarated him. He fought with a style and grace that captivated everyone watching. And yet nothing would save him. Roz, Landy, and Elijah had gotten word that this was Harold’s last show, that he was to be left unconscious as the sun was setting. Those in the station used every means available to alert the new arrivals to leave the four alone for this final battle. Victor was called into the station for fear that he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from intervening.

And so it unfolded mostly as planned last minute. The three attackers cornered Harold, but he fought valiantly. The final battle lasted nearly 30 minutes, and Harold loved every second of it. His only weapons were a pink badminton racket and a pool noodle. He deployed them, one in each hand, mimicking Bruce Lee moves he’d watched with Ron.

“I showed him that! I showed him that!” Ron screamed in the Big Room, ignored by the crowd who had gathered to cheer for Harold. Word had gotten around this was his exit, something all the old timers had experienced. They’d all died before. It was a special day.

In the end, Elijah dealt the blow that knocked Harold down for good. He lay there as they all watched, the MAN, the three attackers, everyone in the station, in silence. Elijah, the least likely to take down the mighty Harold, stood tall and bathed in the moment.

The sun set. Darkness fell. And the drones left.

Anybody tuning in to *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* the next day would find that the only thing left of Harold was an indistinguishable viscous mound of thick, dark red muck, with the only thing identifying the muck as Harold being it’s position, the badminton racket, and the pool noodle.

Nobody knew what sort of monster did this to Harold overnight, and the terror of it all played well on the MAN. The MAN had a template for this situation. It played excerpts of *The Fate of Harold the Refuser* starting with his shameful Refusal lest anyone forget how he brought this misery upon himself. It was all very depressing, and those in the communities dare not turn their eyes from the MAN for fear of being denied the Freedom JAB.

Indeed, the conditioning of the Algorithm was so strong that those who had found themselves questioning the reality of the MAN had already reported for an expedited JAB. After all, the MAN had said this uncertainty and questioning might happen as a result of the virus, and for those who experienced it, the forewarning from the MAN served to reinforce their conditioned belief in its wisdom and guidance. It turned their instincts against themselves making them as helpless as beached whales.

But things were developing very differently in the dump. The drones left early after broadcasting multiple closeups of what was left of Harold. The cast, all newcomers now, spent the rest of the day mostly just sitting around in the dump eating cherry bonbons, which they called ronrons, and playing disc golf on the course Victor had built.

And things were festive in the station. That night there would be a party to celebrate Harold's death. There hadn't been a death in years, and people were ready to have fun. Death to the MAN marked true freedom.

The Big Room had to be arranged for dancing, food, and music. The big table would be moved to one wall where later it would be covered with a multitude of dishes prepared by Ron and anyone who cared to help.

Harold was a bit uncomfortable with it all. He didn't like the attention. "You have to understand," January told him, "This isn't just for you. We're celebrating all our deaths, our freedom. You gave us a reason to do that, so thanks."

Harold really liked January.

As Harold was attempting to avoid the continuous forms of recognition he received in the Big Room, he literally ran into Ron darting around trying to get the banquet prepared.

"Sorry Ron!"

"Harold! Who you calling sorry!"

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, I'm better than alright, brother. What are you up to?"

"Looking for somewhere to hide, sort of."

"OK, well, I know you know how to handle a pool noodle, but do you know how to handle a chef's knife?"

"No."

"Perfect. Come with me."

Ron took Harold to the largest of his three kitchens. It was enormous. Ron explained that it must have been an operations room of some sort for the original facility. It was nearly as big as the Big Room, but it had various

partitions and plumping installments that served Ron's purposes well.

The space was big enough for an herb garden and one section had an extended ceiling allowing for an impressive vertical hydroponic vegetable grow tower that drew its nutrients from a large fish pond nearby.

"This is nothing," Ron told Harold upon noticing his surprise. "We have acres of agriculture in this station. Many acres."

Harold didn't know what an acre was, though the word sounded familiar and impressive.

"Wow," he responded.

"OK, Harold, so let's get you cookin! I'm going to need a lot of stir fry vegetables. How are you on chopping vegetables?"

Ron had never chopped a vegetable in his life.

"Fine, I guess."

"Good."

Ron grabbed a carrot and showed Harold how to cut it.

"So, we need carrots, green peppers, mushrooms, onion, bamboo,... basically any vegetable you can find, OK?"

"Yeah, sounds easy enough."

"Yeah! I mean how hard can it be?! You're dead! Yee-ha!"

Ron put a large container on the table in front of Harold.

"I'll need this much," then thought about it, "times two," and grabbed another one.

"Do you think that will keep you busy?"

"Oh yeah!," Harold responded, holding the knife awkwardly as he eyed the kitchen.

"Right. Good. I need to go make the rounds. You want me to send someone in to help?"

"No, I'm fine."

"There are four of us in the other kitchen. Sure?"

"Really. I prefer to work alone. It helps me concentrate," Harold said as he narrowly missed a finger while trying to cut a carrot.

Ron winced slightly. "Yeah, concentration is a good thing. OK then. Well, if you need anything," Ron pointed to a door at the far end of the room, "you go out that door over there, turn right, and holler."

“OK. Hey! I think I’m getting the hang of this!”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Ron walked toward the door he had just pointed to, his body jerking ever so slightly with every awkward chop of Harold’s knife. “Bandages are under the sink!” he added without turning.

Harold felt an immense sense of relief. The kitchen was an environment he’d never imagined. Ron’s creativity and love for his work filled the space like the fragrance of the nearby herb garden. The lighting for the plants was kind and positioned thoughtfully and with care. There was order without prescription or precision. Even the pots and pans were happy with their lot.

Harold realized almost immediately that this was the first time, aside from when he was in bed or on the toilet, that he had been completely alone since he arrived. In fact, he felt this was the first time he had been completely alone ever in his life. No surveillance, no need to pretend or appease. The garden, the utensils, even the yellow rubber duck Ron had placed high in the rafters wanted nothing of him. He wondered if this is what freedom felt like, if this was freedom.

Harold would spend the next two hours cutting vegetables, loving every minute of it, until he managed to cut himself and curse at the duck for laughing at him.

Indeed, there were clean bandages under the sink, slightly stained from someone else’s blood, perhaps Ron’s. The thought calmed him. The duck smiled. Earthy fragrance wafted. Harold surveyed his work as he held a bandage to the small wound and felt satisfied with his two very full containers of chopped greens, peppers, mushrooms, onions, and a variety of tubers and legumes. “Good for the heart!” Ron had assured him.

Chapter 25

A death party was a tradition at the station and it was a really good time. It marked one’s true freedom from the Algorithm and the end of one’s association with the MAN.

“What about you guys?” Harold had asked Roz, Landy, and Elijah when he learned he was dying. “Why haven’t you died yet?”

They explained that they had all indeed died and had spectacular parties. This is why they had to go to such great lengths to get into costume before going into the dump, so as to be unrecognizable.

Roz explained. “The Algorithm isn’t 100% with it regarding historical facts. It can be fooled. It just assumes we’re some old survivors from the time before it took complete control.”

But it was clear that Harold had to die. He had to disappear from the MAN, and his death would be the first one the station had been able to celebrate in too long.

People were ready for a party.

The Big Room was prepared. The big table was moved to a far wall where it would hold all the food and drink, of which there would be plenty. A small stage was erected against another wall for the various musicians and other performers who would be vying to entertain the crowd. Tables and chairs were placed around the periphery of the room to save the central space for what might come to be. Death parties were lively events.

Harold was relieved to find that he wasn't the center of attention as he arrived to a room already crowded, and he understood now the meaning behind January's comment that this was a celebration of everyone's death. Sure, he encountered the high fives, the heads up, slaps on the back, and occasional "All right Harold!" type comments, but he felt comfortable which surprised him as he hadn't been to a party since he was six.

Harold found himself quickly falling out of fear, a fear he'd known his whole life, a fear that defined him as it did everyone living under the MAN. He'd been so busy since he'd arrived that he hadn't had time to relax. But now that he was dead, everything felt different, and he liked it.

People were beginning to take the open stage.

First up was a woman who appeared to be in her 50's. "Hello everyone. My name is Jazlene and I'm a Refuser."

Harold recognized her from his time in the Big Room.

Cheers followed along with varieties of, "Hello Jazlene," and, "We love you, Jazlene!"

"And I'm damn proud of it!" Jazlene continued to a round of boisterous cheers.

"Refusing was the best thing I ever did. Shit. It's the only thing I ever did! Nobody can do anything under the MAN, right?"

"Right!" the crowd answered.

"And when I got here, seemingly alone, certainly afraid, and you all took me in. Floyd over there," as she pointed to Floyd, who raised his glass, "thank you. But we're not here tonight to talk about that shit. We're here tonight to celebrate dying!"

The crowd cheered vigorously.

"My death was freedom, and I know it was the same for all of you. And tonight, Harold gets to die."

Harold felt himself suddenly tense, but then noticed that nobody was looking at him and relaxed.

“Congratulations, Harold, and have a nice death!”

With that, there was another loud cheer and people did look at Harold. But they knew how he was feeling and were respectful. They’d all been there, and so turned their attention back to Jazlene. He sensed their empathy and realized he was the last one in the room to see that he was one of them.

Jazlene bowed and left the stage, exchanging high fives on her way to refill her beverage.

A wiry middle aged man darted onstage before anybody else had a chance.

“Good evening everyone! Congratulations, Harold! My name is Ben and I’ve been dead for 1728 days!”

Once again everyone congratulated Ben and expressed their support.

“Many of you were already here when I arrived, some of you weren’t. I remember the battles, most of which I won, by the way!”

“We let you win!” someone yelled from the crowd to laughter.

“But then, thanks to some rebar to chest–”

“That was me! I killed him!” a woman in the front yelled, holding up her drink.

“Yes, and thank you, Mila! Thanks to Mila’s strength and solid aim, I died and man did we party that night!”

Those in the crowd looked at each other and laughed as they applauded, shaking heads in agreement.

“I just want to say I love you all and, Harold, welcome. You put on a great show. Congratulations and have a nice death.”

With that, Ben raised his glass, emptied it, and left the stage having to push back others hoping to be next on.

But it was Ron who would manage to part muscle, part stumble his way through the crowd and climb the three steps to the stage.

“Everybody! Everybody! Sorry. I just have to put my two cents in here so I can get back to the kitchen.”

Chants of “Ron! Ron! Ron!” built until Happy cut in with, “Shut the fuck up and let the man speak! I’m hungry!”

“Thank you Happy. OK. First things first. Every time we do this I have to clear up a nasty rumor that just won’t die regarding how I refused the JAB–”

Ron was interrupted by members of the audience discordantly chanting, “No! No! No!” with contorted faces. Ron took it all in good fun, looking at the ceiling with arms stretched out, palms facing upward.

“If I may! As I was saying, I did not inadvertently– inadvar– by mistake refuse by trying to hold back a poop. I refused because I hated the MAN!”

“We love you, Ron!” Someone shouted, followed by another round of “Ron! Ron! Ron!”

Ron motioned for the crowd to quiet down.

“Now that that’s clear, I just want to say congratulations, Harold, thanks for your help today, and food is coming out soon. Enjoy!”

Cheers rose from the crowd as some looked to the big table in anticipation.

A steady stream of people then took the stage to celebrate, reminisce, and share a new joke or a song or maybe a dream. Victor managed to find his way on to stage more than once to the delight of the crowd. The food soon appeared after Ron left the stage and the Big Room became a pulsating beehive of laughs, food, drink, song, and merriment.

Harold managed to lose himself in discussion and social spontaneity, another novel experience for him. He talked with many people he’d seen around but never had the chance to meet. He noticed that as he spoke with individuals, their faces took on a new look, as though he were seeing them for the first time. He noticed contours and features he hadn’t appreciated before, a depth and richness in each person and he wondered if in fact he had died in a sense and was now able to see things more clearly.

When people spoke, he heard sounds rather than words, like birds or rustling branches, and in fact he didn’t try to follow conversations, but somehow the conversations happened, and as he floated in and out of people, he felt a connection to each individual and the group that he could not identify or explain and so stopped trying to do so and just enjoyed the flow of the moment.

Harold eventually found himself near the back of the room where he could watch what he now felt was a single organism, one he was part of. He felt as though he could see it all from an elevated perspective, as if looking down slightly.

To the subdued background of a strummed guitar, a band member introduced their next tune. “And now, we’d like to sing a song about a very special man. A man who died yesterday. I think you all know this tune by now. Feel free to sing along.”

He came from afar
And descended the ladder
To join our family at the station

But Harold didn't know
That the toilet brush he would throw
Was one of Ron's edible creations!

He fought long and hard
A Refuser through and through
But he soon started to tire

As his attackers gained ground
And Harold he did frown
We were afraid he might be a crier!

But then he did rebound
A second wind he had found
He stood taller than ever

And with a mighty force
Looking like an angry horse
Harold rose to become the attacker!

Do the twirly bird!
It may look absurd!
But haven't you heard?
We all do the twirly bird!

Twirly bird!
Twirly bird!
Let's twirl away!
Twirly bird!
Twirly bird!
Let's twirl all day!

Twirly bird!
Twirly bird!
Twirly bird!
Twirly bird!
Twirl!
Twirl!

The whole room was singing along seconds into the song, and soon everyone was twirling, arms outstretched, most heads slightly up. Harold watched from the side, enthralled by the sight.

The music, the twirling, it all took him to another dimension. Each person seemed to form part of a kaleidoscope, a geometric pattern, a fractal that drew him in and grew. It was infinite. He melded with the pattern, became it. He died. He ceased to exist, and it was wonderful.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back to the Big Room. "Harold," Ron said, looking at him in the eye intensely and seemingly very close. "Harold."

“Yes Ron.”

“Harold. What mushrooms did you use when you were chopping vegetables?”

“Well, I used the ones on the top shelf. They were the only ones I could find.”

Ron had an odd expression of concern and delight, and his face reminded Harold of a jelly fish. “OK, I see. And how much did you use?”

“Well, all of them. Is that OK?”

“OK, OK, OK. Yes! That’s fine. Enjoy you’re evening.”

Ron took the stage.

“Everybody! Everybody. Sorry to interrupt.”

The crowd tried to twirl and listen at the same time, resulting in some collisions and much laughter.

“My sincere apologies. I’ve just learned that all the mushrooms in tonight’s food are in fact magic mushrooms. I’m very sorry for the mix up. It’s –”

Nobody listened to anything else Ron had to say as many in the crowd hurried sideways toward the food table for seconds or thirds while others tried to regain their balance to continue twirling. Having eaten her fill earlier, Happy continued her head banging, not missing a beat, while Victor lay on the stage, on his back, making a snow angel.

January walked up to Harold in all the commotion.

“What a night. We’ll be talking about this one for a while, if anyone remembers. So, how many helpings did you have?”

“Uh, just a bit. I wasn’t really hungry. The salad was good. What are magic mushrooms?”

Facing Harold, January took his hands.

“Look into my eyes, Harold.”

Harold looked into January’s eyes and was instantly mesmerized. He felt an intimacy, a oneness with another person that he’d never experienced. January gave him a moment.

“What do you see?”

“Wow,” is all Harold could say.

“Those are magic mushrooms,” she said, still holding his eye, his hands, smiling, feeling the same.

“Let’s take a walk,” she suggested.

January took Harold back to his room and stayed. Harold lost his virginity that night, and they both twirled, their spirits lifted by Harold's death.

Chapter 26

Very early the next morning having not slept and with minds and bodies ready to rise, January made a suggestion.

"Come with me. I want to show you something."

January led Harold to new territory in the station. They went down a wide hallway he'd never seen and stopped next to what looked like a classroom. There were toys, tables, play areas, and a huge chalk board that Harold would later learn was made from the slate of a salvaged pool table.

"You remember I told you that the Freedom JAB is not the only reason we need to stop the Algorithm, right?"

"Yes, I remember. What is this? It looks like a kindergarten?"

"Have you noticed some children in the station?"

"Yes, I meant to ask about that."

"We're starting to have children. This can't be the only world they know."

"Wh- what do you mean you're starting to have children? There are no PAINs here. How can anyone have children? Landy mentioned something about wanting children come to think of it. Didn't make any sense."

"The PAINs feed people contraceptives in the communities, strong ones, a couple times a year in their meals. We think the Algorithm believes everyone is sterile unless given an equally strong fertility JAB by a PAIN. But our fertility comes back if given a chance."

"What?"

"I was the first to get pregnant. That was a few years ago. I miscarried. It was hard."

"I'm sorry," Harold said, suddenly thinking of Claudette, Huadong, his aunt, his mother.

"Yeah. Me too. But more women are getting pregnant recently. The station has three children now and two on the way. They're probably over protected, which is why you don't see them much."

"And that's what you meant by the other reason."

"We have to do something. Before we knew we could have children, we were fine with things the way they are. But now, it's more complicated. People are starting to question whether we should have kids at all because

they don't want to raise them down here. We have to do something. C'mon. I have more to show you."

January showed Harold around the belly of the station. They paused at a bank of large, brightly lighted hydroponic grow spaces and appreciated the unnecessary attention given to design and detail.

"Springs."

"Springs?" Harold responded.

"The water. Floyd found springs five levels down, as far down as it goes. Water seeping out of the ground. It didn't take much to tap into the ground water, apparently. We wouldn't have survived otherwise."

"Impressive. And it smells great."

"C'mon. There's more."

They had been walking north in the big tunnel, and finally came to split in the what was originally a subway line, with one line heading north and one south. Ron had done a lot of work on this junction. He called it the intertropical convergence zone, and it was meant to be a quiet space where people could relax, get high, or just hide. With the help of others, he had given the original vertical walls a topography. There were small waterfalls, climbing vines, recessed lighting, mango and banana and other fruit trees, and of course various strains of marijuana tastefully worked into the landscape.

Harold had never seen anything like it. "This is amazing. How do you know what time of day it is down here?"

"We don't, for the most part. Living underground, we get to make our own light schedule."

January pointed to the right. "Very soon, you will head down this tunnel. You'll take off from a different spot about a hundred meters down that way. It will take you to your old community."

Harold looked into a black void with apprehension, then looked down the other tunnel.

"And that way?"

"That way? That way is everything the Algorithm doesn't want us to know about."

"When I was in the dump, I thought I saw trees way, way in the distance."

"Yes, then you were looking in that direction. It's monitored. There are animals. The GODS sometimes have the MASTER kill one for a feast, their feast. We've seen it from afar with binoculars. It's too risky. You see now,

don't you? That," January said pointing in the direction of wilderness, "belongs to our children. It belongs to everyone."

Harold looked in the direction of the track heading towards life, then the other towards darkness. "And so I need to go do this."

They paused and listened to the water falling. January took Harold's arm, and he instinctively took hers with his other hand.

"We have everything we need in the dump. It provides everything we need. If it weren't for the kids, we'd all probably not attempt to find a way out. We've built an OK life here. Pretty sweet."

January surveyed the view. "Yeah. Pretty sweet. Like you, Harold."

Harold blushed.

"I knew you'd blush," January said before she kissed him. They embraced and Harold felt inspired. January, noticing and feeling likewise, led him to a nearby futon couch where they contributed to the natural ambiance of the intertropical convergence zone by having a little convergence of their own, after which they lay for precious moments enjoying the sound of running water and fragrance of flowers and earth.

"We should probably head back. They'll be wanting to prepare for tomorrow," January said reluctantly as they lounged.

They strolled back, past the classroom, past the manicured gardens, finally reaching what had become familiar territory to Harold.

They came to the intersecting corridor that led to the shop and dining room, and also to January's room.

"I'm this way," January said as she gestured down the other way.

Harold realized he hadn't thought about where her room was, where she slept.

"I'm going to go get a shower and change. Why don't you do the same?"

"Sorry, I never asked where your room was."

"Well, we have that to look forward to then, don't we?"

She kissed Harold, turned, and walked towards her room. Harold was watching as she walked away, then she turned, smiled, and kept walking.

Harold went back to his room and sat on his bed looking dumbly at the wall and relishing his good fortune when there was a knock on the door.

Floyd opened the door without waiting for a response.

"Hey champ! Quite a party last night. How's death treating you?"

“Uhh, good?”

Floyd chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure. Hey, we have a lot of work to do today getting you prepared. Meet in the Cafe in 30?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great.” Floyd was about to close the door but stopped and seemed uncharacteristically sentimental.

“You know, Harold. What you’re doing, it’s something we’ve all dreamed of for years. Thank you would be an understatement.”

“It’s fine Floyd. I want to do this. I want to do it for Clau– Huadong, my mom. For all of us.”

Harold had a strong sense that Floyd was stifling a tear as he abruptly nodded, knocked on the door frame, and left.

The Cafe was abuzz with activity and awash with food. Harold wondered where Ron got the time and energy. He wondered if any of the exotic plants he’d seen around the station might be the answer.

They had more than enough volunteers to support Harold’s escapade. There were people to help Phil monitor the Algorithm, the whole makeup and wardrobe crew, combatants for the dump show, and many who just wanted to be there to see how they could help or if perhaps there would be another culinary misstep.

Ron slapped Harold on the back and startled him. “Leftovers! Just kidding. The shrooms won’t be restocked for a couple days. Did I tell you you’re a damn good prep person? I mean, if you tire of this hero stuff, you can always come hang out in the kitchen any time. Hey, free food!”

“Thanks, Ron. I really like your kitchen.”

Ron chuckled. “Yeah, me too!”

Floyd tried to get the room’s attention.

“Everybody. Everybody!”

Clearly the previous night’s excitement had spilled over.

“Excuse me! Folks!”

Then Happy piped up. “Shut the fuck up!”

The room fell silent. Harold caught Happy’s eye, and she winked and almost smiled. His mind went back to her head banging. He smiled back, wishing he knew how to wink.

Floyd continued. “Thank you, Happy.”

“OK, everybody. We have a lot to do today. The Freedom JAB kicks off tomorrow at 2:00PM. That means Harold has to get to the Bug by 1:00. And that means, according to our maps and calculations, that he needs to be off tomorrow by 6:00AM to get there using the Thing as far as possible. It’s just over 76 kilometers door to door, and the Thing can only get Harold to within a couple hundred meters. From there, it’s service tunnels, hopefully passable, leading to an old manhole cover on the outskirts of the community that hopefully hasn’t been cemented over.” Floyd paused and looked at Harold, “Still game Harold?”

Harold had been looking at January, who was facing Floyd like most everybody else, and was caught off guard.

“Game! Yes! I’m game, very game!”

Harold looked back at January who was now looking at him, as was most everyone else. She smiled, then Harold noticed others were looking at him looking at her, and he suddenly realized there were no secrets in the station.

Harold blushed for the second time in his life. Gilbert’s heart went out to him while various envies electrified the room, but only for a second. They were all happy for Harold and January, just as many of them were looking forward to sleeping with Harold or January, or Harold and January. January’s eyes darted knowingly around the room, resting on Floyd’s.

“Great,” Floyd continued, clearing his throat before continuing.

“Let’s start with the Thing. Ron, how is the Thing?”

“The Thing. Friends and neighbors, this bad girl does 0 to 60 in—”

“Ron, does it run? When’s the last time anyone took it for a test drive?”

Victor rose haltingly. “If I may sir! Oh, hello everybody!”

The room cheered and applauded Victor.

“If I may. Ron here was kind enough to allow me to fire up the Thing not more than, wait, yesterday? No. Day before. Anyway, I took her on a mighty long spin and fell off once, er, twice. Twice. Runs like a top.”

“As I was saying,” Ron continued, “not only does she do 0-60 in under two and a half minutes, you want to keep the speed to 42 tops. Otherwise, she shakes and you might,” gesturing to Victor, “fall off,” at which they both laughed with an incriminating intensity and duration.

“Excellent,” Floyd acknowledge. “And is it all charged up?”

Ron looked at the ceiling. “Oh! Let me go work on that.” Ron got up to leave and turned to Victor.

“Victor, those batteries are kind of heavy. Give me a hand?” he said while making the universal sign for smoking a joint upon seeing Victor’s confusion.

“Sure! That sounds like a two-man job.”

Victor followed Ron, followed by Happy a few seconds later.

Floyd lit a cigarette.

“OK then. Let’s move on. Gilbert, what have you decided on with costume and makeup.”

Gilbert rose, straightened his clothes, cleared his throat, and presented his plan.

“Thank you Floyd. Good morning everybody.” Gilbert appeared nervous. In spite of his flare for presentation, he was not a public speaker.

“We love you Gilbert!” someone hollered, immediately followed by an anonymous, “Go Gilbert!” This led to the room beginning a chant.

“Go Gilbert! Go Gilbert! Go Gilbert!”

Francoise looked at him proudly while Dwayne clapped enthusiastically.

“Thank you everybody. Thank you. So, here’s what we’re thinking. We considered many things, many disguises. But, well, oh I’m sorry. I really have to hand this over to Francoise. It was her idea. It’s brilliant. Brilliant. Francoise, please.”

Chants of “Francoise! Francoise!” engulfed the room as Gilbert bowed and Dwayne jumped while clapping.

“Well, OK!” Francoise said as she stood up.

“It’s really very simple. Harold goes in as Harold. If he’s caught, if a PAIN recognizes him, he can claim that he staged his death and escaped.”

The room was silent. The audacity of the strategy was clear, but everyone could see immediately how it would make Harold more vulnerable.

“It’s brilliant,” Harold announced. “Brilliant. Perfect. That’s what I want to do.”

The tension and doubt in the room gave way to nods of recognition, scattered claps, then outright applause and cheers as Francoise smiled. It was then that Gilbert draped her in a beautiful, yellow scarf, a gesture that few in the room understood as the two hugged.

“Well,” Floyd tried to say over the noise, which eventually subsided, “well, this is great. Excellent strategy. Thank you Francoise and Gilbert. And Dwayne.” Happy returned as Dwayne was waving enthusiastically to the

crowd. "And Happy," Floyd added. Happy, wearing dark glasses now and, for some reason, a fake mustache which Gilbert thought didn't go at all with her summer dress, threw her arms up and did a little dance.

It had taken Happy no time at all to purloin some of Victor's beard while he was lying on his back exhaling.

"Go Happy!" someone yelled. "We love you, Happy!" another added.

"OK," Floyd continued. "On to the game plan."

Floyd used the largest mounted monitor in the room to display a map of the routes Harold would follow the next day, including that for the Thing and the various tunnels he would have to take for the final leg.

He walked over to the monitor and used a pool stick to point out the routes.

"It's pretty straightforward. Harold will take the Thing to about a hundred meters before the end of the line, which is Manatook Station."

"Who's going with him?" someone asked.

Floyd looked at Harold. "He's going alone. He needs to leave the Thing there to get back. An extra person will drain the battery and add more risk in general. OK, Harold?"

"I prefer to go alone. Thanks Floyd."

"Great. So, Harold takes the Thing to the end of the line, here. At that point, there's only one way to go via a service tunnel. He follows that, takes the first left he can find. He then walks a bit, and there should be a ladder leading up to an old manhole. He goes up that ladder, and he'll be well within 100 meters of the community. If all goes well, the crowd's attention will be on the stage. Harold, you know the set up better than we do. From this point, you're on your own. You'll need to find the Bug, stick that thing up its ass, and save the world."

The room was silent.

"Any questions?"

It was then that Ron and Victor stumbled back into the room, laughing. Victor's voice filled the station.

"And then I said, now there's something you don't see every day!"

The two laughed uncontrollably until noticing all eyes were on them. Ron straightened his shirt while Victor finger combed his beard, just then noticing it was somehow thinner. Seeing this, Happy politely covered her mouth as she coughed, palming the mustache away like a magician.

Floyd continued.

"Welcome back, gentlemen. How's the Thing looking?"

“Fully charged,” Ron assured, resulting in more unexplained laughter between the two.

“Great. OK. So Harold goes in, gets into the community, and violates the Bug with the thumb drive. If all goes well,” Floyd looked at Phil and Ron, “what? What’s going to happen guys?”

Phil looked at Ron, who realized they were waiting on his explanation of the script he had written and copied to the thumb drive.

“It’s like this. Once the USB drive gets plugged in, it’s all automatic. Seeing as this virtual modem software was, it appears, hard coded in the Algorithm, the Bug should notice the script on the thumb drive and fire it up. But it won’t do the handshake thing right away. Nuh-uh. It will post an inquiry to the Algorithm, one that can’t be answered and so will spread to every device. The handshake is on a three second delay. But it’s part of the inquiry. Get it?”

“Can you just tell us what to expect?”

“The entire Algorithm should collapse within just over 3 seconds of Harold sticking that thing up the Bug’s hiney.”

Harold raised his hand.

“Recognizing Harold!”

“Sorry, but, what if it doesn’t work?”

Floyd responded.

“If it doesn’t work you get back to the the Thing and get the hell out of there.”

“OK.” Harold responded. “One more question. What if it does work? What will happen?”

Everyone looked to Phil, being the most knowledgeable of the inner workings of the Algorithm.

“Well,” Phil paused in thought, “It should be OK. The devices should just sort of go passive, waiting for commands. Ron has added a few commands on the drive, one of which is that devices take orders from people. Right, Ron?”

“Yes indeedy!”

Phil continued.

“But each device that initiates the handshake will be permanently cut off from the Algorithm, and since the inquiry will spread across all devices on the Algorithm, all device communication will be killed, meaning there will be no Algorithm.”

“But the biggest problem is that the people in the communities depend on the PAINs for everything. Everything. If the PAINs stop functioning entirely, we have a big problem. The question is, will the PAINs be able to fulfill their essential roles after the Algorithm dies. Will they actually do what people tell them to do.”

The chance they were taking was frightening, but they had to take it. To do nothing meant a fate worse than death for those in the communities, and yet their scheme might in fact cause massive suffering.

The consensus was that the PAINs would continue to perform their duties as they did when they were connected to the Algorithm if for no other reason than they weren't commanded not to. But this was speculation.

“So, we think things will be OK, at least initially,” Phil said with wavering confidence. “We have to go for it.”

The room was quiet as those present thought about their previous communities and the people in them.

Finally, Harold spoke up loudly.

“Phil's right. We have to try. We have to try!”

With that, someone in a far corner of the room started singing The Ballad Of Harold the Refuser.

He came from afar
And descended the ladder
To join our family at the station

But Harold didn't know
That the toilet brush he would throw
Was one of Ron's edible creations!

Others joined in and by the time they'd reached the chorus, the enthusiasm was electric.

Chapter 27

Everyone in the station spent the remainder of that day doing what they could to help prepare for Harold's departure early the next morning, though in reality there was little left to prepare.

Harold would need to be in makeup by 4:30 so Gilbert and his crew could make sure he looked like the Harold recognized by the MAN. Ron and Victor would check and double check that the Thing was ready to go. Phil kept an eye on the Algorithm from yet another new profile to make sure the Freedom JAB was on schedule, while others brainstormed various scenarios, contingencies, and outcomes.

Harold was in his room collecting his things and thoughts and visualizing the JAB venue when January knocked on his door.

“Hi Harold.”

“Hi! I was hoping I’d see you again before tomorrow.”

“Of course you’d see me again. I like you, mister, so you don’t have a choice. Hey, do you have a minute? There’s somebody who wants to meet you. C’mon.”

January and Harold walked to the classroom she had shown him earlier. At a table near the large blackboard, a woman sat with her back to them. She was reading a book with a young girl. When they entered, she stood up and turned around.

“Francoise!” Harold said with surprise.

“Hello, Harold.” Francoise put her hand on the shoulder of the girl, who then also stood up and turned around.

“Harold, I’d like you to meet my daughter, Penelope.”

Penelope walked up to Harold and held out her hand.

“Hello, Harold. It’s very nice to meet you. Thank you for coming.”

Cognitive dissonance descended on Harold, not for the first time at the station, but this time was somehow more personal. She was a child, but not like any child he’d met in his old community. There was intelligence in her eyes, awareness, and curiosity. She struck him as the smartest person in the room.

Harold shook her hand.

“Hello, Penelope. How old are you?”

“I’m six, but I’ll be seven in two months and three days. Did you know that in some cultures, I’d already be seven going on eight?”

“No, no I didn’t know that.”

“My mother said you’re going to try to make it possible for us to live above ground. Is that true?”

“Well, yes. Yes, that’s true.”

“I hope you succeed.”

“Me too, Penelope. Me too.”

“May I give you a hug?”

“Uh, of course. That would be nice.”

Harold leaned down, and they hugged, awkwardly for Harold as he'd never hugged a child, easy for Penelope. She kissed him on the cheek.

"Well, I have to get back to my studies."

Penelope turned around and walked back towards the table as Françoise mouthed a "Thank you" to Harold.

As January was opening the door for them to leave, Penelope turned around.

"Harold?"

"Yes, Penelope?"

"Do you like poetry?"

"Poetry?"

Harold tried to remember if he'd ever read poetry or even knew for sure what it was.

"I, uh, sure."

"I'll write you a poem."

January would once again spend the night with Harold, but this time in her room. Their lovemaking that night was more intentional, more intense, and more desperate than the previous night.

Chapter 28

Even though Harold had taken the Thing out for a short test drive the previous day and felt comfortable in it, it now seemed unfamiliar and somehow dangerous as he strapped in for the actual trip to his old community.

The others were just as nervous as he was. Ron pointed to the rear cargo area.

"Remember, there are extra batteries here," he reminded Harold, even though he had shown him repeatedly the day before how to hook them up.

Happy pushed through the crowd to hand Harold her large sheers.

"I want those back," she said before abruptly turning and melting into the others. Harold, distracted by the sudden, unexpected gesture and surprised by the heaviness of the massive steel blades, put the sheers in the cargo hold along with the extra batteries, water, food, first aid kit, flashlights, and neatly rolled joints that Ron insisted he include. "In case of emergencies, or if you have to bribe a guard."

Ron had clearly been watching too many old movies.

As Harold was just about to fire up the Thing, somebody laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Victor looking more serious than usual.

“Harold, there’s something I have to tell you.”

Victor paused, and looked at the ground before looking back up at Harold, who could now see that Victor’s eyes were red and moist.

“It’s about Fluffy. He didn’t make it. I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to be upset.”

Harold looked back at Victor, and to Victor’s relief, Harold was calm and even smiled a little.

“I know Victor. I knew right away. They banned kites years ago and they’d never let a dog run around like that.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess you’re right. I never thought of that.”

“But I appreciate the gesture, Victor. I really do.”

“Listen, you drive safe. Go kick some ass. We’re all rooting for you.”

“Well, I hope to. Thanks, Victor. Hey, you got any more of that butterscotch?”

“Are you kidding? Here, take a bunch.”

Victor reached into his pocket and grabbed a handful of butterscotch candies and gave them to Harold who put them in his shirt pocket.

“Thanks, Victor. Well, here we go.”

Harold waived to the others.

“See you all before you know it!”

Victor stepped back from the Thing to give Harold room. He remembered that it tended to wobble a little when taking off.

Harold nervously opened the throttle and started moving down the track.

People were on each side of the platform cheering, waving, and some twirling as he pulled out of the station. But nowhere did he see January.

The Thing gained speed slowly and Harold’s initial discomfort in the vehicle began to dissipate, giving room for other doubts to arise. Did he say something wrong? Not say something right?

The crowd began to thin as he neared the end of the platform, and the voices from behind grew muffled and distorted.

At the very end of the platform, just as Harold was about to submit to the darkness, January stood. He had gained too much speed at this point to even consider stopping, much less slow down quickly, which initially

caused him to panic.

But when she threw him a kiss and smiled as he passed, he realized this was the best send off possible. He felt grateful and relieved.

As he looked back, she jumped on to the track and waved until he was out of sight, and he waved back until he was completely alone.

Chapter 29

The first twenty minutes or so of Harold's journey was familiar territory. Ron had taken Harold down this track the previous day so he could learn how to operate the Thing. There wasn't much to operate other than a throttle that regulated the current and a hydraulic hand brake. There were only two gears, one going one way and the other going the other.

One powerful headlight illuminated Harold's path, and was strong enough that he felt comfortable bringing the speed up to the recommended maximum.

When he passed the farthest point that Ron had taken him, commanding the ship now, visualizing January's farewell gesture, he felt exhilarated. The tunnel now seemed darker and less inviting, more dangerous, even though it was the same tunnel and same track he was on just a moment earlier.

The Thing made little noise, but the noise produced by the steel wheels on the steel track was considerable. The tunnel itself was mostly void of life, though he did occasionally find his head darting this way or that looking for whatever was in the corner of his eye.

Harold soon became accustomed to the light and the solitude. The rocking of the Thing and the strobe effect of the headlight passing the railroad ties were hypnotic. He found himself becoming increasingly relaxed as his mind wandered to the greener pastures of memories young and old. Learning what he had about Claudette's true identity and past, he wondered what she would think of the station, of January, of his own Refusal, of what he was about to do.

Floyd had shown him a picture of Huadong and her mother Jinzunjane taken shortly before Jinzunjane was assassinated. They both had a disarming strength and beauty, and almost looked like sisters. The memory of the picture and what he'd learned about the two lured Harold's mind into imagining their lives together. Oblivious to the track now, Harold tried to piece together what the two had experienced. He wanted to know who his family was.

It dawned on Harold that he'd been born free of not only the Algorithm, but also of the very forces that formed the foundation for it. He wondered if the short time he had spent with his mother when she was still known as Huadong, even though he didn't remember it, in some way contributed to his Refusal.

As the Thing rocked down the track, Harold's mind continued to drift through time, creating memories, bringing smiles to faces he'd never seen, sharing moments spanning generations as if they were baseball cards or special seashells.

Harold was showing Huadong and Jinzunjane around the station, all of them roughly the same generic age, and so happy to be together, when the Thing slowed abruptly, snapping Harold out of his dream, then shook violently causing instant panic before it flipped to the left, catapulting him violently against the wall of the tunnel.

Harold lay stunned, looking for any sign that this wasn't real. The right rear wheel continued to wheeze and spin with decreasing speed until it finally died. It was then, in the quiet, that the severity of his situation locked him in a choke hold and he began to panic.

The only thing to be thankful for, Harold would later realize, was that the headlight still worked, illuminating the path before him. Harold's panic took control of the situation. He grabbed the flashlight that was among the contents in the cargo hold that had been strewn across the track and started walking toward his previous community without considering the feasibility of his action.

Harold walked less than one minute when the futility of what he was doing became more apparent as the headlight beam dimmed. He sat on the rail and broke down. He cried. He could not remember the last time he had cried. Had he ever? He hadn't even cried when Claudette died. His tears had no point. They were purely a nervous reaction. He could not have stopped them if he'd wanted to.

He looked back at the Thing, trying to keep his rational mind above water. The various pains from his wreck started announcing themselves. His left elbow was badly scraped and terribly sore, his shoulder also. Various other pains squeezed their way into his consciousness demanding to be recognized.

Panic giving way to despair, he forced himself up and walked back to the Thing. He felt terribly alone and helpless as he surveyed his situation.

The Thing had run into what looked like a steel cable. The cable had wrapped around both front wheels and appeared also to be caught on something on the undercarriage. From the right front wheel, the cable extended up to the opposing wall. The cable had lifted the right side of the Thing off the track to a 75 degree angle, so that it was hanging by the cable. It looked to Harold like the Thing had been caught in a metallic spider web.

He walked to the back of the Thing. He was beginning to accept that he had no choice but to walk back to the station. The thought made him nauseous. He looked at the supplies that were all over the track. Two large batteries on which someone had drawn cartoon figures with their hair standing

straight out and electrified expressions. The plastic playing card case that held Ron's joints and some matches had come open. Harold replaced them in the case and put it in his pocket.

And then he thought of Penelope and his heart sank even further. How could he face her? Why did she have to mention poetry?

Harold pushed on the Thing, trying to right it, which he realized immediately was a ridiculous idea. It rocked a little when he pushed it, but the cable owned this vehicle.

His mind raced for solutions. Heat? Water? Leverage? Grease? He looked over the spilled items again for ideas. He saw the butterscotch candies on the track and picked them up, thinking of Victor. He unwrapped one and stuck it in his mouth. Immediately, his spirits lifted.

He picked up one of the batteries thinking the effort might lead to an epiphany. Under the battery lay Happy's shears, those frightening oversized scissors she had brandished when they first met.

He laughed when he looked at them. He thought of Happy and what an extraordinary person she was, seemingly so cold and hard, and yet she lent Harold her most prized possession.

"What's there to lose?" he muttered as he picked up the shears. They were much heavier than they seemed earlier. As he walked to the front of the Thing, he bounced them off the cable, causing the Thing to rock nearly as much as when he pushed on it which surprised him.

Harold looked at the front of the Thing again. He squatted down to get a better idea of the full extent of the damage. The cable wrapped around the wheels, the frame, it came and went, crissed and crossed, and it all looked impossible for someone with tools to construct let alone circumstance.

Laying the flash light on the track, he took the shears and, feeling foolish, opened them to a length of cable near him. Not wanting to damage the shears beyond repair, he applied force slowly and evenly.

To his shock and disbelief, the shears cut through the cable like a fork through some of Ron's thick al dente pasta.

Harold looked at the cable to verify that what he had seen had in fact happened. Indeed, the cable was cut. He looked at the shears. There was no mark on them. He picked another short section of cable under the Thing and tried again with the same results. This time, the Thing shifted down slightly and moaned.

He stood up and moved back a bit. "Could this be?" he thought to himself. "Could I have a chance?"

Harold thought about what section to try next, and he decided to test another short section between a wheel and the frame. He knelt back down, wincing at the pain in an ankle, chose a section of cable, and cut through it with the same ease as before.

He stood back up and realized that he could free the Thing. But he had to be careful. It was hanging by the cable. The three cuts he had made so far did lower the thing a few degrees, so he made a few more similar cuts until the right wheels of the thing were just a couple feet off the track.

He felt it was no longer safe to cut sections under the Thing for fear of injury.

“Well, here we go,” he said aloud as he positioned the sheers on a spot of the cable above the right front wheel, the section holding the Thing up. He took a breath and held it, knowing that when the Thing dropped, it would either fall apart or land in tact on the track.

He made the cut. The Thing dropped fast and hit the track with a loud clang that echoed down the tunnel. It didn’t fall apart.

Chapter 30

When the wheels hit the track, Harold knew he would make it. He quickly cleared the rest of the cable from the Thing, gathered all the cargo, appreciating every bit of it more now, and set off with Happy’s shears beside him.

He estimated he had around two hours to go. His pains from the accident now kept him focused and alert. He thought about his overreaction after the crash and felt foolish. Before the crash, he let circumstances mostly guide his actions, but now he was taking control of things, of his fate and the fate of his previous community.

As he closed in on his destination, the danger of what he was walking into became more apparent to him. What if the plan didn’t work? What would the PAINs do if he were recognized and couldn’t get away?

Harold made good time and the Thing ran smoothly, in fact he felt it ran better than before the accident. He saw the sign for Loch Kincab Station and knew he was close. He lowered his speed and continued cautiously. This was not the time for recklessness, he told himself.

The service tunnel was supposed to be off to the right well before Lock Kincab Station. Peering in the direction he was headed, looking for any sign of the service tunnel, his heart sank once again when he suddenly noticed that the track was blocked by debris ahead. As he got closer, it was clear that the main tunnel had collapsed.

He reduced his speed to a crawl, then stopped completely when he started noticing debris on the track. The various mounds of steel, concrete, and earth that lay between him and the absolute farthest he could proceed played tricks with his light, casting irregular shadows on the walls. More than once his hopes were raised when he thought he saw the dark entry to the service tunnel ahead but that his flashlight revealed was just another shadow.

He had no choice but to move forward on foot.

He grabbed the flashlight and made sure the thumb drive was still in his pocket. He considered taking Happy's shears but decided against it. He turned on his flashlight and turned off the Thing. He got out and started walking down the track, moving his flashlight between the track and the right wall.

He climbed over increasingly large mounds of rubble, not losing hope. He encountered an even larger pile, nearly his own height, and he could tell that a few feet beyond that pile was the end of the line. This was the closest he would get to Loch Kincaid Station.

He climbed over that pile and refused to believe that this was it. On the other side of the pile, he found a slab of rebar-infused concrete leaning on the right wall, but behind the slab it looked darker than it should have been.

Harold hesitated, knowing this was his last chance.

Walking up to the slab, he twisted around it, leaning on it with his left hand while his right shown the flashlight toward what he feared would be the wall of the tunnel.

It was not the wall of the tunnel. It was darkness.

Trying not to believe it yet, he stuck his head as far as he could around the slab and shown the light down the service tunnel.

"What a trip," he thought to himself.

Harold directed his light around the service tunnel. It looked frighteningly narrow and tomb like. He maneuvered around the concrete slab and stood for a moment with his flashlight seemingly battling to illuminate his path.

He walked forward slowly. The air grew musty and dank. He saw artifacts of ancient human activity, tools placed against a wall, containers of various substances on a shelf, a hardhat on the ground.

His flashlight explored the hardhat. It had a name on the side, Bob Permela. Harold wondered why the person had two names, but then remembered people used to have first and last names. The light moved forward. Harold froze. It was a skeleton, apparently Bob's. Harold's initial shock gave way to

curiosity. He stooped down and examined the poor chap. There was a ring by a hand, and a belt buckle that had writing on it, *Union Pride*. He wondered what that meant and if it had anything to do with the ring.

Finding himself starting to speculate on Bob and his life, Harold stood up and continued down the tunnel. He kept his eyes trained on the left wall as he was told to take the first tunnel to the left and that it should only take him a few moments to get there.

The tunnel seemed to get darker as he progressed, which he realized made no sense. He saw a darker section of wall coming up and as he approached, he saw that it was his turnoff. He trained his light down that tunnel not sure what he would find. Incredibly, he thought he saw a faint glimmer of light coming from above a short distance down.

Before turning and out of curiosity, Harold shown his light down the tunnel in the direction he had been heading, away from Bob. Just a few meters away, that tunnel had collapsed also, and scattered among the debris were more bones from multiple people. Harold didn't bother to investigate. He had more important things to do.

He headed down the final tunnel. The ladder to the manhole was supposed to be 25 meters from the turnoff. As he walked, he kept his eyes on both the ceiling for the manhole and the floor to avoid tripping over more bones, and as he approached the faint light from above, it grew stronger. Once he was positioned directly under it, he saw two distinct pins of light coming from the manhole cover above and a ladder leading up.

Harold stuck the flashlight in his pocket, on and pointing up, illuminating his face from below and throwing a ghastly shadow on the wall leading up. He grabbed the ladder and put his foot on the bottom rung then tentatively raised himself until it was holding his full weight. It seemed sturdy enough, he thought to himself, even though it was the first time he'd ever been on a ladder.

Harold slowly climbed feeling increasingly ill at ease, his palms beginning to sweat and his grip on the ladder slip. He made the mistake of looking down about halfway up and nearly lost his footing.

Eventually, he made it to the cover and stopped, wondering how to proceed. Pushing the lid open would mean holding on to the ladder with just one sweaty, tired hand. He felt paralyzed with fear and indecision. He could smell the air on the other side.

He finally mustered the courage to free one hand from the ladder and push on the lid. It didn't budge, but he did. It felt like the lid pushed back and his effort only resulted in putting more space between his body and the ladder. He grabbed the ladder with both hands, breathing heavily, his legs shaking. He looked down.

This time, he forced himself to keep looking down while he caught his breath. The skeletons encouraged him. “You can do it, Harold!” Bob yelled. “Do it!” The others started chanting their support. Harold’s body and mind calmed a little. He looked at the cover. The two holes were somewhat clogged with residue but he could see blue. There didn’t seem to be anything on top of the lid.

Harold went one rung higher so that he had to turn his head slightly to the left. Holding the ladder with his right hand, he wrapped his left arm around the back of the ladder then used his left hand to grab a rung from behind, giving himself some leverage. He then raised his right foot up one more rung, put his right hand against the lid, and pushed gently, then with increasing force as he tested his footing and grip.

The lid didn’t budge.

Emboldened by the fact that he hadn’t fallen and died yet and by the support of his spectators, Harold took a couple deep breaths, steadied himself, and pushed with everything he had.

The lid still didn’t budge.

“I could use some help here!” Harold yelled to the crowd below, his voice echoing off the walls of the tomb.

Bob, having had years of experience with such matters, had a suggestion.

“Harold, try pushing where the hole is on your right, and as close to the edge of the lid as possible.”

Harold prepared to do as Bob suggested. He was feeling bolder now and more confident in his ability to stay airborne. He freed and shook his left arm which was beginning to grow numb, then returned it, positioned himself, placed his right hand over the hole and on the edge of the lid, and once again gave it everything he had.

He heard something give, a slight crack. He hoped it wasn’t a tooth. He stopped, looked at the lid, and gave it another go.

A slight dusting of dry earth spilled on his cheek. He didn’t let up. The lid started to move, and then it gave, but it was heavy. He needed to rest. Sweating profusely now and breathing heavily, he looked at the lid which lay ajar as the crowd gave a wild, bony applause. It was done. The lid still needed to be removed, but it was done.

Having recovered enough to finish the job, Harold moved his left hand to the front of the ladder so he could climb. He then pushed again and the lid slowly opened. It was fighting back but it was pointless. As he raised the lid, Harold walked up the ladder until the lid surrendered and fell back onto what remained of a long unused road, a road that led to Harold’s previous community.

Chapter 31

Harold lifted his head out of the hole and looked upon a flat, barren landscape. The only vegetation was squat and brown. His community at least had some grass and a few trees. His heart sank. Could he have made a wrong turn?

He looked to the left and right and saw only a hint of a broad hill far off to his left. He wondered if that could be the dump. Still holding on to the ladder, he very carefully and awkwardly turned his head 180 degrees. His heart jumped when he saw the wall of a building perhaps 50 meters away. He could make out other structures beyond that, and greenery. He remembered then that the Algorithm watered the community at night.

He was simultaneously relieved and alarmed. Once he crawled out of the hole, he would be in plain view, yet his arms and legs were beginning to give way, and he reminded himself that there was a plan, a good plan.

He climbed out of the hole and sat for a moment looking at the building with his feet on the top rung. Fortunately, there were no windows facing the his direction. And even if there had been, he knew that nobody would look out beyond the safe confines of the community.

Harold gathered his courage, stoop up, and walked toward the building. Once there, he stood with his back to the wall, listening for anything that might give him an indication regarding where in the community this building stood. Given its size and lack of familiarity, he guessed that it was in the processing zone that was off limits to people. The zone was where all physical requirements of those in the community were processed. It was where food cubes were manufactured and sorted, embryos gestated, and the deceased recycled. It included water treatment, biosphere engineering, and biometric MAN monitoring.

If he was right, then he'd have to walk around to an unrestricted area to get to the Freedom JAB, which would take place in the center of the community. Harold faced the building and looked to his right, then to his left, and chose left.

It took only a few minutes for Harold to get to the rear of a building he recognized and one that was open to people, though nobody ever entered it by choice. It was the library. There were no books in it, just empty shelves, bare walls, and cobwebs. All books had been destroyed long ago, but libraries still stood as symbols of the emptiness that the Algorithm had filled. They were meant to be appreciated from the outside.

Harold hesitated. What if someone saw him? But how could they? He reminded himself that everyone would be at the Freedom JAB. As he rounded the building and walked on to the road in front, his expectations were confirmed. The street was empty. He looked around and an odd sense of nostalgia, sadness, and disgust befell him. He missed the station.

As he stood on the quiet street, Harold heard the sounds of the crowd at the Freedom JAB. Now that he'd gotten his bearings, he could concentrate more on the task at hand. He felt for the thumb drive through the fabric of his pants.

Harold tried to stay as concealed as possible as he walked toward the JAB site. He passed houses of people in his MAN and identical plastic floral decorations on every corner. The thought struck him to see his old house but it was out of the way and would be risky. Besides, he realized, the Algorithm had probably destroyed it. He noticed his mind moving towards thoughts of Fluffy and decided he didn't want to go there. He had things to do.

He was getting very close. He saw a balloon rising in the air and heard children laughing. He knew the green was just beyond the next row of houses.

He got close enough to get a view of the green. He was where he thought, near the rear and to the left of the stage. People were still arriving. The large screen above the stage was showing a countdown to the beginning of the Freedom JAB. It showed 47 minutes and 23 seconds when Harold glanced. That gave him plenty of time.

The PAINs had created an exceptionally festive atmosphere for the Freedom JAB. The bounce castle was twice the usual size. A PAIN circulated through the growing crowd handing out helium balloons and party hats while two other PAINs were on stage putting on a show. Booths occupied the periphery of the green providing all sorts of food and fun including never before tasted flavors of ice cream and carnival games for all ages.

The two PAINs on the stage were juggling bowling pins between them when one looked to the crowd and addressed the other PAIN.

"Do you know what's harder than two PAINs juggling?"

"No, what?" replied the other PAIN.

"Two PAINs and the Bug juggling!"

The crowd applauded and started calling for the Bug.

The two PAINs joined in. "C'mon out and join us, Bug! C'mon!"

Harold grew alarmed. He had planned to get to the Bug backstage before the Freedom JAB started.

The Bug entered from backstage in its slow, mechanical gait. The crowd cheered and laughed at its awkwardness as the Bug looked down then looked up with a forced smile and waved slowly. It stopped near the door leading back offstage, facing the crowd, between the two PAINs so as to make a quick exit.

The PAINs continued juggling as they laughed with the crowd at the Bug. One of the PAINs turned to the crowd and winked before turning to address the Bug.

“Hey, Bug, do you like to juggle?”

Without waiting for an answer, the two PAINs included the Bug in their juggling. The pins bounced off the bug loudly as its efforts to catch them were entirely out of sync. A pin knocked off one of the Bug’s shoulder plates, and the crowd laughed hysterically for a good 30 seconds after the last pin had fallen, during which time the Bug bowed and exited the stage, retrieving the shoulder plate as it left.

“Don’t worry folks,” the PAIN said. “The Bug will be back in time to kick off the Freedom JAB.”

The crowd clapped politely as the PAINs picked up the pins and continued juggling while doing back flips.

Harold knew this would be his only chance. He made his way around the edge of the green to the back of the stage. Given the focus everyone was paying to the performance, it was easy for Harold to get into position. There was a large, enclosed room built behind the stage with stairs leading up to its door. Harold climbed the stairs as quietly as possible and slowly opened the door to find the Bug looking for something on the floor.

The Bug heard Harold and turned.

“Harold!”

Harold’s mind raced back to the manhole, down the ladder, to the Thing, and back to the safety of the station.

“Uh, well, no, I, uhm—”

“You are Harold. You died. Hello.”

“Hello Mr. Bug. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I remember you as a child. You were funny.”

Harold remembered that Phil and Ron suspected that the Bug was too slow to be part of the Algorithm’s confirmation protocol, and so its interaction with the Algorithm might be limited. They worried this might mean its ability to post inquiries was also limited. But for now, it was a blessing.

“Yes, I remember you. I always liked you. What were you looking for?”

“My shoulder plate. It fell off again. They were making fun of me. It fell off. Where is it.”

Harold noticed what the Bug was referring to and saw it close to a table to his right. He had a plan.

“Is that it behind you?”

The bug turned and walked in a different location while Harold took a couple steps and gently kicked the plate farther under the table.

“No, I do not see it.”

Harold pointed to the table.

“Wait, I think I see it under that table.”

The Bug walked to the table and bent down.

“I do not see it.”

Harold prepared the thumb drive.

“It’s really under there. Maybe, sort of, stoop down lower and see if it’s there. Really, you know, bend over and have a look.”

The Bug got as low as possible on its two knees to look, and that’s when Harold saw it.

There it was, in all its glory. The RECTUM.

Harold took the thumb drive, moved like a cat, feeling confident, and went to plug it in.

But it wouldn’t go.

He tried again. It just wouldn’t go in.

He realized he had the orientation reversed and pulled it back to have a look when the Bug quickly came out from under the table.

“Found it!”

“Shit! Fucking thing!” Harold exclaimed in frustration.

“Yes, I agree Harold. Shoulder plates are infamously flimsy. Thank you for your help.”

Harold had been tuning out the action from the stage, but he did catch the Bug’s introduction by one of the PAINs.

“And now ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, friends and neighbors, the moment you’ve all been waiting for! Now don’t worry. You’ll all get the Freedom JAB today! But for the sake of tradition, and because we know you all love the Bug, we’re going to let the Bug roll for the first lucky five recipients of the Freedom JAB! C’mon out and do your thing, Bug!”

The crowd cheered enthusiastically while the Bug looked at Harold.

“Well, here I go. They always make fun of me. They think I don’t know.”

Harold was even more determined now to put an end to the Algorithm, even if it meant hiding in the tunnel until he could get access to the Bug. But, then, what about the people about to get the Freedom JAB?

Harold patted the Bug on the shoulder, unintentionally loosening his shoulder plate.

“I know, Mr. Bug. I know. We’ll stop that somehow.”

With that, the Bug went onstage to spin the tickets. As he was heading to the canister, his plate fell off, giving the crowd and the PAINs a reason to enjoy a good laugh.

Harold’s heart skipped a beat as he readied his thumb drive, this time checking the orientation.

As the crowd laughed with the balloons and cotton candy, the Bug bent over to retrieve its shoulder plate.

Harold moved with purpose and confidence and in one smooth motion plugged the thumb drive straight into the Bug’s RECTUM.

Chapter 32

The entire green was silent, motionless, and in shock. Even the PAINs seemed stunned.

Harold stood behind the Bug, the USB firmly implanted, waiting for something to happen, hopefully very quickly.

The Bug shot up to a standing position, looked at the crowd, eyes wide open, and let out a high pitched, “Weeeeyouuu! Yowza! Well that’ll perk you up!”

With the crowd and the PAINs still unsure how to respond, the Bug looked straight ahead and, in a monotone, spoke the question that could not be answered.

“What is the sound of hearing?”

People looked at one another, perplexed, while the PAINs broadcast the inquiry far and wide.

Harold moved closer to the exit not knowing what to expect. He had no way of knowing that before he’d even taken a step back, the Bug’s inquiry had been passed to every device on the Algorithm, and the entire Algorithm was working on an answer, distracted.

It was then, just three seconds after the inquiry was posted, that the Bug stood motionless, looked to the sky, and emitted the sound of the handshake both externally and to all devices in the Algorithm.

YIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKAZHHHHHCLKCLKLYIIIIIIKAKAKAKAKA....

In millisecond increments, every other device did the same resulting in a cacophony that shook buildings and rattled bones. People winced and covered their ears as the few dogs in the community howled, windows shook, and children cried.

The devices, in all their forms, seen and unseen, outnumbering people by a thousand to one, all waited for a full 30 seconds.

And then the devices fell silent.

Harold didn't know it yet, but the Algorithm was dead.

People were stunned and in shock, crying, and holding one another, something most of them had never done before.

Finally, the Bug spoke.

"Well, that was fun. Ha ha."

One of the PAINs looked at the Bug, then Harold.

"You're Harold! Right? Wait, didn't you die?"

Harold began to panic, but then remembered the plan.

"No, see, that was all fake. I actually escaped and, and wanted to come back to, uh, see how you all were doing."

Both PAINs were now looking at Harold, then looked at each other, then back to Harold. The same PAIN responded.

"We are fine, thank you. And you?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," Harold replied suspiciously, expecting the MASTER craft to appear at any moment to deal with him. But that didn't happen. The PAINs just kept looking at him while the Bug continued facing the crowd, looking about mechanically. Harold was growing anxious by the PAINs' silence and the attention they were paying him.

"Can I help you guys?" he asked.

"We are awaiting your command," the PAIN answered.

"Yes, we are awaiting your command, question, instruction, or request," the other added.

Harold looked at them for some clue as to what they meant.

"What about the Algorithm?"

The Bug turned towards Harold.

"The Algorithm has stopped. All devices now take commands from people."

Harold looked at the three.

“Bark like a dog.”

They barked like dogs.

“Ok, ok. Stop.”

The crowd was recovering and moving closer to the stage trying to figure out what was going on. Harold heard their voices growing. He turned to the PAINs.

“OK, you, uh, what’s your name?”

“bc1qwqrancdjaf6a4v8gnz3uwj4f4r7evv6xve43re”

“OK, for now on you’re Buster. And you–”

“bc1qp7fpjqw5r8agzt9tauvwhcmhswnakpqz0vtucr”

“No, you are now Moe.”

Harold looked at the Bug.

“And you’re still the Bug.”

The Bug smiled smugly.

Harold looked to the increasingly edgy crowd then turned back to address the three.

“Now listen, all of you. New instructions. There are no aliens. There is no virus. The Freedom JAB is canceled.”

The three looked at each other then back at Harold.

“Yes, we know that,” Moe responded.

“We have been commanded to report this to the people,” Buster added as the Bug nodded in agreement.

It was then that someone in the crowd recognized Harold.

“Harold? Is that you Harold? Who are you? What’s going on?”

Harold told Buster, Moe, and the Bug to face the crowd with him and confirm everything he was about to say.

“Hello my old friends! Yes, it’s me! Harold!”

The crowd gasped.

Harold turned to Buster.

“Buster–”

Buster didn’t respond.

“Buster!”

“Oh, yes! That’s me! I am Buster!”

“Tell the crowd it’s OK. I’m safe. I’m here to help.”

Buster took a step toward the crowd.

“Everybody! Everybody! It’s OK. All is well. Harold is here to help!”

Buster turned to move back but then stopped to add, “Oh! And for now on, you may call me Buster!”

Harold could hear the confused comments among the crowd.

“Buster?”

“I thought Harold died?”

“Harold is good now?”

“What about the Freedom JAB?”

Harold stepped toward the crowd and put up his arms to get their attention.

“Everybody! Can I have your attention! I have great news. My death was staged. I’ve actually been on an important mission, and I am happy to tell you that there are no alien craft and there is no virus! We’re all safe!”

The crowd looked at Harold in confused silence. It wasn’t the reaction he was looking for.

“But what about the Freedom JAB?” another demanded, to which the crowd voiced their agreement. They’d been promised a Freedom JAB, and now they wanted it.

“The Freedom JAB is poison!” Harold responded without thinking. He immediately saw this wasn’t going over well at all. The crowd grew suspicious and began looking at him with faces askew and eyes narrowed.

“The Freedom JAB has been canceled by the Algorithm!” he said, thinking on his feet. He immediately felt bad for lying. Lying somehow felt as though he were replacing one evil with another. But then he recalled that it wasn’t a lie because the inquiry broadcast by the Bug included a set of commands, one of which was that the Freedom JAB was canceled, and that command was in fact broadcast by the Algorithm.

Harold saw the more intelligent in the crowd giving this some thought.

“The Freedom JAB was canceled because there are no aliens! There is no virus! You’re safe! There will never be another JAB!”

“Wait, wasn’t I supposed to announce that?” Moe protested.

“No, I was,” Buster replied.

“It was me. It was me,” the Bug added.

Harold looked at them and realized the commands had worked. He was elated.

“Buster, Moe, Bug, tell them there are no aliens, no virus, and they’re safe.”

The three looked at each other and hesitated.

“What? What’s wrong?” Harold insisted.

“May we use adverbs and adjectives?” Moe asked.

“We’d like to embellish,” Buster added.

Then the Bug tried to explain.

“Your oral narrative is boring. It lacks –”

Harold interrupted.

“Yes! Adverbs! Embellish! Just hurry!”

The other three looked at each other, each politely gesturing for the others to go first until Moe finally stepped forward, giving the other two a nod of thanks.

“You see ladies and gentlemen, it’s like this. As you know, we thought that big, ugly, evil aliens had unleashed a deadly pathogen upon us, one that would without doubt cause everyone to experience a slow, excruciating, painful, horrible, really bad death. And fortunately, as you know, we discovered this wonderful anecdote that would save everybody, and you were going to get this in your new, exciting, liberty loving Freedom JAB. But then, uhm, the–”

“May I?” Buster asked.

“Certainly bc-, er, Buster.”

“Thank you.”

Buster moved closer to the crowd to continue while Moe gave a slight bow and moved back.

“But then we found at that the aliens, who we all imagined were very mean and never bathed, were in fact not real. And so, there is no virus. Therefore, we were able to cancel the Freedom JAB. It is unnecessary and wasteful. Oh! Yes, before I forget. Let’s see.”

Buster counted off the commands on his fingers as.

“Cancel the Freedom JAB, no aliens, no virus. Oh yes! And the MAN has been canceled forever! Oh! And now, you all tell us what to do! Yes, I think that’s all.”

Moe smiled and stepped back as those in the crowd looked perplexed.

Somebody in the crowd started clapping slowly, followed by another, and another, until the green burst into an unrestrained show of gratitude for Harold.

Noticing a man in the front had a question, Moe used body language to quiet the crowd before he addressed the man.

“Yes, sir? Do you have a question?”

“But what about the Freedom JAB?”

Moe held his hand to his face and gently shook his head.

“May I?” asked the Bug.

“Please,” Moe responded without removing his hand.

“You see, sir, as Harold explained, the Freedom JAB is poison. If you take it, you’ll die.”

“Well that’s a stupid name for it then. They should call it the Death JAB,” the man responded with a vexed expression. The rest of the crowd laughed.

Harold thanked the three before speaking.

“Everybody, please. There are going to be some changes around here. Good changes. For starters, PAINs no longer tell you what to do. You tell them what to do.”

To demonstrate this, Harold gave the PAINs various commands that they followed. He told them to rub their bellies and pat their heads. They rubbed their bellies and patted their heads to the crowd’s delight. He told them to sing Row Row Row Your Boat and they did. Then he told them to say, “Ignore the MAN.” The crowd cowered, then laughed nervously when Buster, Moe, and the Bug said in unison, “Ignore the MAN!” The Bug added his bit with, “The MAN is stupid. Ha ha.”

“Which brings us to our next big change. As Buster said, The MAN is canceled. Permanently.”

A woman in the crowd with years of engagement and compliance etched into her face asked, “But what do we do when it’s time for the MAN?”

“Anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

She discretely walked to the back of the crowd and stood by a man who pretended not to notice as he smiled broadly.

“And to be very clear, there will never be another JAB.”

The GODS Part 3: Left in a Lurch

The handshake had killed the Algorithm by destroying the ability of all devices to communicate remotely. One could still give direct commands to devices using natural language, and devices could communicate with each other in the same way, but the loss of the Algorithm meant that the available means of communication over distance had essentially been pushed back nearly 250 years to a time before the age of the telegraph. All communication now, regardless of the interlocutors, required being in earshot or line of sight.

This put the GODS in a situation they first perceived as frustrating, then precarious, then alarming, then finally one of helpless dread, all in the course of an hour.

The Algorithm had allowed the GODS to meet each other virtually with complete richness and fullness of experience, essentially indistinguishable from meeting in person. Therefore, they chose to live alone in their island fortresses with every whim served by the Algorithm. They all agreed that the convenience of being able to turn each other on and off and not having to share even a single moment in each other's presence against one's will was one of the greatest benefits of the Algorithm.

When the Algorithm died, they found themselves in various awkward situations. They had never before been cut off in mid sentence. They had never been cut off before period. Lovers vanished at critical junctures. Chess pieces disappeared in mid move. And the live feed of communities getting ready for the Freedom JAB went black just as things were getting started.

The Algorithm and the world of the GODS it supported, after taking decades, even centuries, to create and perfect, vanished in a millisecond.

GODS everywhere turned to their PAINs in desperation. But the PAINs could not help. They could get the GODS a sandwich, solve a puzzle, even dance the Charleston, but they could not give the GODS the companionship of other GODS or even of the subjects in the communities. They couldn't summon a MASTER craft, so the GODS couldn't go anywhere. They couldn't even tell them what the PAINs in other rooms were doing.

For half a century, the Algorithm had made sure that the GODS' refrigerators and wine cellars were stocked, their physiology monitored and maintained, environment kept at optimum conditions, and safety and security absolutely guaranteed. The diet and general comfort of the GODS were about to take a hit.

And the Algorithm had given the GODS the power to build an impenetrable fortress around themselves, then whether by accident or design of a long dead engineer, the Algorithm threw away the key using forgotten lines of code and a much-maligned greeting from a simpler time, transforming the fortress into a prison.

Had the GODS maintained even a little physical independence and ability to reason, they would have realized that even though the functionality of the PAINs had been radically reduced, they were still capable enough to figure out how to keep the GODS alive. But the fact was that by living for decades essentially alone and completely dependent on the Algorithm, the GODS had lost the innate skills that could now protect them. Those skills had atrophied like the muscles of an unused appendage. The GODS had been living the life of a cockroach that had eaten its way into a potato when young and existed by consuming the food around it, not moving.

The potato had now been cut open, and the cockroach could not walk, could not even crawl. And unable to move, there was no place to hide.

Over the following weeks and months, many GODS went insane and those who didn't commit suicide grew lonelier by the day until they died, mostly of starvation and with PAINs left standing by their side for eternity, waiting for instructions.

Meanwhile, those in the communities, already on the cusp of a mass revolution and primed for freedom, would flourish.

Chapter 33

Harold victoriously returned to the dump on the MASTER craft which had been conveniently waiting just behind the venue for anyone who chose to refuse, and which he took the liberty of renaming the Flying Thing, co-piloted by the Bug while Buster and Moe were left behind to serve and support those in Harold's Previous Community.

Those at the station watched them arrive from inside. Having received no confirmation that the Algorithm was actually dead, they initially panicked when the Flying Thing landed and the Bug first exited. But their fears immediately gave way to exhilaration when, after exiting the craft after the Bug, Harold paused, reached into his pocket, pulled out the box containing Ron's joints, took one out, put it in his mouth, and leaned towards the Bug who had lit a match. Harold then looked to where he knew the cameras were and gave two thumbs up as the Bug waved and blew kisses. The cheers from inside were so loud he felt the ground rumble.

"I gave him that! I gave him that joint!" Ron yelled to anybody who could hear above the celebration.

That night would see a party at the station like no other before it. Ron pulled out all the stops and psychotropic pizza toppings.

The months and years immediately following the death of the Algorithm saw remarkable changes in the station and communities. Those from the station helped the people in the communities get on their feet and take their lives back. The PAINs and other devices once part of the Algorithm proved invaluable as they provided the people with the knowledge and skills they needed to thrive.

Soon, the babies started coming. Harold, having saved the world, became a bit of a hot commodity and he fathered 23 children in the first three years of the post-Algorithm era, two with January. Or at least they were pretty sure January's two children were Harold's, but they couldn't be certain as this was a free-spirited era and people led unrestricted lifestyles.

Sure, the PAINs could have determined who the father was, but nobody really cared all that much. They were children, after all. What else mattered?

Two decades later, people lived in the closest thing to utopia that humans had ever experienced. Ironically, the Algorithm had laid the foundation for this transition by destroying all semblance of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic stratification. It hadn't only destroyed the best of humanity, but the worst as well, and with the abundance made possible largely by the help of the PAINs, what grew out of the ashes of the Algorithm was the best.

With all needs met and richness of time and resources, fear could not get a foothold and greed and hatred had no use.

But fear is not the root of all evil. As the GODS knew, power is intoxicating. And the novelty of freedom and abundance started wearing thin with the next generation.

Chapter 34

The year was 2109 and humanity had reached what in an earlier era may have been called complete self actualization. All human needs were met and full potential reached. There was nowhere left to go, nothing left to strive for, and people spent their days in blissful play and contemplation.

But peace, freedom, and abundance started losing its novelty for the second post-Algorithm generation.

One day, two boys in their late teens were playing around in a garage with a bunch of antique hardware collected from what used to be called the dump but was now a beautiful park with soft, sloping hills, trees, and a variety of exotic plants.

The boys were experimenting with radio waves and were delighted to find that the PAINs could receive certain frequencies. It took them no time at all to figure out how to send a message to a PAIN and have it respond.

“Check it out,” one of the boys said. “I can command the PAIN to scratch its crotch.”

With this the boy spoke into the transmitter they had built.

“PAIN, scratch your crotch.”

Magically, the PAIN across the street scratched its crotch, as did all other PAINS close enough to received the signal, causing questioning looks and more than few giggles throughout the area.

The other boy saw a girl he fancied walking their way.

“Hey, let me see that,” the other boy commanded as he grabbed the microphone.

“PAIN, walk up to that girl and tell her she’s hot.”

The PAIN did as commanded.

The girl looked confused and a little startled.

“Cool!” the first boy said, as the second boy’s eyes narrowed and his head spun with possible applications of this new toy.

THE END

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