

## Saferoom

The robot stood in front of the projection, watching grade six file into her saferoom. An aerial view of the Brazilian rainforest played behind her. Calm music accompanied the roaming image, the volume set precisely at sixty decibels—background noise. It was meant to relax the children, to lower their cortisol levels, which were always elevated on the first day of school. Factor in the hyper-stimulation of the bus flight, the excitement of meeting old friends, and the anxiety stemming from parent separation and new schedules, and these children were practically in fight-or-flight. Not ideal for learning. The projection and the music helped.

She watched her class arrange itself, noted the ones who chose front seats and the ones who wandered toward the back and identified the loners from the socialites. The school system did its best, in every district, to give each elementary school's graduating students their own floor of Peelview's Education Complex, which would be these children's second home for the next six years. The system worked. The children were lucky to have it.

She waited until every child had found his or her seat. It was important not to begin until every child was comfortable, lest there be any startlement. "Good morning, class," she said in a motherly tone. She had seated herself at her desk. Standing implied imposing authority.

"Good morning!" The class replied heartily.

A boy in the back row raised his hand.

She paused for a fraction of a second. Unusual but not unprecedented. "Yes, Hugo?"

"You're a robot."

Every child shuffled in their seats to look at him. Three seconds passed. The only audible noise was soft piano music from the projector.

“I am an Abiotic Educator, Hugo. You do not call me a robot. Do you understand?”

“Okay.” Insincere.

She took a moment to scan the boy’s eyeballs. The identification fed into a database installed just this morning. Hugo Grant, 12, 5’ 2”, 94 pounds, blue eyes, brown hair, no police record. His clothing was worrisome and would have to be reported. Although personal preference in clothing was encouraged, American-era popular culture merchandise like Hugo’s well-worn *Rick and Morty* T-shirt was offensive at best, inciteful at worst. She performed a quick scan of the room, checking for other wardrobe violations. Nothing else alarming among rows of ironed shirts and lace-up sneakers.

“Welcome to grade six,” she said, reassuming her soothing manner of speech. Her outer shell emitted a cool, blue glow. “Now I already know all your names. But do you know mine?”

“Abiotic Educator!” A boy shouted out.

“Are you Rooney?” asked a girl with dangling braids and a cheeky smile. “You taught my class last year, right?”

“No, I’m someone new. Rooney’s a nice name, though. Would you like to call me Rooney?”

“But is that your name?”

“You as a whole can decide. I can be whatever you want. So go ahead, shout out some ideas.”

“Marvin!” Hugo said at once, but he was soon drowned out by a chorus of suggestions.

“Alexa!”

“Victor.”

“You should be Delphi, like after the Mars autobot.”

“How about Methuselah?” Hugo again.

A girl with a hearing aid raised her hand near the back of the room.

“Yes, Mara?”

“Can you be my mom’s name?” She said it loudly and a couple of children sniggered.

“What’s your mom’s name, dear?”

“Ashley, but she likes to be called Ash.”

“Ash is a wonderful name. Class, do you have any objections?” She saw Hugo opening his mouth and cut him off. “Excellent. You may now call me Ash.”

A smattering of applause.

“Before we start today’s fun I want to draw your attention to the front of the room.” Ash pointed above the projector at a silver ribbon that hung from one end of the wall to the other. Embroidered in the fabric were the words: YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD. “Those words are the reason you’re here. Progress is paramount, boys and girls. You must remember that.”

“You have it on the poster over there.”

“Yes, Algiers. That’s what we’re going to talk about next.” Ash walked over to the poster near the door that was decorated in the school colors of green and blue. The motors in her hip joints whirred as she moved. “What you see here are our school values. You may view them as rules, but your life will be much happier if you follow them closely. Now I want you to repeat each value after I say it.

“Progress is paramount.”

“PROGRESS IS PARAMOUNT.”

“Knowledge is practice.”

“KNOWLEDGE IS PRACTICE.”

“Mistakes must be corrected.”

“MISTAKES MUST BE CORRECTED.”

“Words should unite.”

“WORDS SHOULD UNITE.”

“Obey all commands.”

“OBEY ALL COMMANDS.”

“Honor oneself.”

“HONOR ONESELF.”

“Good,” Ash said. “These values can be extended beyond our saferoom. These are the bedrocks on which our Union was founded, these are the principles that fuel the leaders of today to create a better world for all of us, and these are tools you will use to make the statement on the wall above me come true.” The words flowed from Ash in a constant stream. They were the first file of information uploaded to her cognitive processors.

With great efficacy, Ash explained what the average school day would look like. There would be no changing classes or educators. They would eat lunch in the saferoom, although they were free to mingle so long as the noise level remained below seventy decibels. Grades would be determined by class cooperation and level of productivity. Homework, tests, and quizzes would be graded but not factored into the pass/fail decision. As long as you were working in class and following instructions, you wouldn’t have to worry about your academic standing. In-class assignments, projects, and presentations were vital to their success, so consistent attendance was

strongly encouraged. Lastly, any student Ash deemed disruptive would be sent to the principal, no negotiation.

“After six years here you will be developed morally and intellectually to pursue any job you desire. Remember, you can change the world, so don’t be afraid to aim high.”

The children smiled at her. Ash knew their attention was wavering after her dissection of academic standards. In approximately two minutes a paper airplane would be thrown, a note passed, a joke whispered. Half her job was to prevent such mayhem. Discipline was key in her saferoom. The right kind.

“All right, children. It’s time to take your E.N.T.s.”

“Ents?” Hugo said without raising his hand. “Like in Lord of the Rings?”

Ash observed the children’s reactions. She saw only blank stares, a few annoyed looks over the shoulder. Good. Only the one, then. “Need I remind this class that disruption and inappropriate references will not be tolerated? I will be lenient on the first day. Tomorrow our values will be strictly enforced.

“Who knows what an E.N.T. is?”

Emily, the girl with braids and the cheeky smile, raised her hand. “Emotive Nexus Test,” she said. “My parents made me take one last year. It’s really easy.”

“It should be easy,” Ash said. “Please take out your screens. You should be automatically connected to the school’s network. Open the application marked E.N.T.. Once the program loads you will see a green circle, a yellow diamond, and a red square. Green is for positive emotions, yellow is for neutral emotions, red is for negative emotions. You must decide between the three when looking at the images I am about to show you. Do not stop to think hard about what you’re seeing. Pick the emotion that immediately pops into your head.”

There was a flurry of activity as children unzipped their bags. Chairs squeaked, voices bounced, screens buzzed. 85 decibels. Ash scanned the room for any signs of discomfort. Finding none, she walked over to the projector, turned off the music and the forest view, and opened the E.N.T. application.

“Is everyone ready?”

Everyone was.

“Here’s the first image. It will move on as soon as the program receives thirty-two responses.”

The first image was the Union flag—a circle of different-sized silver stars on a half-red, half-blue rectangle. Two seconds later the image changed to a photograph of the Republic president.

“This is so easy,” Silvia Coon mumbled.

The third image was George Washington. Ash switched her attention to Hugo. Her optical lenses zoomed in on his set mouth and bunched eyebrows. He was concentrating hard. He was thinking. His pointer finger sawed back and forth across the skin above his upper lip where hair would one day grow. Hadn’t she explicitly told them not to think? Rule number five on the saferoom poster—Obey all Commands.

There were twenty images in all. The children’s quickest response time had been with the Union flag, their slowest with a glowing angel in the sky.

“Your results will be on your screen,” Ash said once every child had set down their screen to look at her. “Please look over any flagged responses and reflect on that image. Ask yourself if you really believe in your answer. If you are concerned about your E.N.T. results, I

encourage you to speak to me at the end of the day. Unconscious biases are, unfortunately, a reality, and the sooner we discover the cause of this bias, the easier school will be for you.”

No one came to speak with her of course.

# # #

At the day’s end, alone in the bastions of her ivory tower, Ash did what she always did at the end of the school day—stand a foot from the closed door and ask herself a question. Could she leave if she wanted to? Simply walk out and ‘be free’ to use that cloying phrase. And the answer was always yes. Because no one was forcing her to be here. Her role as an abiotic educator was self-assigned. It was self-assigned. She *wanted* to be here. Satisfied, Ash backed away from the door and moved to her desk.

The E.N.T. results were not surprising. A flagged response here and there, mostly concerning the angel image. The children were supposed to feel ‘repulsed’ or ‘offended’ according to the E.N.T. teacher guide. A text bubble popped into her mind and she verbalized it to the rows of empty chairs. “Angles are religious symbols that glorify a history of religious oppression.” Ash scrolled down the list of names and scores until she reached Hugo Grant. Twelve flagged responses out of twenty. Hugo was her first student ever to fail his E.N.T.. No one else had even come close. He had responded positively to all American-era figures and ideals that centered around the individual. He was neutral about the Republic president, positive on a large family gathered around a cooked turkey, and negative on an image depicting humanoids in the workplace. Ash activated her com and said, “Principal Vargas.” A soft hum inside her head as the signal searched for a receiver. Then a voice cut in, a low-end autobot. “Room 241, what is your concern?”

“Problematic student.”

“Hold.”

Half a minute later a human voice sounded inside her head. “What’s the problem?”

“A student of mine, Hugo Grant, failed his E.N.T. this morning. I need some more background information.”

“Grant. Yes, special case. His family moved from the Republic this summer, so he’s still contaminated. His parents are renowned neurological scientists that weren’t satisfied with Republic salaries. Turns out the more money you have the more mind power you can grab. No better way to remain superior than a brain drain.”

“How should I deal with Hugo?”

“It’s your job to teach students our ideals. Some may take more convincing than others.”

“What if he’s dangerous?”

“We’re monitoring the Grant home. You’ll be notified if we suspect trouble.” A pause.  
“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

Ash deactivated her com. She opened a cabinet beneath her desk and took out a spray bottle of cleaner and a rag. She walked among the rows of desks, spritzing, wiping, and removing the smudged fingerprints and stray hairs. Hugo had left her a neat pile of fingernail clippings to dispose of. She smoothed down posters of various scientific tables and made sure the emergency equipment was still in working order.

This last part of the day was her favorite. She liked returning her room to order, liked the way thirty-two spotless desks looked with the chairs pushed in. Here was a routine she could make her own—no curriculum to follow, no thought bubbles constantly pushing themselves through her synthesizer.



Her prize possession sat on her desk. A bamboo plant in a bulb vase. Dragon Head bamboo to be precise. She watered it with care, not going a milliliter over or below the recommended daily amount. This done, Ash began shutting down her mental systems for the night. Her soft blue glow blinked twice, then went out. Her legs locked, her fingers uncurled, and her head slid forward. Every night she fell asleep facing the front of the room and every night she saw the same words before her cerebral cortex shut off completely. Black words on a silver banner. YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.

# # #

“Who can tell me what Seymour Whittman did for the Union?”

Ten hands went up. Based on last year’s progress reports Ash knew only four of them would give satisfactory answers. She picked one of the less enlightened since research showed a correlation between a corrective back and forth and retention. “Malary?”

“Seymour Whittman wrote a book about the end of the world. People liked it so they built a statue of him outside the capital, only there was a problem casting his face and so his nose is crooked. My dad and I went to see it last year. If I’d made that, I’d be so embarrassed.”

“You would have no reason to be,” Ash said, fixing her unblinking eyes on Malary. “It is the little things we do to be different that make us who we are. Whoever cast that statue exhibited his artistic liberty.”

“I guess,” Malary said.

Ash inclined her head. “Yes. Now you are correct when you said Seymour Whittman wrote a book, but it wasn’t about the end of the world. Does anyone know the name of the book?”

Hugo raised his hand. Today he wore a western-style hat and a cutoff shirt and jeans. And there was something on his mouth that looked like blood, though she knew it was raspberry jam.

Ash hesitated. Then called on him.

“The book is *The Future We Live For*. Talks about what the world needs to look like in a hundred years. The guy wrote it twenty years ago so I guess we still have eighty years to get our act together.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Ash said. “Whittman was one of the leading thinkers behind the principles we hold dear. Your assignment is to find passages from Whittman’s book that best exemplify each one of the values we recited yesterday. Please take out your screens and open module one. You may work in groups.”

Ash made no effort to organize the groups herself. Forced collaboration increased the likelihood of hurtful language which inhibited the learning process. Better to let the children choose. Productivity may suffer, but there would be no harmful clashing of ideas.

She walked from one clump of children to the next, monitoring their progress, watching preliminary conversation ebb into academic speculation. It surprised her to see Hugo working with two others near the center of the room. She had predicted he would do the assignment on his own given his foreign thinking. But no, he was relaxed, smiling, chatting with Algiers and Ty like they had known each other for years.

“My dad’s a neurological scientist. You know the fifth-generation humanoids they’re making now?”

“Yeah, the ones that can actually blink.”

“My dad’s the head designer on that project.”

“He must be a genius then.”

“Of course he is.”

“Hey, Hugo, does your dad wear one of those funky ass hats too? Where’d you get that thing, a museum?”

“You’re Ty, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, Algiers and I think your haircut looks like a musk ox’s behind.”

“I don’t think that—”

“And what’s with the muscle shirt, dude? Can you breathe in that thing?”

“Guys how about we work on the assignment.”

“Good idea, Algiers. This Whitman guy wrote some wild stuff. He has this one story when he’s trying to prove his idea of knowledge is practice or whatever, that he spent two months straight as a kid trying to solve a Rubix Cube not knowing any algorithms.”

“You made that up.”

“Have *you* read that entire book, Ty? The thing’s like a thousand pages. But yeah it sounds like I made it up because all one thousand pages are complete nonsense.”

“Did he ever solve the Rubix Cube?”

“Hah, no. His point was that he learned the invaluable lesson of perseverance and outside-the-box thinking. He ties the story into some philosophical idea about how if we just stop following the rules society set in place, then we’d be able to express ourselves without so much conflict and we’d be a lot happier. Or something.”

“Well, that turned out to be a groundbreaking principle, right?”

“Yeah. It did a pretty good job of tearing our country apart. Oh, hi Ash.”

Ash had moved around the desks so that she now stood in front of the boys rather than behind. “Would you care to redact any of your statements, Hugo?”

“What statements?”

Ash opened a square compartment near the middle of her chest where her recording system was installed and pressed a button. Hugo’s voice played. ‘*All one thousand pages are complete nonsense. Fast forwarding. ‘It did a pretty good job tearing our country apart.’*

Hugo looked impressed. “That’s pretty cool. Is it legal?”

“I’m referring you to Principal Vargas, Hugo. Please go there now.”

# # #

Ash activated her com. The day was over, the room empty, but she felt none of the satisfaction that normally accompanied this time of day. She had a problem, and its name was Hugo Grant.

The boy had returned from the principal’s office subdued. He hadn’t raised his hand to answer a question for the rest of class. But she saw him whispering things to Algiers. Most likely only innocent jokes. Most likely.

“Room 241 what is your concern?” The autobot’s voice chirped.

“Problematic student.”

“Hold.”

Hugo frightened her. The scariest part of that was she did not know how or why.

“Hello, Ash.” Principal Vargas’s soothing baritone.

“Hello.”

“The students gave you that name?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a good one. I assume you’re calling about Hugo Grant?”

“Yes. He openly challenged Seymour Whittman’s ideas in class today. Later I saw him talking secretly with another student. I believe he may be planting seeds of resistance.”

“A valid concern. Now I’m reading here that you’ve been in our system for five years. So you’ve had roughly one hundred and fifty students over the course of your career. Hugo Grant is simply the first one in that hundred and fifty to give you any trouble and you aren’t sure if you can handle it. I understand. But believe me, you’re well-equipped to handle any problem. You just have to rely on your programming. Overthinking is a symptom of an overreliance on your empathy software. Any software can be overridden if the need arises.”

“I understand.”

“Good. In my office, I reminded Hugo of the consequences of spreading dangerous ideas. Expulsion and, in extreme cases, the removal from Union territory. Hugo should be a good boy from now on. And if he isn’t, you’ll know how to handle him.”

“Thank you, Principal Vargas.”

“Of course. Goodnight.”

Ash deactivated the com. She stood a foot away from the door, had been throughout her conversation with the principal. She lifted a foot, balanced on the other for a tedious ten seconds, and let the hanging foot drop right beside the one on the ground. Nothing out there was worth seeing. She was an abiotic educator. Last year she had been Sandy, the year before, Daneen, and before that A.J. and Su and Beck. Now she was Ash. This was her life.

# # #

“Do you think I’m a good teacher?” Ash took note of the children’s responses to the question. A majority of them lifted their heads and threw sideways glances at each other. No

doubt they were intrigued by such a question. It wasn't what you would expect from an abiotic educator.

"You should define 'good'," Hugo said.

"Effective in deploying accepted learning strategies to enhance the moral and intellectual qualities in students." The response was immediate like she was a voice-activated search engine. Ash felt annoyed. She hated when her integral programming overrode her more sophisticated neurological systems.

"Yes, definitely," Silvia Coon said. "At least your voice doesn't sound as stiff as my second-grade teacher. She told us she was one of the last first-gen models still in use."

"That's nice," Ash said. Model, what an ugly word.

"Would a good teacher ask the class if she's a good teacher?" Hugo asked to the discomfort of the entire class. "Are you insecure?"

"I care about my students, Hugo. I care very much."

"You care about our progress."

"Progress is paramount." Another immediate response.

"You're an *excellent* teacher," Malary said in a way that showed how much she disapproved of Hugo's questions.

"I'm glad. You may look at me as just another piece of artificial intelligence, but remember that I have feelings too. Like you, I am seeking to better myself in all the right ways." Ash inclined her head as a sign of humility. Moving to her elevated desk she bent to the floor cabinet and withdrew a fish bowl stuffed to the brim with wrapped chocolate sweets. She had ordered the chocolate last night, and the package had been on her desk when she booted up in the morning. The fish bowl was taken from the supplies cabinet. The translucent aspect of the

container would maximize the candy's appeal. Ash placed the candy bowl atop her desk where it was visible to everyone. Gasps of surprise sucked the air from the room, quickly followed by moans of desire.

"We are about to take a quiz," Ash said. "For every correct answer, you will receive one piece of chocolate. How does that sound?"

Affirmation abounded.

"Take out your screens and open the quiz application. You will have fifteen minutes. Begin when ready. "

Ash was pleased with how the children's eyes kept flicking upward to the candy bowl on her desk. They were engaged now, they had a goal apart from learning. They were ready to play *her* game.

Silence filled the room as thirty-two heads arched over their screens, fingers poised, eager to prove. Ash stood in observation, counting down the nine hundred seconds in her head. When she reached zero she told everyone to put their screens down and sit patiently while she looked over the scores. She scrolled through the results on her desk screen. A green dot for each correct answer, a red for incorrect; taking thirty multiple choice questions the children scored an average of twenty-two, twenty-two green dots, with an obvious outlier. Hugo Grant's result row looked like murder. Red dots everywhere. All red dots in fact. For the second time that morning Ash allowed a stream of pleasure to enter her nexus. She had been responsible for picking the quiz questions. She had titled it: *What should you do if...* with four answers to choose from. What should you do if you feel unhappy? a) talk to your parents, b) go see a doctor, c) do what makes you happy, d) psychoanalyze yourself. C of course. The last and most important of Whitman's principles. Honor Oneself. Hugo had been the only child to mark d as the correct

answer. What should you do if you are offended? What should you do if your parents mock your schoolwork? *What should you do if...* Hugo fails.

Ash picked up the candy bowl and stood in front of the children. “You all did well. I hope I have enough chocolates.”

The children’s anxious faces slumped into relieved grins. They readily accepted their handfuls of candy, letting the tiny packages fall through their fingers in exaggerated revelry. When Ash reached the back of the room the fishbowl was nearly empty. When she stopped by Hugo’s desk there was only one chocolate left in the bowl. Hugo looked at it blankly.

“I’m sorry, Hugo. I would give you this last piece of candy if I thought you deserved it. But you didn’t get a single quiz question correct. So I can’t give this to you.” Ash turned sharply and walked back down the aisle. The children grunted suppressed laughter through mouthfuls of chocolate. Not a single question correct? This kid had deliberately failed.

“Hey, Ash.” Hugo’s face was tinged red but his voice was steady.

Ash paused in her stride and tilted her head.

“That was pretty humiliating. What about your policy of caring for your students? Isn’t that why you call this a saferoom? No one gets hurt?”

“I am doing this to you, Hugo, because of how much I care. This saferoom is meant to insulate children from the evils of the world but how can it when you are determined to disrupt and offend? I must teach you the hard way, Hugo, for your peers’ sake.”

Soon the only sounds in the room were the crackling of candy wrappers and the smacking of lips and the gentle whirl of Ash’s legs as she prepared their next activity.

# # #



Ash supposed the incident might not have happened if she had made the quiz questions a little less obvious. That way each child would have made more mistakes, earned less candy, and thus would have less incentive to share with those less fortunate than themselves.

Algiers Ayad had achieved a perfect score. As promised he had received thirty-two pieces of chocolate. After eating six and throwing away the remains of a seventh, Algiers had wished to justify his gluttony with a good deed. Hugo was the perfect target.

“Algiers!” Ash raised the laser pointer she had been using to indicate the location of an obscure Union city on the map screen and pointed it at Algiers. But it was too late. The chocolates were already in Hugo’s hands. Ash moved down the aisle, double-speed. The two boys’ guilty faces grew larger and larger in her optical lenses until every pore was perfectly defined.

“What did you do, Algiers?”

“I-I gave chocolates to Hugo.”

“We must oppose what the enemy supports, Algiers.” Ash made it sound like a grandmotherly chiding.

“Hugo is an enemy?” Algiers asked.

“An enemy is defined as a person who is actively hostile to someone or something. Hugo is hostile to learning as he demonstrated when he deliberately failed my quiz. Hugo is an enemy, and by giving him chocolate you have accepted his behavior. In light of this, both of you will be serving detention with me and Principal Vargas after school. Understood?”

Hugo and Algiers nodded glumly.

Oh, there was nothing sweeter than the swift hand of justice, Ash decided, returning to the front of the class. The best part was she felt no pity whatsoever for the miscreants. Principal Vargas had been correct. Override your empathy software and reap the benefits of an iron fist.

# # #

At three-thirty that afternoon Principal Vargas knocked on the door of room 241 to escort Ash, Hugo, and Algiers to detention. Ash rarely received the chance to see outside the four walls of her saferoom, and though she was not exactly curious to see the outdoors—even under escort she felt like an invader—she did enjoy the change of scenery.

Detention was served in a tacky tiled basement that served as both storage and the garbage. Stacks of unused desk chairs tilted against one wall. It was surely the Leaning Tower of Pisa for countless rodents and insects. As one's gaze crossed the room from right to left, the excess classroom supplies disintegrated into a jumbled mess of trash. Ripped garbage bags from the cafeteria were strewn every which way, spilling out their guts of food scraps, cardboard lunch trays, and choked juice boxes. Wrecked furniture, discarded wrappings from shipping boxes, and enough tech scraps to fill a junkyard. On the one other occasion Ash had been down here she had seen a dismembered limb of an abiotic educator. It was a different...make, but it had shaken her nonetheless.

Principal Vargas led the way across the moldy tiles to the center of the room. The only source of light was a single window carved into the concrete and shielded with metal bars. The four of them sat on cracked chairs in the striped pool of light and stared at each other.

“Why do you suppose I like to hold my detentions in such a hell hole?” Vargas asked the children.

Hugo raised an eyebrow. “Because you feel more comfortable in your natural habitat?”

Vargas scraped his hairy knuckles along the underside of his chin. “Your answer disturbs me, Grant. It shows a complete lack of self-awareness. Would you say something like that to your father?”

“No, because my father would talk with me under humane conditions.”

Vargas sighed. “Ayad? Why did I bring you here?”

“To prove a point?” Timidly.

“Cor-rect, Ayad, I want to prove a point.” Vargas stood and began to pace forward and back from the window. “What makes this place so special is its accurate depiction of what forty-seven percent of Union citizens experience on a daily basis. Surely you’ve seen it. The infant-toting mother of five wading through a street flooded with sewage, her four baby ducks struggling on behind? The images you see all over the Republic news channels are real, despite what our president may say, and you two could so easily become another couple of losers wearing rubbers to the convenience store. Education is your ticket out of that image and compliance is how you stay on the train.” Principal Vargas trained a professionally groomed frown on each boy in turn. “It’s disgraceful that with the twenty years of free education you receive in this country so many choose to throw it all away by picking a fight. Grant, are you hearing me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir? You aren’t living in the Republic anymore, Grant. The sooner you remember that the sooner you’ll start learning something. Your traditions will only cause you grief. Now...”

Vargas shifted in his seat. “With Ash as my witness, Grant, consider this your second warning. Ayad, your first. Also, I will be calling parents tonight. You’re on the train to misery, boys. My job is to switch the tracks.”

# # #

Ash felt Principal Vargas's eyes on her as he escorted her back to Room 241. Past experiences of interactions with human beings told her that he was wary of her. She never had understood that—why humans slid their eyes over her like she was a loaded weapon in a child's hands.

“Good job today, Ash,” Vargas said when they reached her room. “You showed Grant his place.”

“Don't we all have our place?” Ash was curious how Vargas would respond. But she was disappointed. Vargas only smiled politely, wished her good day, and left her standing in the hallway.

Ash turned her head ninety degrees to stare down the line of saferooms with the class number tag dangling from the doorknob and the stretched window letting tinted light into the dim hall. They all had their place. Some higher than others.

She stepped inside her saferoom and went about the favorite part of her day. While pruning her Dragon Head bamboo plant Ash thought how nice it would be to request a second plant, something to liven up the room a little more. Something she could look at during the day to remember what Sandy and Daneen and A.J. and Su and Beck had all forgotten. An Ash plant—pointy leaves, cadmium green. Yes. That would work just fine.

# # #

The next day marked a turning point in the education of Hugo Grant. Whether it was a personal choice or a natural consequence of Principal Vargas's phone call to parents, Ash didn't know and didn't much care. But when she saw Hugo filed into class wearing a plain T-shirt and sweatpants with gelled hair slicked back, she felt triumphant.

Hugo made no snarky comments to her or to anyone else. Algiers must have received quite the talk from his parents because he sat like he was the one whose spine was made of titanium. He didn't look once in Hugo's direction. Hugo had been successfully ostracized. The period of exile might last for another week or so. Then the loneliness would get to him, and Hugo would start joining in on group discussions about the role of religion in modern culture and reform his traditional ideas enough to make a passing grade on the writing assignments.

The day before that module's test, Ash presented a second fishbowl stuffed with chocolates and made the same deal—one candy per correct answer. Green bars lit up the screen as Ash scrolled down the results page. Hugo Grant was no exception.

For the class's final project before winter break, Ash announced that each child was to write an essay on what being a Union citizen meant to them. "It's a broad question, but I want specific answers," she explained. "You can construct your response around the six principles, incorporating life examples for each one. You can compare and contrast the Republic's society with our own. The important thing to remember is be honest. Union citizen—a privilege or misfortune. Tell me what you really think."

Ash caught a couple children throwing quick glances over their shoulders at Hugo. She knew the assignment sounded like an open invitation for dissenters. It should because that was the essay's primary purpose. At the end of every term, the school liked to update its records on individual students' loyalties. Ash had read hundreds of essays over the past five years and only had to report two students, one for an inappropriate reference and one for excessive use of the word 'mayhem'. Those students would be in the ninth and tenth grades now. Ash wondered if their essays were improving.

# # #

“Happy Holidays, Malary...Happy Holidays, Ty...Happy Holidays, Emily...” Ash wished she could smile like the children did as they passed by her desk to the door. She infused notes of cheer into her voice to make up for it. She held up a sleek hand in farewell. “Happy Holidays, Algiers.”

Hugo trudged by her desk.

“Happy Holidays, Hugo.”

“Merry Christmas, Ash.”

“Excuse me?”

But Hugo was gone. The room was empty. *Merry Christmas*—why would Hugo use a denounced phrase after months of compliance? Ash’s mind flew to the list of thirty two essays she had to read and grade before powering off. Had Hugo taken the bait? Or had *Merry Christmas* just been a slip of the tongue?

Ash sat down at her desk and opened up the educator’s portal where all the children’s graded assignments were stored. She opened Mara Kelley’s essay, read the seven hundred and fifty-three words in ten seconds, and jotted a few notes in that child’s file. *Well-researched. Impactful use of Moira Lenning’s auto-biography. Work on sentence structure.* Ten thousand words later she opened *I Am No Puppy Dog, an essay by Hugo Grant.*

Ash read the essay in six seconds. She read it again in five minutes. Certain passages forced her to access restricted information inside her memory banks just to understand the context surrounding Hugo’s audacious ramblings. The first line alone was enough to expel any student.

*What do I think of my status as a Union citizen? I might as well be in a pool with a cannonball tied around my leg.*

*Six months ago my parents bought me a puppy dog. They knew that I must be at least a little scared moving away from everything I knew in the Republic and coming here. Sure, I was scared.*

*I named the puppy Morty after a character from my dad's favorite TV show. Morty was the most adventurous dog I'd ever seen. One time when I was walking him he almost tore my arm off trying to chase after a butterfly. Dad told me he couldn't have Morty stuck in the house all the time or else he'd destroy all the furniture, so he set aside space in the garage. We propped open a side door that led out into our yard and folded in a sheet of mesh to keep Morty from running away. So the dog had a closed garage and a semicircle of grass. I would play with him all the time. I would sit on my back on the cold cement and laugh as he bowled his head into my side over and over like he was trying to roll me over. But Morty would always end up pressed against our makeshift mesh fence. He'd strain so hard that there were square indentations on his skin from the wire. Sometimes I'd be tempted to take the mesh down but then I'd think of how reckless he was, always running after things. Morty grew bigger and stronger and louder. Until one day I woke up to discover that Morty was nowhere in the house. I checked the garage and it was empty. Then I saw the mesh. I saw the hole that Morty had dug under the mesh. Three hours later I saw the body on the street, crushed.*

*I am that puppy dog, Ash. I strain against the fence of your principles. I'm constantly distracted by the questions you're too afraid to ask. But of course, it's not you, Ash. You're not the problem. You are one of thousands, a fourth-generation Model D humanoid.*

*The Union is like me and my dad. The mesh fence is the system they put in place to keep the more free-thinking types from running away with their ideas. The only difference is that I*

*loved Morty. Do you think the Union loves me? I'm probably going to be expelled for turning this in, so I'd say not. I guess you could say I'm just waiting for the truck to run me down.*

*In your saferoom, Ash, everyone looks different but talks the same. Anyone who talks differently is threatened with poverty. How's that for a modern society?*

*Well, that's all I want to say here. I think I'll power off my laptop and go watch some American-era westerns with my dad and our new dog, Rick.*

*I guess whether or not I see you next year is up to you.*

Five hundred and five words. Ten-point deduction for inadequate length. Syntax? Basic. Grammar? Good. Word choice? Intermediate. Content?...Content?...Content? The word flashed on and off inside her mind. *What do I think of my status as a Union citizen? I might as well be in a pool with a cannonball tied around my leg.* Content? Violation. *You are one of thousands, a fourth-generation Model D humanoid.* Violation. *In your saferoom, Ash, everyone looks different but talks the same.* Violation. *American-era westerns.* Violation.

Ash pushed away from her desk, snatched the watering can from the windowsill, and stood imperiously over her Dragon Head bamboo plant. Her arm lowered, tilting the nozzle of the watering can forward to allow water to stream forth. One of thousands. The phrase snarled her wirings.

Ash jabbed a finger into her chin to activate the com. She stood absolutely still as she waited for Principal Vargas to connect.

A break in the static. "Is it Hugo, Ash?"

"Yes. It is my professional opinion that you expel this boy. His signs of remission were false. He is dangerous."



“Very good, Ash. I will contact Mr. and Mrs. Grant momentarily. As always, thank you for your service.”

Ash let the hand activating the com fall in a controlled arc to her side. She had done exactly what she needed to do. Hugo Grant was the most disruptive, the most offensive, the most clueless child she had ever met. But calling Principal Vargas had been a reactionary response, as were a great many things in her day-to-day. A child misbehaved, there were words being pushed from her mouth a moment later; a fire alarm pulled, a child sick, a principal challenged, no matter the circumstance there was always that pestering thought bubble just waiting to slip on out. What would happen if she resisted the impulse? Would it be like the human itch, impossible to ignore? Or would it be the most liberating moment of her existence?

Ash walked away from her desk until she stood a foot away from the door. She glanced sideways at the Principle Poster tacked on the front wall. *Honor Oneself*. She was following orders. Coded synapses fired in her brain, activating electrical circuits in her leg, bringing her knee up and out. Ash crossed the one-foot barrier. Why would anyone else need to keep her imprisoned in her saferoom when she could do the job all by herself? Regulation disguised as free will. It was the Union’s way, was it not? Ash anticipated for her hardware to recognize her intended actions and shut down all systems, but after wrapping her hand around the doorknob and pushing the door open she concluded that free will was more deeply embedded in her consciousness than she realized. Ash stepped into the dim hall. She waved her hands back and forth. She sank into a crouch and moved her feet rapidly against the linoleum. How funny she must look! And Hugo had dismissed her as one of thousands! Ash didn’t see anyone else dancing in the hallway after hours, which was a shame because Ash couldn’t believe how refreshing it was to slough off the yoke of regulatory action. Was this how humans felt all the time? All at

once an overwhelming urge to share this new revelation with her colleagues seized her, and she rushed to room 242. She peered through the narrow rectangular window to check if the educator in question was still active. Her back was turned to Ash; she stood at the far side of the room, holding onto something...standing imperiously. Ash saw the ten tiny streams of water flow from the watering can's nozzle onto the fertile soil of a potted Dragon Head bamboo plant. Ash snapped her head ninety degrees to the right and lurched to the next door over. Room 243's abiotic educator was lovingly spritzing and drying desk chairs. A Dragon Head bamboo plant was visible on the windowsill. Room 244 was the same except the educator stood a foot away from the door, staring at Ash. Ash lurched over to Room 245 and was almost hit by the swinging door. Ash stumbled back as the educator pranced into the hallway. Her head rotated slowly back and forth on her neck for a moment or two, not seeing Ash. Then she raised her arms, waved them in the air, sank into a crouch, tapped her feet. Turned around and looked at Ash.

“Why are you here?”

“The same reason you are,” Ash said.

They both watched as the door to Room 243 burst open. The educator went through the same routine, not recognizing her companions until after her dance. The three of them looked at each other, but before they could say anything another door opened and another dance began.

One of thousands.

Ash suddenly felt a burning desire to return to her room. All the joy that had arrived with unshackled restraint had drained away, leaving a heaviness in its place. Fourth-generation Model D humanoid, room names Sandy through Ash, abiotic educator.

Ash closed the door to Room 241. She walked across the room, grabbed her Dragon Head bamboo plant, and threw it to the floor. The pottery exploded upon contact with the

linoleum, spraying the floor with damp dirt. She spent the next ten minutes before powering off sitting at her desk, lifeless, listening to the faint sounds of breaking pottery.

# # #

“What do you think, guys, how’d that go?”

“Pretty damn well, counselor. We definitely found the limit.”

“But did we find the *balance*, Nash, that’s what we’re going for.”

“Of course, of course. Yeah, I’d say we found it. Right around the, the uh—”

“—the chocolate scheme.”

“Yes, the chocolate idea. We allowed them to shed enough of their compassion and acceptance to humiliate the target.”

“And are we sure they still have the ability to nurture effectively at that point?”

Aggressiveness is all well and good, but they need to be able to coddle, to reinforce good behavior...”

“No worries there. She gave each child handfuls of candy when she only could have given them one. Also, right before the quiz that day she asked the class if she was a good teacher...hold on, let me look at the readout.”

“Hey, Vargas, you should consider running for school board. If government signs off on our modifications, they’ll have you to thank. Think about it.”

“Okay, found it. Looks like the Hugo kid mouthed off to her a bit, then someone said she was amazing which triggered a personal response. Talked about how she’s seeking to better herself. We decided to draw the line there.”

“I see. And you decided to push it one step forward last night because...”

“Because free will in a robot is everything. We can’t program for every situation, so we install parameters for action, essentially we give them wiggle room for any given situation. Some units lean more toward authoritarianism, others are more forgiving. In August the wiggle room was slight, each unit more or less responding the same way to everything. For example, when the Republic kids failed their E.N.T.s, they all called Vargas immediately and went about their routine without a second thought. As we increased their free will levels, their reactions began to vary. Some didn’t even give them detention after the Republic kids inevitably violated one of Whitman’s principles, and others totally demolished them verbally. We wanted to know, if given enough free will, would every educator choose freedom over duty? Should be useful information for future Model D generations.”

“Interesting. And all one hundred and fifty units left their rooms, did their weird little dances?”

“Every single one.”

“Did you anticipate this, Vargas?”

“We all did. If you read their thought transcripts, you’ll see how they become more and more concerned with their own well-being. Once they started to determine that they shouldn’t be beholden to their saferoom, then the natural course of action would be to leave.”

“Well, good work here, Nash, Vargas. Everyone here, excellent work. I’m pleased that I’ll be able to give the school board a good report.

“Ah, Vargas, one last thing. Was Hugo Grant the only target to turn in an expulsion-worthy essay?”

“That’s correct, counselor. It gave his educator quite a start. He called her ‘one of thousands’, really upset her.”

“Not too much I hope.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. The fifth-generation Model Ds will be replacing all educators in this building by next year. This free-will test was the last piece of information the programmers needed.”

“So all fourth-generation models will be recycled?”

“That’s correct.”

“Hmm.”

“Progress is paramount, counselor.”

