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About 6400 Words

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We Can Think It For You

By A.T.

I sense acceleration and deceleration as our automated driver corners tightly. The vehicle's windows are coated with a special filter known as a 'Humean Shield' producing feeling similar to a sensory deprivation tank. But no filter is perfect – given the number of turns, we must be cruising through the 3000 square kilometre Yagi Fields, a vast bamboo network of antennae wider than the Tunguska Event. Each one is pointed at orbital reflectors designed to redirect their immaculate signals back to Earth; tirelessly lathering the surface of the planet with putrid filth.

Cheeseman starts to speak. I can barely see his mask in the dusk of the interior. "Can't we just start here? Could put these fuckers out for days, even weeks." There is immediate tension in the cruiser. Lord Zouche and I glance at each other, *zeir* body language is perfectly blank. Before the inevitable happens, Cheeseman stops and looks at a massive tome from his bag. It's worn to shreds, more tape than paper at this point, and must weigh several kilograms. It matches his third generation Hume-Suit. He flips through expertly, scanning the pages like a flipbook. His finger compresses the page precisely, stopping the whirl dead.

“There... let me see.” He scans for a second, and taps his finger a couple of times. “Ah I see... right, okay nevermind.” So his suit is leaking but the Code stayed tight. He deftly finds a nozzle on his suit and inserts an innocuous stick, before giving himself what I suspect is a pain shot. His entire body spasms uncontrollably for a few minutes, before relaxing back into his shadowing corner. Got to hand it to the codemen, they keep it tight – crazies actually think a social control tool from the Gulag will keep them clean. Second order thought kicks in almost instantaneously: Do You Trust Cheeseman Or Will He Compromise the Mission? I reflect. I carry out around twenty thought-experiments. When do I trust him; what scenarios; with whom; how do I treat him; is this different from how I treat others in similar positions; is this operation a confusing factor? Results: my doubts about his cleanliness are not implanted. Source, most likely ‘Hyper-Rhetoric 2: Modes of Resistance’ from year two at the University. Okay, so we’re safe – my doubts aren’t a slope. But I’ve been conscious too long, I’ve run too much thought. Lord Zouche notices and nods: I self-medicate. Time to check out.

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Whilst under, Nicholson drifts back to his early teenage years. He is coming home from the University; this is his final semester and must choose whether he wants to wipe his memory to become an Übermonk (‘Tabulising’). As he takes a shielded taxi to his home in the suburbs he carefully weights up his options, cosily unaware that this choice has already been made for him, *will* be made for him, in a few minutes. Following dream logic, he never leaves the taxi, nor does he make the short walk up to his front door. Instead, the scene cuts immediately to the door opening and the exciting revelation inside. His grandparents have come to welcome him home. Unfortunately they have been affected by some new social fad, probably from a memetic bomb or a wasteproduct of hyper-social engineering. His grandfather has undergone extensive plastic surgery to look just like Peter Parker. Even his voice box has been swapped out so that he sounds like the 17 year old superhero. Of course

his body is still that of a 68 year old steel worker, a hardened man who loved his grandson and never let anyone tell him what to do. His grandmother has also visited the operating table, but decided to go for the more popular Mickey Mouse. Giant fleshy appendages are skilfully sown to its head for the ears, fake fur glued on to its skin, a substitute nasal voicebox. Both of them are very pleased with their new looks. Nicholson feels this is entirely natural, a reaction so surprising that he abruptly wakes up from his dream.

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I wake up sometime later. Everyone is talking - the plan must've entered a low-probability branch. This is dangerous. "Zouche, update me in 5." "Road blocked. Manual override needed." Shit. We're fucked. Time to run some thought experiments. I begin running scenarios methodically. First I visualise the different branches and assess their likelihood and relative cost; then I cross them off by one according to my criteria; finally, I sanity check them using our pre-planned decisions. A solution. "Okay, here's the plan. We set up a Humean Shield between us and the driving seat; I'll go forward, lower the external shield and check where we are. Then I'll report back to you all." Test of faith. Cracovia flips her coin to decide. Good. 'X', so she's in. Lord Zouche is an Übermonk so will take some time to run through zeir thought experiments. Cheeseman is scanning again, next to him, Neozelandese and Stoic Toaster, fellow codemen doing the same. A few minutes pass. Cracovia starts sketching on a little notepad with a piece of charcoal. I count my fingers. Zouche cracks zeir knuckles, meaning they've finished. Cheeseman's finger stops, he pauses - Zouche and I tense up. A nod. Okay, he's in. Stoic Toaster also nods. That just leaves Neozelandese, the junior codeman. She's found the relevant line in her codebook but is hesitating. Her eyebrows wrinkle, she tosses it to one side. A codeman never tosses their code away. It can mean one thing: her code's been cracked. Before even Zouche or I can react, before the tome hits the ground, Stoic Toaster fires a needle into her head. She stays sitting,

perfectly still. Smiling. She looks calm, but we know the truth: her brain has been scrambled. Our decision-making process revs up again. Zouche and I run thought experiments; the remaining codemen scan, a sharp ‘ding’ as a coin is flipped.

I’m fumbling towards the driver’s seat. The plan’s fucked, and we know it. We pretend I can somehow use my 2nd or 3rd order analysis to survive long enough to look, but the truth is I’m probably going to be hacked; that after even a few seconds of exposure I’ll want to get out of the cruiser and go for a stroll. And that’ll be it for me. Of course the disintegration of my identity is fine for the rest: all they need is the cruiser rolling. If I’m just a cog in that process, so be it. Understandably I’m a little more hesitant. Before I climb through into the cockpit Cracovia gives me a coin. I smile, though I know she can’t see it. It trembles in my grip and I suspect through trained introspection not all of it is fear. I haven’t seen the landscape in 10 years, the truly undiluted cultural killing grounds. I’m about to look the basilisk in the eyes. Grasping the coin, I clamber over the thoughtlock and collapse into the seat. There is a mushroom of dust. It settles on everything, tracing winding patterns over the buttons. I spend a few seconds looking at the swirls. What do all these controls even do? I breath out slowly and feel my heartrate lower. People used to enjoy things like this. Driving. Thinking. I feel like crying. I think back to my grandparents, and my corporate sponsor. I miss them all. I want to go back home! Training kicks in, I distance myself. I must lower the screen. From Hume Level 5 to Level 2. Only then can I check where we are. I hit the button, bypass several rounds of ‘are you sure? Are you *really* sure?’ before Level 5 goes down, Level 4, Level 3, and now Level 2 is revealed: I see hazy shapes. But not hazy enough. I see just how civilised we are.

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Moments before Nicholson gazes at the downtown sprawl, he briefly thinks of a high school prank in school. His memories are not totally accurate – they have been ruthlessly

edited during the Tabulizing process. This one was considered acceptable to keep, albeit at a low level of detail. If Nicholson tried to concentrate on this flashback he would notice faces, colours, anything outside its tight physical confines, and much of the surrounding context are missing. But he won't so it doesn't matter. Nick is in Computing class, they are learning about the 'RatioSouls', super-complex AI developed sometime in the past. He's not paying much attention though. Instead, he's obsessed, like the rest of the class, with what is going on outside. Someone is dancing about wildly on the school pitch. Oh! It's the school principal, who has taken off all her clothes and seems in good spirits. How funny. With hindsight, she is clearly the victim of a Do-It-Yourself Programming Kit. This was several years before such kits became cheaply available from corner shops and cafeterias. Instead, they were exclusively found in the remote markets of Southern Somewhere. Accordingly, Nick knew exactly who had done this – Aretha Secondname, an enigmatic and discrete girl who, and Nick believed this was a little known fact, was actually of immense means. Aretha and Aretha alone could afford such a nifty gadget. These kits were already sophisticated, they would scan the web for data on the target and displayed, using general laws of human behaviour, the necessary images and material to trigger a line of soul-searching in the victim, culminating in the desired behaviour. For the principal this was seemingly a desire to be more spontaneous and cool, triggered by random pictures of cacti, fire hydrants, flash mobs, and crying old people. Her sole testimony about this unusual event was: 'Worth It.' Nick suspects this testimony, not the dancing or her subsequent retirement, was the punchline of Aretha's prank.

Or perhaps it wasn't? Nick remembers smiling at Aretha afterwards. She laughed and he laughed back, relieved she loved him and he loved her, and that at least love was perfectly natural. Because Nick always considered this a sad memory, it escaped the Tabulizing process mostly intact.

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My eyes are immediately affronted by ugliness, randomness, a hyperprofusion of material, a submersion in abundance. Even though it's blurry at level 2, I can tell we're on a motorway suspended above the virulent sprawl of urban chaos. There is no tonal centre, no meaning. The buildings are haphazard, blossoming like orchids, some bulge painfully, pregnant with human activity. Community centres connect to crematoriums, purposeless buildings intrude on parks, shopping malls combine with Buddhist retreats. The people are diverse. Some are impossibly beautiful, unimaginably charismatic. CGIs, computer generated idols, unfold, unwind, corkscrew wildly on screens – quite appealing in their own, fuzzy way. Others seem horrific, mutilated, average, unexpected. Hundreds have had plastic surgery to look like, as far as I can tell, Marge Simpson. Others have modified their bodies to be more duck-like. I've heard stories of Monks coming home to find their grandparents have deranged their faces to look like cartoon characters, or to see their partner has eaten most of their own body. The balls of people pattern with the bulbous, oozing buildings. There are groups worshipping public restrooms like shrines, others having sex with drainpipes and stroking them with pillow talk. I've read about this too: these urban and genetic transfigurations are the products of memetic weapons misfiring, essentially eidetic shrapnel lodged in the collective psyche. When weaponised super-crazes fail, they leave pockets of bizarre, uncontrolled growths of obsessive behaviour. It manifests as mutation both in the mind and body of society. A huge range of memories hit me: all the toxins I had suppressed by becoming an Übermonk. I think back to my childhood, how I worshipped my grandfather. How we played football, and how we paid slaves to clean our bodies. How he... My reverie is interrupted: black monoliths with regular forms, straight lines, parallels jump out in the horizon. Organisations which can sustain autopoietic closure from the lethally unstructured cultural fields. They persist whilst all else morphs. The towering trapahedron is our target: the

Department for Water and Graphic Information Patterns & Co. Further in the distance, past the vast craters of cleansed outer cityscape, I see the Yagi Fields. Those silent needles are the core component of the MERLIN network, a vast arrangement of satellite dishes used by Autopoietic Systems to pump litres of sludge into the cultural veins of society. Every moment they pepper the surface with high-spec memes to engineer the populace. And not just Earth. It is said the Fourteen Square Kilometre RAVIN dish is aimed at space. It bombards outwards at the settlers on the moon, those renegade degenerates, with their Humean Shields set to 8. They'll be saturated too, with hyperads, hyper persuasion. Everyone can take part in acceleration. The more the merrier! I'm losing it. Shit. Shit. Calm DOWN! Now's the time to do the thing: use my training. Why am I here? Why are we here? I must get the cruiser going. What has caused us to stop? That's it! We've run someone over and the automated car has stopped to call an ambulance. No wonder we've stopped – the Health Service bonded with the *Tanizaki-Borstall Corporation* years ago. The system's fritzed –reset it! I glance at the screen – takes me several attempts as I keep looking out the window. I hit the keys in sequence H – A – H. Towers, love suckers, detergent, Buy More! Buy More! No! No! A – L – O. Almost there, Buy, why do I feel like dancing in the rain? Arondian Sex Games where have you been all my life! Yes! Yes! S – E... oh God, gnhmmm, one more, uh, uh, uh R! Done. We'll be back in motion in 5, and the window can be closed. The window can be closed. But why? But I want to keep looking. I see everything, it's all so sexy, it turns me on, I'm excited, driven, completed – the people are beautiful. I want to be part of this profusion. No. This is wrong: quick, Quick! 3rd order desire help me now: Okay (1) I want to keep looking, and (2) I want to want this, but (3) do I want to have this kind of unreflective desire to keep loving, to love to no end, to love and love? No I don't! I don't I don't I don't. Act now! I laugh, I slap my thighs. Hooray for acting rationally. I flick my wrist at the controls, racing the levels back up: Hume Level 3, level 4, 5 is back. I've made it – I survived the basilisk known as daily life.

Now what? Übermonk training suggests Lvl 2 Exposure requires immediate Tabulizing with an ethanol-compound injection. Lord Zouche, as my partner monk, ought to have initiated it, but zey seem to be delaying. I have some time with my own thoughts. I suppose I could wipe my own memory, but should I? The information I've learned is valuable – I've possibly seen more of the outside world than any currently Clean monk. And I've stayed Clean, more or less. I could use this for the mission, increase our odds of success. I could run some thought-experiments, but I don't see the point. Normally I'd have anxiety if I didn't carry out this ritual but I feel okay. In fact, if I have this level of resistance, perhaps I should lower the screen again, just to get another look? I could get even more valuable data. Just a quick little peek wouldn't hurt anyone. I shimmy to the door, but as I do a coin falls out of my pocket: Cracovia's. Hm. Coin. Code. Monk. Sex, hunger. CGI, worship. I need to be careful. I want to take a quick peek. I can sort out my. Wait. Fuck. Okay what do I do? Memories of my training. Shit. What do I do? Humuna humuna, humana. MMMM. It's essential recon to go outside, but equally should I skip analysis? It'll take hours to complete... maybe I could flip the coin and if it's X we wipe? How do I commit? I feel like I'm running out of time. Okay, act now think later. I attach the injector to my temple. "Computer, Inject if this beautiful coin lands on X" Okay, precommitment. It won't land on X anyway, I mean the odds are really low. Fuck it, we'll just go for it. I flip. No! NO! Fuck, fuck, it can't be X, I'm not going outside. I cry, my face streams with tears, Boohoo I want more daddy! Damn! Catch it Catch it Catch it! I miss. I don't see what it lands on.

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Nicholson is back in dreamland. This time it is ethanol induced and his thoughts are empty. It is a deep and restless slumber, punctuated by a couple of loud bangs. Although neither he nor his University Tabulizer realised it, these bangs are echoes from his childhood.

They are the sound of long-range missiles cleaning up parts of the city infected with dangerous memes, pursuant to S23 of the Crime and Civil Order Act someyear.

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I wake up in the same place as last time. My brain is frazzled, I have the world's worst hangover. Lord Zouche is looking at me.

“Recount last day.”

My mouth dries. It's black, pitch black. They've all turned on me, Stoic Toaster has a needle gun out. What do I tell them?

“Sorry LZ, I've got nothing.”

I wait for the end. Cracovia nods in my direction and takes a coin out of my hand before twiddling it, the equivalent – as far as Chancers go – of a smile. “Good.” We're back on track. The vehicle has the steady lurch of acceleration and deceleration as we corner tightly. I look around. I see the same stupid crew, each one leaning back in the tight confines of our insulated box on wheels. Minus one?

“LZ, where is Neozelandese?.” A pause.

“Code cracked. 100% Clean.”

Damn. Must have been a leak in her suit. We cruise along for another few hours. Cracovia checks the explosives. Other than that small hiccup, it's been a fairly stable trip. The computer navigator informs us we are several hundred miles from our main target. Perfect. Absent-mindedly I take a quick look at the map. The gridscape of urban sprawl is quite impressive. Apparently a long time ago, maybe two or three months, there used to be lines carving the cities up, limiting cultural transfusion. Of course most of the space is empty now, thank god. Children have become unpopular in the wake of automated jobs. In University they called it the Third Economic Evolution. Feudalism was eaten by capitalism, and now capitalism is being eaten by something else. The silent outsourcing of the proletariat,

maintained by a combination of suicide pact crazes and a manufactured distaste against reproducing. It's an entirely 'free' choice, maintained by bombarding us with just the right images and stimuli. I know this is a cynical stratagem, that my disgust at the thought of children is insolubly connected to the masses being superfluous, but I don't care. It's a personal choice after all isn't it? Why don't I want to have children? Is it because the world is a mess? When did I deci... There is no point on starting analysis. I know I should complete my thought analysis, and that not doing so it tantamount to having my code broken, but I can't bring myself to. All Übermonks have their blindspots and this is mine: not reproducing has been the default for as long as I remember Mickey Mouse, and I like it that way. I was made to like it that way and I like to like it that way. And so the cities empty out, leaving only the Monolithic Systems and their pure ideological DNA.

A beep, we are almost there. The team starts to stir. The plan is to deploy Cracovia, myself, and the two remaining codemen with the high explosives. LZ will stay behind and pilot the unmanned drones. The cruiser has stopped near the *Department for Water and Graphic Information Patterns & Co* Ratio-Soul power centre. We look at one another, LZ holds my hand, I hold Crac's, she holds Cheeseman's, who holds Stoic Toaster's. We say in unison: "Let's make a real choice." As we do so, a coin is flipped, code books are scanned, and LZ and I embrace as we run through our thought experiments one last time. The mission starts. The explosive squad and I jump out the cruiser and sprint towards the mesh gate. Crac and I have the bomb, the codemen have the drone cases. Thankfully the *Department* has cleansed the area of life due to its extreme paranoia of contamination, so we can leave our Humean shields at 2 without much fear. They have extensive anti-air turrets, fearing kinetic orbital strikes and bombing runs, but relatively little in terms of ground defence. They're confident no-one can escape their Yagi Field broadcasts. That's their blindspot: they lack the conviction someone could discipline themselves enough to avoid selling out, just as they all

did. Of course they're wrong and we're about to prove it. As we run we kick up dust and sand, avoiding the half-buried residential buildings, the rebar, steel reinforced concrete wreckage of what seems to be an office building. Wind whips the sand into waves, coating our visors and padded heat regulating trousers. Up ahead we have three obstacles: an electric fence, reinforced doors normally used for deliveries, and patrolled corridors leading to the core. Once we get past the doors we'll deploy the drones and LZ will clear out the corridors. As easy as eating bread. ClunkClunkClunk as we pound over a buried steel door. We're getting close now. The gate can be cut with laser snippers. Simple, Quick. I can tell Crac's smiling, I don't know how but I do – the maniac lives for risk. I glance up: my vision is dominated by the black geometric object representing the *Department's* headquarters. We're like little gnats in comparison, bumbling and jumping about. Who knows how many are installed in its massive neuronal columns – a few decades ago they were the biggest employers for miles, today it could be a ghost ship of automation. And surrounded by these systems, human veins pumping into the mechanical, lies our target. We're at the gate. Crac and Cheeseman whip out their snippers. They begin cutting, open a nice wound we can infect. No more closure for you, the riff raff are bleeding through! Once the cut is complete Crac stops. We all pause. I wipe a few specs of sand off my visor. The wind whistles and we freeze. She laughs and takes out her coin and positions it carefully on her thumb. I hear Cheeseman and Stoic Toaster inhale sharply. “No. Way. Right now? Right fucking now?” Ding. As it's in the air the others hold their breath, desperately praying to the Code. The coin lands and she pauses for a second. Stoic Toaster twitches. Hand up. It's an X. They sigh. I sigh too for good measure. It's a necessary performance: you see, Zouche and I have Crac fixed. Her (modified) coin lands on X when we want it to, ready to be revealed as a free choice every time. That way we get an extra drone to use on the ground. Crac whoops and high-fives Cheeseman, “you crazy son of a bitch Crac, had me for a moment there” I can't

help smiling as she winks and slaps my shoulder. Just the morale boost we needed before breaching the delivery door. Gotta hand it to you Zouche, you're a genius.

Jogging again. Past the gate is more rubble, a few pieces of grimy, mechanised trash, more concrete objects half obscured by the rising grey desert. The blast door is pretty close to the gate, there's just a brief jog over. The odds of a disaster are ti... sand and rock explodes outwards. We all dive behind a brass statue of Albert Einstein as the automated turret peppers us with magnetic flechettes. We turn up our Hume shields on instinct. Although this is clearly for drones, there's no telling what kind of memetic weapon the *Department* might throw at us. Thankfully it has the intelligence of a lawn sprinkler. We crouch low, turning down our audio input to filter out the loud rings as Einstein is perforated. The flechettes curve round wildly following the laws of magnetic attraction and repulsion, some off the mark, others coming centimetres away from our feet. "Nicholson, what do we do?" That's the problem with codemen and Chancers – incapable of original action, too reliant on typified ritual. Thankfully I know exactly what we do. "One Second! Let me run some thought experiments." I have to make this look real, like Zouche and I haven't planned for this scenario in advance. "Fuck thought experiments! Let's just use the Code, ss 6671, para 2, part a." Excellent, they have chosen the subsection on 'self-sacrifice.' What will happen is that Cheeseman will look at his code and conclude he has to sacrifice himself. Crac will flip her coin and therefore join him. One will distract the turret, the other will blow it up with one of the bombs. The likelihood either will survive is quite low, hence why we have Stoic Toaster as a back-up. Okay, let's see it play out. Vrrr, pages flip. Ding. "Shit." "Okay on the count of three. Three, two, one" ThudThudThud. Whir of gunfire. An explosion. Silence. Stoic pops her head over Einstein's holey crotch. "Nicholson, I think Crac's unharmed but Cheeseman... he's gone" Stoic slowly shuffles over and picks up Cheeseman's holepunched code, holding it tightly to her chest for a minute or so before burning it to ash with the snippers. "And so the

code remains unbroken, as it was in life, as it stays in death. Cheeseman you were a true codeman.” Stoic looks genuinely sad, I pause for a second to give her space. After this little performance is done I look round to see Crac spinning her coin on her thumb absentmindedly. The maniac survived? Lucky bastard hah! I hug her unexpectedly for a few seconds before we take shelter to run the procedures.

Our humane shields are still turned up high so everything is a fuzzy blur. But you can't miss those reinforced doors. It's like they put them there just to make it clear where to put the payload. Two colossal ceramic slabs with lead and uranium lining and high shock absorption, the *department* wants to make sure nothing gets through to them, memetic or otherwise. But we have other ideas: one of our bombs is biological, specially engineered with bacteria who love the taste of that door. Another one of Zouche's useful skills: bio-engineer, and Ubermonk extraordinaire. We set the bomb in place using aerosol glue from a couple of cans. Okay, now to get out of the blast range bef...

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Nicholson is knocked unconscious by the force of the blast. Nicholson, Cracovia, and Stoic Toaster (who's actual name is Charlotte) did not realise the bomb's detonator had been miswired by its creator. It was quite a simple sabotage, all it took was recalibrating the countdown to be half a second. As Nicholson lays there, Humean shield totally wrecked, his mind drifts back one last time.

Nick has finished his training and firmly believes he has been saved. Now it's time to save his brother. As before, his dream starts in the middle: he is confronting his brother in the local coffee shop. His brother is all suit and tie, no soul: a sell out to the core. He is shouting loudly at a barista, a diminutive man who looks frightened and hurt. These feelings are understandable: Nick's brother is someone who he used to like and considered dating for a while. Looking at him now, the barista is reminded of his own father who left him when he

was little. Though he could not vocalise this explicitly, he has always felt an inexplicable attraction to partners he senses one day might leave him. In complaining to his friends about these repeated abandonments – for the abandonment, if not inevitable, is made so – he can relive that childhood trauma and attain catharsis. He is what we would call a B-7661 Sub Class 889. Nick's brother, for his own part, has his own hangups. As he shouts, he looks back on his time with the barista and is filled with a small kind of pity. Whilst Nicholson came to believe he needed to purge his memories with the University and train harder to become immune to persuasive conversation/conversion, his brother chose instead break through to the other side. Only by reconfiguring others can he get back the sense of control he irretrievably lost when he came home that day to find his grandparents' new look. He is probably what we'd call a B-5542, sub class 882, or 881 maybe, but hey, let's not over-analyse.

So Nick's brother was shouting at this barista, furiously, and dream-Nicholas kicks the door open, though of course that isn't what actually happened. They argue for a bit, the 'pragmatist versus idealist' debate plays out, before Nicholas suddenly turns the tables on his brother in a way no-one could have expected. He reveals, and this is his favourite bit of the dream, that his brother's entire life, his journey to becoming a suit, his character arc with the barista, are all manufactured. All of his choices, his feelings, his beliefs, his struggles, have been carefully curated by a small group of elites very far away. Worst of all, they aren't doing it because he useful or important – they do it because he's fun to watch as he goes through this little dilemma. T.V, Nick explains, has become boring – the elite now prefer to socially engineer drama and let it play out in front of them. A suggestion here, a nudge there, and you can create sublime moments with unmatched realism. Nicholas believes he short circuited the performance by doing this, and that even though his brother didn't quit his ambitions, he somehow managed to give him a brief moment of realness. For some reason this is also a sad memory.

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I wake up with a ringing head and blurry eyes. My visor's cracked, Stoic Toaster lies in several places around the door. Crac is coughing but otherwise seems in a similar state to myself. With luck like that I could kiss her. We look at one another and pull our Hume-suits off. She's covered in dirt and blood, and is clutching that coin like a monk prayer beads. I'm in a pretty sorry state myself, covered head to toe with bruises and topped off with a fine film of anti-ceramic bacteria. The bomb is corroding the door but hasn't finished. There's still time to turn back. She pauses. I see her face for the first time – I haven't seen another human without a humean shield in decades. She's entirely average looking, no additions or twists. Beautiful. The coin is expertly threaded through her fingers, she looks out from the side of her vision.

“O we call it off?”

Our eyes meet: she snorts and I can't help laughing.

“Quit it. That's my religion you know. I take this coin very seriously.”

One corner of her mouth is turned up, and for a second I really want her to flip the coin. Before I can analyse the thought, the door 'opens.' Looks like our decision has been made for us. We grab the drone case and hurl it into the room, once within the border its restraints fire off with clouds of black smoke. Six small objects shoot out with a loud whistle and curve down into the building, spiralling before breaking off into different corridors. We see punctuations of light as they clear our path through the labyrinth, distracting security, disabling alarms, sabotaging circuitry. It's basically now a straight shoot to the core, through the soulless behemoth to the only true mover at the centre. The twisting tube-like hallways are featureless, cold, probably made of some kind of silicon or polymer. As we walk we leave a trail of dirt and grime, our own personal mark on this otherwise immaculate superstructure. Minutes pass; it feels like we search endlessly. Without features we can't track how deep

we've gone in and the silence exerts a brutal pressure. Crac and I start telling each other stories of our past. She tells me about how she got reprogrammed in high school to date the chemistry teacher. I remind myself students being programmed is extremely rare. The scary thing was that it felt so good at the time. There was no external force, no overwhelming coercion, it was simply the right thing to do, the natural choice. It felt like love. But it was an ugly relationship, and she only broke free when she stumbled upon the then recently formed Chancer movement. She flipped a coin, and with that took control of her life. We debate for a bit about the differing philosophical roots of Chancerism and the University System. Crac is piercing, she rebukes my dogmas on second-order desires, about choosing what you want to want, by saying you can't choose those desires, and even if you could, you couldn't choose the third degree ones and so on.

“It's randomness all the way down isn't it, why not speed things up and flip a coin? If I'm choosing between an autop system and cosmic luck, I know which one I'd go for...”

I guess she sort of has a point, but accepting her reasoning would mean the destruction of my worldview so I must repel it. I deploy a defensive thought-terminating cliché.

“Now's not the time for this, let's agree to disagree.”

After I said that our chat died down a little. Thought successfully terminated. I remember my lessons clearly. I chant the Dogma. Persuasion is Violence. Teaching is Control. Listening is Suicide. Our steps echo down the hallways, those surfaceless panels. We've yet to find any rooms, or any directions to the main core. I'm not too worried though, being with Crac and her 'cosmic luck' is comforting. I smile. We round a corner and stumble into a wide open room. Ahead is a small desk, dwarfed by the magnitude of the surrounding emptiness. Sitting behind it is...

“Zouche!” “What are you doing here?!”

LZ laughs. “Nice of you to drop by, I thought it would be fun to meet you myself.”

His name badge reads ‘Minister and CEO for Sewage Treatment and Marketing.’ The bastard runs this place. He must have been boxed: where a big system gathers enough data on you to predict and condition all your responses. You don’t even realise it has happened: ice cream still tastes like ice cream in the box.

“Well, it’s been fun, but I’m getting a bit bored of this scenario” LZ pulls out a needlegun.

“Okay Crac, here’s a fun dilemma, will you save Nicky?”

The gun flips towards me, the coin starts spinning in the air. I know what’s going to happen, I try to push her away but it’s too late: she’s dived between us before the coin has even landed. A sharp whistle of air as the gun fires and Crac is lobotomised. Moments later the coin lands somewhere. I don’t see the outcome but hear the rattle as it wobbles on its side before tipping over. My vision blurs. I prepare to start running but the needle gun is now pointed at me. LZ walks around his desk, gun steadily tracking my brainstem, and comes over.

“What a shame, but you and I both know she would always save you don’t we?”

“Bastard!”

LZ smirks and pulls off his Hume-suit. Inconceivably reckless. I have a lethal earworm which should be enough to terminate us both if I play it. Before I can decide, the mask slips off. Underneath is. My god it’s my brother. That scumbag did it, he got behind the controls.

“That’s right Nicky, I’ve come for my revenge and now I will finally show you what it means to be a real man.”

I scream and go for the audio grenade. The lights flash bright and the room is brilliantly illuminated.

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Nicholson and his brother look around, confused. Myself and the other directors of this installation walk out arguing.

“Zouche is his brother? Are you kidding? Who decided that, it’s like a cheap soap.”

“Can’t believe you killed off Cracovia and Nick, totally shipped those two.”

“Dunno, I felt this has potential for poetic circularity given their standoff in the café.”

“Predictable. Lame. Worst Tuesday Night Ever”

A shame, I guess the whole thing with the brother was a bit arch. Nicholson looks at me and asks me some questions. I don’t respond as there’s no point. I know in advance what questions he will ask, just as I know that no answer I give will be satisfying. It’s devilishly difficult to get these scenarios to be fun. And we must have our fun whilst we can— we’re running out of time after all. Somewhere out there people are describing us from a distance as we do Nicholson; our habits, childhood traumas, choices, decisions, our core philosophies and beliefs, our schlocky casual conversation: all there on a spreadsheet. And there are people watching them, and people watching those watchers, and so on and on, until we get to the apex, a pack of creatures who have reprogrammed their identities so extensively and ruthlessly that they barely resemble humans at all. Soon they’ll outsource me and my friends, our pathetic little pocket of drama-lovers, with a system which can more efficiently redirect potential terrorists. But for now they’re happy with us: we sold our freedom for our little games, and they knew we would. They ensured we have nothing else. They hired us because we swallowed the poisonous truth that any thought process can be manufactured for some purpose or another. Feelings of free will, purpose, the ineffable, of the indominable human spark, sublimity, the divine. Made and Shipped daily. Most pathetically, they knew this wouldn’t be a dealbreaker. We just like our games too much. Maybe we’re already automated.

But self-reflection is depressing. Let's get back to part II: Nicholson and his brother discover a wider conspiracy and join forces. What do you think? Does it sound fun?