Silence Falls on New Alexandria

The awakening came slowly. The dawn broke as regular as the synthetic tone that rang out from the alarm clock, as heavy beams of light brisked over and paddled the thin layer of dust settled on the floor. In the corner, a huddled figure rustled under the sheets and the shadows of the window shutters.

The awakening came alone.

From under the sheet, a withered and gaunt hand reached out and flicked a switch on the now dormant clock, then lowered the opaque covers while the complement pulled a pair of glasses from off of a shelf and rested them on the man's weary face. After studying his eternal, unchanging apartment, he once again set about his daily routine; eating a light breakfast of soy derivatives, brushing his teeth, washing his face, taking his pills, and dressing for his job which eclipsed any other activity and asserted itself as his sole purpose in life. Before he left, he grabbed his briefcase which remained mostly empty, just like its handler, but also contained a few heavily outdated memos, electrical hardware such as flash drives, and a manual on the laws of robotics and other programming fundamentals, printed on paperback. Along with this, he picked up a small employee keycard laminated with the name, "Walter Updike", and below that, the title, "Senior Programming Assistant". Over the course of twenty-eight years, his position in Machiavellian's Automation division hardly changed.

As Wally held open the door, he glimpsed back into his apartment. Same as ever.

He gently nudged the door shut and headed towards the elevator. The doors opened as he approached, and welcomed him with a small meaningless tone, followed by the cold, electric hum ever-present throughout the entire city. Without pressing a button, the elevator shot down to ground level and opened once more. Outside of the short walk to the front entrance awaited the New Alexandria Autonomous Transit, lifeless and primed to escort its only passenger. The doors slid open with a hiss as Wally Updike drew near. He took a seat in the vacant bus, next to the window. It began to sputter to a start, and left behind the apartment complex along with all of the buildings it passed. Not a single

building looked familiar. The bus itself, along with being nearly empty, was lined with shiny metallic

seats that visibly and fragrantly were cleaned with an excessively hygienic acid solution. The windows,

long and clear, met with the seats at the plastic protectors and reflected a small amount of light back in

the cab such that the passenger saw himself as a ghostly apparition barreling across the sidewalk.

Through the window, the streets remained desolate and uninhabited. Only the occasional passing

freight truck, autonomously piloted, provided any sort of detectable movement outside. Human drivers

proved brutally costly and inefficient, so it seemed logical to remove any unknown variable. Suddenly,

the shuttle lurched to a halt, and the doors screeched open.

Updike stepped out in front of Machiavellian Tower. He drew a quiet breath and felt serenity

mix with the vapor in the air. He felt the soft rain pepper his face. The droplets streaked down and

provided a texture and sense of reality that no program could fully replicate. He brushed off his face,

then stepped forward and pulled the door open for himself.

He lifted his identification in front of a small, outdated scanner mounted to the elevator's

facade, and the doors opened synchronously. The interior of the elevator appeared identical to the

hundreds of others embedded in the city, small, modern, and in perfect condition. The light provided

from the unfailing fluorescent light bended, bounced, and diffused across the visually impeccable

surface of the metal walls. He only could discern the texture, a median between smooth and flawed,

after sliding his hand over the surface. The microscopic and near undetectable variations in the metallic

surface only amplified the monotonous, mechanical drone created from the joint effort of the lights,

elevator pulleys, and ventilation system, as well as the ding of the doors opening. Updike lifted his hand

from the wall, and proceeded over the gap in the floor into the 17th floor of the tower.

He made his way into his office and avoided the seats strewn about the floor, left from his

former coworkers now supplanted by a few strings of code in a computer program. Turning the corner,

he entered a cramped, bleak, undecorated room furnished with the tools of his trade: a top-of-the-line

computer running an operating system with an unpronounceable name, the accompanying keyboard

and mouse, and other appliances connected to the computer all on a cost-effective desk assembled

from synthetic materials. He sat in his office chair, whose fibers were worn over the years of active use,

and clocked in.

Barely an hour passed. Updike completed the last few lines needed for a program he worked on

for the last few months that allowed for complete self-replication and self-improvement for AI. He

leaned back in his chair, and in tandem a small red light flicked on above a small printer, not unlike the

ticket dispensers that could once be found within the number of arcades that dotted the nation. He

ceased his work immediately. The motors in the printer began to spin, and the tip of a small slip slid

through the opening on the machine. He tore it out and stared at the docile slip that barely fit the palm

of his hand. His mind flared up and burned at the sight of its pink hue, the same pink of famine and

poverty and obsolescence, perforated and stamped in small, lined print displaying the concluding

bulletin: You're fired! He crumpled up the ticket and threw it in an unassuming waste bin, and then

kicked the bin across the room as well, for good measure. Flustered, he sat back down to collect his

thoughts within his pounding head. He glanced back at the insignificant, mangled slip that now lay

helplessly scattered on the floor. He knew the slip would inevitably arrive, as surely as the moon waxes

and wanes, and as surely as the sand submits to the sea. Suddenly, a memory flooded back-- a

conversation he had with his last coworker. Their name eluded him, and the words sounded inaudible.

The words mattered little, however muffled and distorted they grew. The message, carried with them,

related apprehension and anger. They said something about the machines that replaced, phased out the

humans that lived in the city, how they would continue to propagate without purpose or meaning. And,

while taking a sip from a cup, his coworker said something similar to "life is inefficient. The moment we

become unnecessary, they won't waste a second to lay us off." Wally thought the idea seemed

outlandish. He didn't think much, not anymore at least. Yet, a few weeks after the conversation he

began work on a killswitch, and implemented it in his programming when they discarded his colleague. This he was sure of. With resolve, he gathered his bag and set out through the door.

Updike headed for the elevator, but continued past it towards an unimpressive and antiquated doorway at the end of the hall. The door led into a bleached and untread stairway, perfectly clean and with a large glass window running all along the height of the stairway that provided a breathtaking view of the city. He started up the steps with their black sandpaper edges. Before long, he turned to the last flight of stairs on the sixty-seventh story, which were much narrower than the stairs he climbed previously and lacked the gloss that furnished the lower levels. Halfway up the steps, the window ended, and the staircase itself ended in a dim and dingy room furnished with the sound of a soft patter. At the far end rested a door, which Wally unlocked with a key he took off of a ring that dangled from a pin stuck in a board attached to the wall. The hinges shrieked with the swaying of the door as he stepped through.

A gust of wind folded over the few inches of hair still left on his head. The wind tugged at the ruffle of his clothes, and he shielded his face from the rain that spiraled around the roof. He walked to the far end, and opened the door on a large console situated next to an antenna. He reached into his briefcase, and extracted a hard drive the size of his thumb. Examining it for a second, he wiped the rain off the tip and stuck it into one of the many ports that ran all along the interior. The drive itself contained just a few strings of code that activated the dormant killswitch that he discreetly planted within his programs years prior.

Time stopped. The lights on the tops of all the towers around him extinguished themselves. Freight trucks tumbled to a crashing halt, and the ever-present, electric hum that flowed throughout the city completely vanished. Updike took in the silence for a moment, and found the situation ironic. He removed the stick and stuck it back into his briefcase, now soaked by the torrential downpour laying waste to the city. He opened the door, and creeped back down the sixty-eight flights of steps to ground

level. After leaving the tower, he walked the distance back to his apartment, where he ate his lunch and

packed his belongings neatly in his briefcase once more. He tugged on his coat, and began to exit New

Alexandria for the first time in decades. He looked back remorsefully for the last time before continuing

over the last hill that jettisoned him out into the fields and highways that lay beyond. For once, the city

slept.