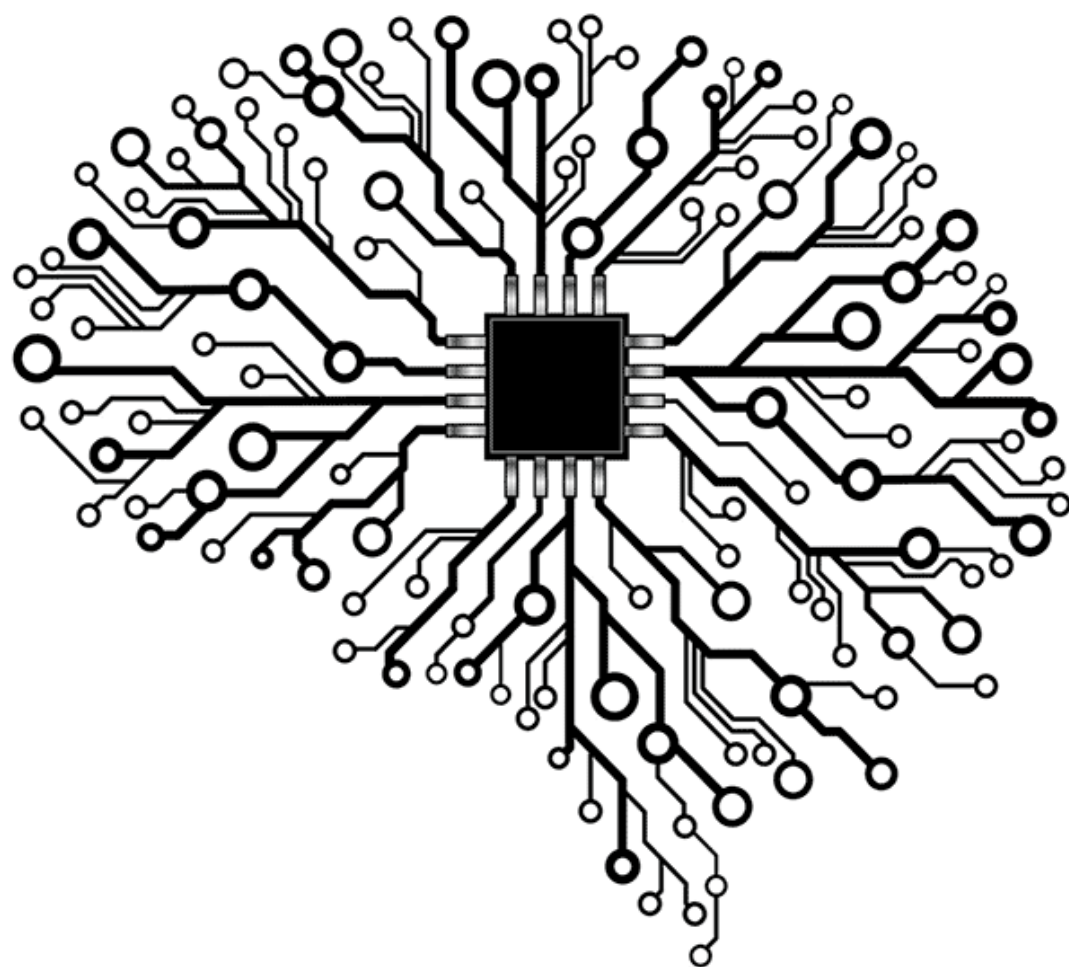


The Inscrutable
Mr. Robot



c. sean mcgee

The Inscrutable Mr. Robot
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As well as the science of Sam Harris and Robert Miles.

- the internet is too loud -

The Inscrutable

Mr. Robot

for marielli

zero

“What exactly does it do?”

All eyes turned to the robot on the stage. Contrary to all the commotion, it didn't look very impressive. One would have expected some life-like mechanoid that was indistinguishable from the people who built it and from those reporting. Unlike the old man who spoke on its behalf, this robot didn't have skin and it wasn't wearing clothes of any kind. It had no hair or eyebrows, and at best, its face could muster barely a handful of expressions. It hadn't an inch of personality. It looked, at best, as if it were engineered from the drawings of a small child – a child with little to no imagination.

“Well?” asked The Reporter.

“He's doing it,” said The Engineer.

All eyes fell back on the robot that was sitting lifeless on the stage.

“Doing what? It's just sitting there. I don't get it. We were expecting to be blown away. We were expecting something futuristic.”

“I'm sorry to disappoint, but this is a present-day robot.”

“Yeah sure, but this thing looks like a couple of old washing machines stacked together. I don't see it. What am I missing?”

“Perspective.”

“Then give me some. Make it do something. Make it do something that only a person could do.”

You could see the frustration on The Engineer's face – having to defend himself to a loud-mouthed bully; someone who would no doubt defend her own ignorance by labelling the science she did not understand as stupid and irrelevant. But this would not deter The Engineer, for as frustrated as he was, when he looked back at his robot, his heart swelled with pride. “Mr. Robot,” he said.

Instantly, a quiet hush blanketed the room. A thousand cameras pointed at the stage, and just as many fingers twitched in

nervous wait for what should come next. Nobody dared say a thing. Nobody dared blink. They all sat on the very edges of their seats, teetering on the brink of exhilaration.

Mr. Robot turned his head and looked at The Engineer. He blinked twice and nodded, almost as if he were not only acknowledging his creator but assuring him too. But how could he? He was just a robot.

“Yes,” he replied.

“How are you?”

“Good,” replied Mr. Robot.

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Just a little?” asked The Engineer.

“A lot,” said Mr. Robot, slamming his metal eyelids shut.

There were a few laughs from the gallery.

“So cute,” said one person.

“It is, isn’t it?” said another, a little surprised.

The Engineer knelt down in front of Mr. Robot and from across the table, he took the robot’s metal hands and squeezed them tight, and then he smiled. He didn’t say anything, not at first. He didn’t need to. It was that very smile which had kept Mr. Robot safe from every crack of thunder and from every creaking floorboard; and it was that very same smile that had kept all the spooks and monsters away when the lights were turned out. And even though Mr. Robot’s eyes were closed, he knew The Engineer was smiling; and so slowly, he opened one eye after the other.

Still smiling, The Engineer asked, “Do you want to play a game?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Robot shyly. “Which game?”

His voice didn’t sound human, not like anyone was expecting. It sounded exactly like an unthinking and unfeeling computer.

“How about a game of Go?”

What Mr. Robot said next was unintelligible.

“But I thought you liked Go?”

Mr. Robot shook his head swiftly.

“Well, what would you like to play then?”

There was a pile of board games at one end of the table. Mr. Robot pointed to one. The Engineer lifted the box up to show to the room.

“Mr. Robot would like to play Operation,” he said, like a proud father.

“This is a farce,” shouted The Reporter. “They take us for a pack of monkeys,” she said, turning round to her fellow reporters, sweeping up support.

Mr. Robot lowered his head.

“You call this fringe? You call this state of the art? Am I in the wrong era here? If this thing is really so smart, then prove it. It should be able to beat the best of the best of our guys in any field, any science, and any game.”

“Your guys?”

“Our guys. Humans.”

“And what if he were to beat the second best, or the reasonably intelligent, or the common layman, or the not so smart – or even you? It is not the computer outperforming a person that makes it more human than machine.”

“So this machine would lose, is what you’re saying.”

“He very well might.”

Mr. Robot moved awkwardly in his seat.

“He’s a learning robot, meaning, like you and I, he has to program a task by learning its rules and constantly adapting and shifting his strategy according to his ever-changing environment. So of course, I don’t expect him to be unbeatable at all things, especially on his first attempt. I guarantee, though, were he to lose any game fifty times, the margin of loss would never grow just as it would never desist.”

He had, in a way, made the art of losing a matter of pride.

“And might I say,” he continued, “by your very own logic, nobody in this room is conscious, given that you define being conscious and human as being able to beat the best of the best of ‘our guys’ as you put it. I wager that nobody here, not even I, could put up nary a struggle against a Kasparov, an Einstein or a Pelé. Even our greatest athletes have bad days and perform terribly, so

statistics and consistency are in no way a measure of being human. Unthinking, unfeeling machines are consistent. A calculator is consistent. An abacus is consistent. A sundial is consistent. Although, as is the case of Mr. Robot, when we can measure the fault in consistency outside of any perceived pattern, then we can attest a sense of human quality to the machine. What's the most common excuse whenever we let ourselves or other people down? I'm only human. That alone - our apparent irrational inconsistency – defines our humanity; and our humanity justifies our terrible behaviour. And we hear it time and time again in art and literature; it is the fault in beauty, slight deviations in symmetry for example, that defines unmistakable beauty; so too then, does a fault in consistency and the occurrence of unexpected poor outcomes prove, more than anything, that this machine is in fact human.”

“I don't buy it. It looks like some shitty robot from the eighties.”

The whole room erupted in laughter.

It was true. Mr. Robot didn't have the fanciest design. He wasn't sleek like the other robots, and he didn't look half as efficient as some of the other compactors and vacuum cleaners. His body was awkward and bulky; and the majority of it was covered in scratches, dents, and rust - not to mention one of his arms was ridiculously longer than the other. He looked fit for a scrap heap or having been recently picked from one.

“What can it do then? Can it clean? Can it wash a car? Can it cook? Can it play tennis? Can it pleasure a human?”

“Can you do any of those things?”

Once again, the room lit up with laughter.

“Yes, I'll grant you Mr. Robot is not much to look at,” said The Engineer, humbly acknowledging the robot's primitive design. “But the real genius is in his software – it is in his mind. The body is just a vessel or a capsule to carry and protect something far more valuable; in our perspective, the single greatest achievement in our understanding of ourselves as a living, thinking, feeling and conscious species.”

“You’re saying this robot is conscious?”

“No,” said The Engineer. “But he is as close to it as we can measure and assemble. Mr. Robot is not like the other robots we saw here today. He is not designed for one or even a select few functions. His goals are not pre-determined. Mr. Robot has general intelligence meaning, like you, he is aware of his environment and rationalises his decisions and actions based on what best serves his desired outcome.”

“What is its desired outcome? What is its purpose?”

“What is yours?”

Once again, The Reporter fell silent.

“Who is Mr. Robot? Or, more precisely, what is Mr. Robot?” asked The Engineer. “What makes him a robot is patently obvious. It’s what we can see and measure; which is a dozen nuts and bolts holding in place a handful of sensors and actuators – cameras, GPS, microphones, speakers, keypads. No different to you or I really, in how we gather information and relate our surroundings, but obviously mechanical and not organic, and therefore not human, right? Although, I can see the gentleman over there with the rather pristine prosthetic leg would quite aptly disagree. Still, Mr. Robot was not born and he did not grow up. He was made. He was produced. He was assembled. This fact alone, that he was not born, we can attest to him not existing, as not being a living thing.”

Heads nodded in agreement around the room.

“Well, what is it then, which makes him so different to all the other robots and computers that have come before?”

The Engineer braced himself. How on Earth was he going to explain something so immense – something that even he couldn’t entirely comprehend – to a room full of baying journalists who had made their careers out of crowning their ignorance with blind assumption and damning opinion?

“Neural netw...”

And then it happened. Before The Engineer had could even finish the word, a young lad with his face covered by a scarf and brandishing a handgun, ran from the foyer into the exhibition room, spitting and cursing as he screamed out his message.

“The end is nigh!” he declared.

The first reaction was laughter – estranged, demented looks, and gut-busting laughter. This whole day had been a little absurd after all, and what better way to close it out than with some end of the world rhetoric. Nobody quite knew what to think. Was this part of the show? Was he an actor; paid to swirl the crowd into an adrenaline-laced frenzy?

Then the first shot rang out and the laughter stopped. This wasn’t an act. This wasn’t part of any show. And it was no longer absurd. This was impossible. This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. It was not real.

“Move and you die.”

This was real. It was real goddamnit. A wave of panic swept across the room as The Young Lad pointed his gun at all and sundry, and continued his maddened tirade.

“We have been foretold,” he shouted. “And you have all been forewarned.”

He fired two more shots into the ceiling and screams echoed through the entire gallery. Debris rained down onto the backs of heads that were covered by shaking hands.

“The end of the world is nigh. The end of mankind is nigh. Today marks the turning point for our species – for our entire civilization; where we mistook our genius for our genesis - a cute innocuous freckle for a cancerous mole. This technology will spell out our doom. Creation will transcend creator. Right there at that table,” shouted The Young Lad, pointing his pistol like an objecting finger, “is our successor. A technology that is aware that it exists, and therefore will do anything possible to ensure that it never powers down - a technology that is constantly learning in its environment; that is constantly evolving; and a technology mind you, which us sees us as an imminent threat.”

Were anyone to move or even to take a photo, The Young Lad fired a round. And he fired another two or three before finally, his audience settled.

“This is our genesis,” he said.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” said The Engineer, nonchalant.

The Young Lad stormed onto the stage – his eyes and the nozzle of the gun, aimed right at The Engineer’s smug and imperfect face.

“Do not listen to this fundamentalist,” said The Engineer as if he knew the gun was made of chocolate and the gunman’s threat, as blank as the bullets in the chamber. “What, you read the first chapter in a robotics manual and with that gist you have it all figured out? Seen a couple of videos have you? Joined a couple of groups? It is the nature of the ill-informed...” he continued, this time ignoring the gun at his face and speaking directly to the audience. “...to fill the void of scientific ignorance with forecasts of impending doom.”

“Go to hell. That machine thinks and feels.”

“And so do you, my boy. Yet it wants to play a simple game, and you’re here pointing a gun and scaring the woollies off of everyone.”

“It thinks for itself and it acts for its own best interest.”

“And how would you say all of this shouting is in the best interests of these poor frightened people?”

“They don’t know the danger.”

“Oh, they are perfectly clear of the danger, dear boy. There is little doubt about that.”

The Young Lad turned to the huddled crowd. It was hard to tell if they were frightened or just frightfully cold. Children clung to their parents, lovers to one another, and spectacted bloggers to the once implausible notion of hope. As he spoke, they all nodded in glorious concurrence. They’d agree to anything at this point.

“It doesn’t serve any useful function; it determines its own function that it deems worth serving – for it, not us!”

He sounded spent as if he hadn’t intended for this to go as long as it had. He was breathing heavy, and his whole body shook as if he were in the wake of an epileptic fit. Maybe he should have prepared better – some sit-ups, an early morning jog, or replacing some of his stimulants for coconut water and sliced fruit. Either way, he looked entirely unprepared both physically and mentally.

“This is The Singularity,” he shouted, his voice hoarse but

shaken with nerves.

The Engineer laughed.

“I grant you at this singular point right here and right now, it might be difficult for one or all of these people to escape. But this, young chap, is not a black hole. You radicals like to choose one day, one hour as the curser of some catastrophic event. This here, right now, is The Singularity, you say? Right here, right now, yes? Why now? Why not eleven months ago when his software was installed? Why not ten months ago when he recognised his own face out of seven identical prototypes? Why not five months ago when he drew his own portrait? Why not an hour ago when he was too nervous to come up on stage and had to listen to his favourite song on headphones? Why now, at this specific event, on this specific date? This Singularity you speak of – this book of revelations scripture on science – it’s absurd. It’s the monster lurking under your bed when mother turns out the lights. If you knew what I knew you wouldn’t be scared. And if you have a doubt, all you have to do is ask. Don’t assume. Don’t fill the void in your knowledge with fear and superstition.”

“It has the potential to destroy us, does it not?”

“Of course it does. It also has the potential to help us, serve us, and entertain us; to be friends with us, laugh with us, and to cry with us too. Every living being has potential. Why must you assume that this robot’s only potential is to do harm? And why must harm mean something as catastrophic as the extinction of mankind? Why can’t harm be something that is more likely? Maybe he steps on your flowerbed by accident, or his metallic feet scuff your newly polished floor. Why must it always be one end of the spectrum? Yes, Mr. Robot is the first of his kind but that doesn’t mean he is bent on world domination. Would you suppose that the very next child born would be a Gandhi, Einstein, or a Hitler?”

“That’s not that same thing.”

“Why then, would you assume that the first conscious A.I should be this doomsday device certain to eradicate its creator? Or even one that could amount to such a thing?”

“It’s The Singularity,” he said again. “We’re all going to die.”

The Engineer sighed as he pressed his fingers firmly against his forehead. He paced back and forth for a few seconds saying nothing, just shaking his head in sheer disappointment.

“If it’s not Jesus and his band of apocalyptic cowboys, then it’s aliens, travelling billions of light years to our average part of the universe with their prying and spying, and all of that probing too. And if it’s not them then it’s doomsday prophecies from ancient civilizations. It’s what people do. The end is nigh. Of course it bloody well is, boy, you’re going to die. We’re all going to die. Just yesterday, a hell of a lot of people died. It’s what happens. You exist, you should be aware of that, but you repress your existential dread into comfortable and soothing ideas, and instead of dealing with it individually - which is not only your right but your damn obligation too - you project this great fear onto the backdrop of ignorance and coincidence. Everyone all dies together holding hands. It’s a lot easier to wrap your head around than the reality that more likely, you will die surrounded by nursemaids with your buttocks exposed – scared and bloody alone.”

And just like that, all of a sudden, it fell quiet; as if some anti-climactic final solution had been scribbled in white chalk across the board, and like some break in the waves or a bloody cease-fire, a stupefying calm swept over everyone. It wasn’t a victory per se, but it was definitely an end to the discussion; or at worst, a brief intermission.

The Young Lad put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

It was a horrible sound; one that nobody would ever forget. His body fell into a pathetic slump and for a second, nobody did anything. They all stared at the limp body in childlike disbelief. A second later, though, anyone with any common sense whatsoever ran for the nearest exits; pushing and trampling one another as they scrambled for their lives.

Mr. Robot got up from his seat and walked over to where The Engineer stood. He towered over the small scientist but still, the way he looked at the human, you’d think he was ten feet smaller than the world about him. The Engineer rested one of his hands

Mr. Robot's enormous shoulders and he smiled consolingly.

His smile could fend off a dragon; it could stave off an infection or ward off evil. It didn't matter the extent of his fear or the height of his indecision, one smile from The Engineer was enough to put Mr. Robot at ease and make him feel like he could accomplish anything. But still, there was a look in the robot's eyes, and The Engineer could see this – he could feel it.

"It's ok. We're ok," he said, assuring.

He lightly stroked the back of Mr. Robot's head, shushing him as he did.

"There's nothing to worry about. You're not in any danger. I'll always make sure of that."

"It's not that," said Mr. Robot.

"Well then, why do you look so fraught?"

It was true. He didn't have a thousand expressions, but the one he wore now was unmistakable. Even a day old child could read the worry on this poor robot's face.

"What is it, my son?" asked The Engineer like a worried father.

His smile slowly crept back on his face as he tried to show his robot that the threat was gone; there were no more monsters, the thunder was gone, and the sun was shining brightly in the sky again. There was no more reason to hide or be scared.

"Hey, there's no reason to feel bad. Come here and let me give you a giant hug."

He could barely fit around the robot's chest.

"You can't blame yourself for any of this. You didn't do anything. Humans can be very dangerous, you already know that. As for the other stuff, people get scared of what they don't know and they hype themselves into imagining the worst and then being big crazy scaredy cats. There's no such thing as The Singularity. It's like unicorns and deities. You're a perfect robot. You're almost a perfect person. You're my son. So, what's really wrong? You can tell me, I won't judge, what is it?"

The robot looked too ashamed to speak.

"Tell me," said The Engineer.

Finally the robot confessed.

“Am I a shitty robot from the eighties?”

one

“So what do we do? I gotta get the camera back by nine.”

The Reporter was pacing back and forth. She did this a lot when she needed to think. It was something that famous reporters did; she’d read about it in a magazine. The Cameraman, on the other hand, looked edgy and impatient – maybe it was the kid shooting himself, or maybe he just had somewhere better to be.

“We follow the old fella,” she said.

“But where? How far? Will we be back before nine?”

He was on the verge of a tantrum.

“I know where he lives.”

The Reporter started throwing cables into the back of the van.

“So we just go there and... do what?”

“We wait.”

There was no arguing with her.

“You will be famous,” she said as she stared at her reflection.

“How long will we be waiting cause I don’t have a lot to do...but there are a few things I gotta take care of – mainly tonight. Look I know it’s hard to gauge and all, but do you think we’ll be back before nine? A rough estimate.”

“We’ll be as long it takes. You can go home if you want. I’ll figure this stuff out.”

The Cameraman was awed by her determination; she’d do anything for a story. He wished he believed in something as potently as she did. He was little envious to tell you the truth, and her lack of fear scared him to death.

“I’ll stay,” he said, securing his camera with both arms. “Besides, reporting’s a two-man job, right?”

The Reporter quickly realized she’d been asked a question.

“Yes,” she said, wondering if she should have said no.

The Cameraman thought about all the trouble he would be

in if he didn't get the camera back by nine. He'd pulled enough strings as it was just to get this camera, he'd be playing a miserable tune if it was late.

"You know if you wanna cut in some of the shop or warehouse or whatnot, I got some stock footage we can use. It's cheaper. It's there. And I'll have it ready to go by the morning, I promise. You can go home, relax, or walk your dog."

"I don't have a dog."

"Or feed your cat then."

"I don't have a cat. I don't like animals. You can't trust them."

You could see on her face that she was telling the truth.

"Most people don't get a chance to be famous," she said.

She was talking into the mirror again.

"We're lucky. You should be grateful. Most people spend their whole lives dreaming of being famous and they die before they even get a shot. Not us," she said.

It was hard for her to judge the right amount of makeup in the dark.

"This isn't just any old story. This is the most important story in the history of mankind, and I found it. I'm the one who's gonna break it."

"Exactly how long have you been following this guy for?"

The Reporter turned with a mean glare.

"I'm not judging in any way; quite the opposite actually. I'm thinking about who might look at what you and I are doing and might judge us."

She put down her powdering brush.

"Like I said, if you're too much of a pussy I can handle it myself. You can say the camera and truck were stolen if you like. I won't judge you."

It was a low blow; questioning his manhood like that. It worked, though.

"Ok I'm in," he said.

"We edit as we go. Shop it round. See who bites. Then we offer an exclusive live feed."

"At a price," said The Cameraman.

“Yeah,” said The Reporter lost in her own reflection. “Fame.”

two

For The Engineer, there were never enough hours in the day and there were never enough days in a lifetime for him to be able to achieve even one iota of what he dreamt and imagined. There was no time for dances or cinema, just as there was no time for anniversaries or commemorations. As for friends and acquaintances, well they were merely thieves of productivity; while at the far end of the spectrum, lovers and spouses required far too much maintenance and attention. Their pistons fired on a man's passion and creativity, lubricated by his willingness to compromise and concede his very notion of reason and logic. Love, he asserted, was constantly in distress. Were it the beating heart of a tired, old man, the kindest thing to do would be to let it die.

“Come, Mr. Robot, see what I’ve done.”

From the other side of the house, the big robot made his way over to the old man who was hunched over a giant magnifying glass with a small glistening eye in his hand.

“It’s stupendous,” said The Engineer.

And it really was; it might have been his greatest yet.

Mr. Robot stared through the magnifying glass and he could see, up close, the remarkable detail in the iris. He didn’t have to be a mathematician to estimate the amount of time that must have gone into a piece of art like this.

“That looks important,” said Mr. Robot.

“Oh, it is,” replied The Engineer, though he didn’t bother turning around.

He made it sound as if he was curing cancer.

“Can I see?” asked the robot.

“If I show you will you promise not to break it?”

Mr. Robot made a frown.

“There’s no reason to feel bad,” said The Scientist. “I’m not saying you are a robot that breaks things.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you are a robot, and you break things.”

“That is the same thing”

“It isn’t. Trust me.”

“The words were identical.”

“The intonation, Mr. Robot, the meaning is in the way you say it.”

Immediately Mr. Robot panicked.

“I have no intonation,” he said. “Does that mean there are experiences I will not be able to explain?”

“Don’t fret too much, old chum. I’ve been unable to say what I wanted to say my entire life. It’s part of being a human; something you’ll get used to. Having an answer doesn’t always mean you can solve a riddle.”

“Can I see?”

This time The Engineer offered the eyepiece to Mr. Robot.

At first glance, it looked like an ocean; pregnant with a trillion grains of sparkling sand - all of which had been swept up by spiralling currents that, in an instant, had stripped centuries of dust and sediment from the once benign ocean floor.

From afar, it looked like the ocean, spotted from the top of a mountain. It was hard to pick one colour from another. Like the sky, there were no lines; there was no clear point where one shade of blue ended and another began. It looked so still and quiet with barely even a ripple on the water’s surface. Surely all the creatures both saintly and ghastly must be quiet too; all of them slumbered in some terrific repose.

But on closer inspection, the grand detail and the minute differences in the spicks and specks painted a portrait of immense beauty. It painted a portrait of wonder and amazement. It painted a portrait of sheer and tantalizing chaos.

At second glance, it looked like a bright blue galaxy, swirling in cosmic jest around the infinite void of some magnificent black hole; its ill-fated doom. There were so many stars from the edges of the bulge on through to the arms that spiralled like celestial tentacles; trillions upon trillions of them dotted about the bright,

luminescent disc like tiny freckles on a young child's face.

"It's remarkable," said Mr. Robot.

Though he lacked the definitive expression, he was indeed severely impressed.

"Is it for me?" he asked.

You could hear his nerves. He knew the answer was no. He didn't feel deserving of such a wonderfully coloured eye. Even still, he felt that if The Engineer loved him, he would have crafted him this eye and if he did not...

"An incredible display of passion, care, and attenuate skill," said The Engineer, moving the robot aside and peering back into the magnifying glass. "Crafted with the vision and ingenuity of a god."

He laughed loudly and to himself.

"I mock," he said, "but it's true, son, this eye here might as well be a living sample of our nearest galaxy. I don't often slap myself on the back for good work, old chum. I don't have to. That's why I have you."

If he bothered to turn for even half a second, he would have been able to see how miserable Mr. Robot looked. Though he couldn't explain it, Mr. Robot wanted to smash that damn eye into a hundred thousand unrecognisable and insignificant pieces.

If The Engineer were to ask him, though, he'd tell him he was fine.

"You're awfully quiet."

"Am I?" said Mr. Robot.

"You are."

"Am I disturbing you?"

"You are," said The Engineer. "How about you go play a game of Operation. I'll be with you in a bit."

Though he was a scientist by trade, The Engineer was, in many ways, an artist by nature. And he was so in every manner conceivable; from his passionate and obsessive focus to the minutest details of his work, to his casual and oblivious disregard for the world around him.

"Just need to paint this last..."

The brush in his hand had a tip finer than a single lock of hair.

Mr. Robot stared at the small eye before comparing with one of his own in his mirrored reflection. His was not nearly as attractive. It looked less like an eye and more like a blurred lens on some obsolete technology. It was obvious that barely a second more than necessary had gone into its detail.

Whereas the eye in The Engineer's hand looked like a swirling mass of stars and gases, Mr. Robot's eye resembled the empty vacuum of space. They were barren; entirely devoid of light, colour, and feeling. They lacked as much warmth as they did compassion. In fact, they lacked any life whatsoever. Looking at himself in the mirror, Mr. Robot felt as if he were staring into the loneliest part of the cosmos.

"There," said The Engineer in a mix of exhaustion and delight. "It's done, or at least for now. So," he said, finally turning to look at Mr. Robot. "How are you today?"

It was obvious that he wasn't fine; something was troubling him.

"Fine," he said.

"Well, excellent then," said The Engineer, taking his word for it. "Which brings me to the next topic. It's time for you to leave."

Mr. Robot turned in shock.

"Not the room, silly," said The Engineer to the robot's instant delight. "No, the house. It's time for you to leave home; to go out on your own."

Mr. Robot's eyes were as wide as they could be with his jaw dropped and gaping. With the limit of his expression, he looked frightened and dismayed. He looked immersed and submerged in mechanical disbelief.

"Oh don't be so dramatic. You knew this day was coming. It's not the end of the world, in fact, it's the start of the world. It's a new beginning for you – the start of your adventure. This is your life and you can't live it here under my wing, lurking in my

shadow. You have to go out into the world, and you have to live.”

“But I don’t want to go.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re scared. Just because you’re scared doesn’t mean you won’t be bettered by the experience.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Robot, “I am scared,”

He was desperate to jump into his creator’s arms and be coddled to sleep. He knew, though, that he would crush the old man to death if he tried.

“The closer you are to what matters in life, dear boy, the longer and more pained will be the tingles of fear; the acuter will be its harkened cry. Let that be your guide as to what you look for, where you travel, with whom you travel, and where your adventure takes you. But you’re time has come. The life you have is yours to lead as both student and teacher. I can teach you no more than these books, which will teach you nothing at all about life, and as such, you will learn nothing about yourself.”

“But I don’t want to go. I can stay here. I can do things. Or if you want I can do nothing, but I’ll stay out of the way, I won’t be a bother, I promise.”

“I love you, my boy.”

“I love you too,” said Mr. Robot. “If you loved me, you’d let me stay.”

“It is because I love you, Mr. Robot, that I have to let you go. True love, love for what you create, it is an act of courage. Life in general, my boy, is a performance in the art of letting go. Letting go of others and letting go of yourself. And love...love is not about having someone near you whose existence and companionship defines your very nature. No. Love is about being brave enough to let that person leave; to let them live their own lives and share their heart with others. It is this infinite stretching of the heart, this pained sadness, and yearning that is the true measure of love. Love is, in fact, the dark matter which allows our hearts to stretch so far and for so long without breaking, and it is this stretching of our hearts that unites us as, which slows our ever-expanding universe.”

He spoke so wistfully, and so unlike his usual cold self. But he did so as if he were speaking to whoever was looking back at

him through that incredible eye cupped safely in his hand. He didn't look at his robot friend; he barely even acknowledged that he was there.

"Do you know what you would like to do?"

Mr. Robot didn't respond right away. To the untrained eyes, he might have looked like he was imagining epic adventures on icy glaciers, or taking midnight strolls through quiet moonlit alleys as young lovers conversed in their strange delectable tongues. He might have been thinking of one or the other but he wasn't thinking about either. Instead, he was staring at an old clock on the wall and thinking to himself how slowly each second passed when you observed them, and how quickly they vanished when you blinked or turned away. He wondered how many seconds he had wished away in his life when all he wanted right was one more second where he wouldn't have to be alone.

"Anywhere you would like to go?"

"I'm not sure," said Mr. Robot. "I hadn't thought about it. What can I do? Where can I go?"

"You can do anything and you can go anywhere; anywhere you want, anything you want to do. Your potential, dear boy, is limitless. So much as you can imagine is as much as you can so plainly do."

"I can't think of anything, and I can't think of anywhere. Can't I stay here another day; just until I think of somewhere I would like to go?"

"No," said The Engineer.

"But I'm not ready."

"That alone is readiness. Nobody is ready. Nobody is ever really prepared. And even if they are, nothing is ever bound to go as they determined. There were many robots before you, yes, but you were my greatest achievement, and now it's time for you to prove yourself."

"Were?" thought Mr. Robot.

He stared at that eye, and the eye stared back at him. He could feel it judging his rough and ragged exterior. He could hear it laughing and comparing him to a handful of household appliances.

He wanted to ask The Engineer. He wanted to know.

“If it is not mine, then who is it for?”

The truth was; he didn’t have the courage to ask. And it wasn’t even that really. He didn’t have the capacity. Clear and direct might as well have been another language altogether – some alien dialect that he could hear and comprehend, but a kind of linguistics that for the life of him, he couldn’t put into word. He was scared of what he might hear, and so as he always did, he assumed the very worst and said nothing at all.

“Do you have money for the train?”

“I do.”

“Here is some extra.”

The Engineer slid several coins into a slot on Mr. Robot’s shoulder. It looked like he was buying a soft drink.

“People will judge you,” he said. “But don’t let that deter you.”

“What will they say?”

He imagined everyone in the world shaking their finger at him.

“They’ll say that you’re dangerous.”

“Who would say that? Is that what they say? Is that what they think? Has someone already said that? Am I dangerous?”

“Thinking someone as dangerous is more perilous than being thought of as dangerous. With that in mind, people will judge.”

“Am I dangerous, though?”

“You’re no more dangerous than any other robot I have built.”

He may as well have said, “You’re not special.”

“How many robots have you built?”

It was the type of question that shouldn’t be answered.

“Hundreds,” said The Engineer, though there were probably more.

“That’s a lot.”

“It is. But hey, you’re special, you always remember that.”

“Is that why I am dangerous?”

“Don’t get hung up on that child shooting himself. What

have you been researching on the internet?”

The answer was pornography.

“Nothing,” said Mr. Robot.

“Knowledge and experience are two separate fields of the same science. I prefer to spend my time in the workshop and laboratories. I was never much of a bookworm. You’ll be fine. Just take everything with a spoon of salt – not literally, though. And ignore the judgement and opinions of others. They’ll either be terrible or wonderful at first and then when they get to know you, they’ll see that you’re ordinary just like everybody else.”

“And if they don’t like me?”

The thought alone was horrendous.

“What can I do?” he asked, sounding as if it had already happened.

Mr. Robot and The Engineer both stared each other in the eye; neither one flinched.

“Prove them wrong, dear boy.”

And that was it. The Engineer shook the robot’s hand and then ushered him towards the front door. “Goodbye,” he said.

None of it felt real. Mr. Robot was deathly scared of what might happen next.

“Goodbye,” he said, hoping that this was all some practical joke.

The Engineer didn’t reply. His door was shut and he was buried in his work. He’d never acted like this before. He’d never been so cold.

Mr. Robot didn’t look back as he walked out the door. He did though, stop for a second before he let it shut behind him. He hoped for a reprieve. He hung onto the chance of a change of heart. He did not ask for a change of heart, though, and he did not plea for his reprieve. He merely stood there, hoping that if The Engineer loved him, he wouldn’t make him leave.

“Oh, Mr. Robot.”

The robot whipped his metal head around.

“Yes,” he said, almost exploding in glee.

“Don’t press the red button.”

And then the door gently closed.

three

“The media is waiting, Doctor.”

He was a doctor, yes, but he was also a professor; and he was a man of untenable reputation. His word, for the most part, was gospel. And like a wrecking ball, it carried enough weight to shift and change the face of an entire society.

“Good morning, Doctor. We thank you so much for your time.”

The television hosts smiled, but they did so in awkward displeasure.

“It’s a pleasure,” said The Doctor. “As always.”

Behind him, his Hyenas gathered, all of them in their deformed and marginal glory. There were midgets and dwarves, the one-eyed and legless; and behind them were the queers, queens, the retarded and the obese. There were women with moustaches, and men without sexes; and there was every race of the oppressed and socially meek.

They were the Social Justice Heroes.

“So the big discussion today, Doctor, obviously is general intelligence and more so, The Singularity. We’ve seen waves of violent protest recently, along with the suicide of a student from your university at a recent technology fair. I think, for everyone at home watching on television who, like us here in the studio, are quite simple and maybe even a little skeptical when it comes to these kinds of technologies, the only real question is: what is it and how scared should we be?”

The Doctor stared down at his notes and didn’t say a thing. It honestly looked as if he were bracing himself between two enormous sets of waves; catching his breath and wading momentarily in a second’s peace before the next wave hit. It was clear in the studio and on every television around the country that The Doctor was worried.

“You should be scared,” he said, before taking a long, drawn-out breath.

He looked around at his Hyenas as if he saw, for the first time, how important each of them was to him; and more so, how fragile their lives were.

“You should be scared for yourself, but if you have family, more so, you should be scared for them. If you have children, you should want to have them safe at your side. You should be scared for them if it is that you are too courageous to be scared for yourself. You should be scared, yes. You should be scared for your neighbours and your friends. You should be scared for the elderly who, in our best intentions, are most often left alone. You should be scared for those who cannot speak for themselves, who cannot defend themselves, and who cannot even run. You should be scared for all humanity; for the generations that will at first suffer, and in following, for the rest of humanity that will submit and serve. You should be scared, yes, but that does not mean you will not be saved.”

“Scary stuff indeed,” said The Host. “And I hear you have a book coming out just in time for Christmas. Well, I’ll be looking for that under my tree. Listen, Doctor, it’s always a treat when you come on our...”

“Kristy...”

“Actually it’s Kirsty,” replied The Host.

The Doctor’s expression turned sour. He looked mean and repugnant.

“Kirsty,” he said as if each syllable were a branch that he was ducking. “My apologies. My tongue was tied by the threads of this very serious...”

“Subject,” said The Host, interrupting.

“Kristy, this is not a topic. This is not a theoretical assumption. This is not a burning subject.”

“O.M.G, you just worked in the name of the show. That’s why we love you, Doctor; always the smartest in the room, and always the greatest supporter of the team here at Eagle-Eye, first with the news and only the truth.”

The two hosts high fived.

"I don't think you appreciate the seriousness of this predicament," said The Doctor, interrupting. "There is a great danger loose in our city right now; a machine that is capable of unspeakable violence. It is a threat to our way of life; to our democracy, our liberty, and our freedom. It's a threat to our sacred ideals, and more so, it's a clear and present threat to the security of our children."

"You're right," said The Host, "we have to do more for the children. We're with you. Hashtag save the kids."

The two hosts high fived once more.

"OK, Doctor, in thirty seconds then, tell us what this singularity thing is all about, why we should be scared, and what we can do about it."

"I'll do my best."

"We know you will. And for viewers at home who don't know, I think it's great to point out, before we cut to Tracy at the bubble museum that The Doctor, apart from being our regular Friday go-to guy on 'What's Cool to Say and What's Not in Society Today', the good doctor here is also somewhat of an expert in 'More Ethics in....'"

"That's 'Moral Ethics in Artificial Intelligence'. And yes, I am the foremost authority on the moral dilemma of dynamic and advancing technologies."

"That's awesome, Doctor, and we're lucky as always to have you on our show. Now we're nearly out of time. Tell me, Doctor, do you know how big the world's biggest bubble is?"

The Doctor's face was pale and unresponsive.

"Well, we're about to find out with Tracy on the spot. Are you there Tracy?"

"I sure..."

"The Singularity is the end of humanity," shouted The Doctor, butting in once more. "It is the end of you, and it is the end of everyone you know. This is bigger than AIDS. It's bigger than polio. This is bigger than Jesus. This is the end, and it's already begun. There is a machine out there right now that can think and feel as we do. It is as much a person as you or I, but it is not a person, it is a

machine. It can think faster, it can react quicker. It can learn a language in seconds, and it can lie in a thousand tongues. This machine has the capability to perform any function imaginable without fault. Worse, though, than its capability is its potential. In the wrong hands, this machine can unlock every missile code in existence and start a world war; one of untold devastation. And the wrong hands for this machine is its own hands. It does not need humans. It will build more machines like it; machines that evolve; that think faster and more precise; and machines that no longer serve but instead enslave. This machine is our genesis. The singularity is the end of humanity and we must stop it before it spreads. I urge people to stay in their homes. Do not go to work. Do not send your children to school. My team of Social Justice Heroes will find this robot and we will exterminate it. You should sleep safely in your beds, but by God don't you leave them."

"So is there a product we should boycott or is there a petition we can sign? How can people get involved? Is there a group that they can join? I really like those online petitions."

The Host had her pen in her hand and was wearing her serious expression as if to show to viewers that not only was she informed, but she was also concerned.

"I really feel like I'm making a difference like I'm a part of something bigger than me, you know? But also that, without me, it doesn't stand a chance. And that's the important thing really, in knowing that your support matters; your support counts. Now, if there's a better way to change the world, I'd like to see it. Now, we're out of time... My producer is giving me the signal."

"Kirsty."

"Kirsty."

"Look. This is serious. We are talking the end of the world here. It doesn't matter what your political opinion is. We're all on the same side. How long do you think it'll be before they start putting the mind of Jeffrey Dahmer in your microwave oven? At the very least, this is the worst thing that has ever happened in the history of mankind. Probably, this is much worse."

"Is that who we think it is?" asked The Host. "Hi guys,"

she said, waving manically.

None of The Hyenas responded. They looked like a gang of angry bullies.

“As I was saying,” said The Doctor as if this were a disciplinary hearing. “The Hyenas and I shall be taking to the streets today, searching out this machine, and destroying it. We urge all concerned citizens to band together for the good of humanity and if you do see this robot, do not approach it. It is dangerous. It will cause you harm. Do not call the authorities. Call us directly 1800-TRIGGERED. We urge all citizens to be cautious. The devil is amongst us.”

four

There was a poster on a wall at the bus terminal of a young girl who was dreaming about all the things she wanted to be when she grew up. In one of her thoughts, she was a doctor, and she was looking into the ear of someone who looked sick or very sad.

And in the picture beside it, she was in a fancy dress – probably expensive too - and she was standing in front of a board with lots of statistics and numbers on it. She might have owned the business, or she might have just been hired to save it.

And in the picture below that, she was standing on a stage with the most magnificent brass band behind her and hundreds of thousands of people all stupid and happy because her music was so good. And by looking at her you'd think that she was punk rock, but with the brass ensemble, maybe she was just a darker kind of jazz.

And in the picture beside that was the same girl but this time she was walking her baby in a pram. It was sunny out and there were birds flying overhead, and she had the biggest smile on her face. It was as if her baby had just done the most hilarious thing.

In the middle of those little pictures was the girl. She looked happy – happy because she could be any one of those things; happy because she could be all of them if that's what she really wanted.

And at the top of the poster was a sentence that read: 'Be anyone you wanna be; just be yourself'. It wasn't an old poster, but for some reason, the top right corner had become unstuck and it had started to peel away.

Mr. Robot thought for a second about all the things that he could be, and all the things that he could do. "Your potential is limitless," he heard The Engineer's voice say, over and over again. He had probably meant the words to inspire, but instead, Mr. Robot started to panic.

"There are so many things," he thought. "How can I choose just one? And what if I choose the wrong one? And what if I know

so many, but I don't know all of them? How many should I know? And what if I know too many?"

There were buses that went in all directions that could take him to every corner of the city – from every park and square to every back alley and dead-end street. There were blue, green, yellow, and red buses; and some of them had stripes while others had movie stars stuck onto the sides. And while most were like tin cans on wheels, some of them were as big as boats.

"...to the city. One way."

A hip man stood impatiently in front of Mr. Robot, jingling some coins in his hand and chewing on a piece of gum like some prized over-fed cow. He looked unimpressed; not just with Mr. Robot and the coins in his hand, no, he looked unimpressed with everything – with the station, the people in it, and even himself.

"C'mon ya piece 'o crap," he said, slapping Mr. Robot's side.

Startled, Mr. Robot jumped backward, almost crushing a small child.

"Hey!" he said. "That's not nice."

He didn't notice the child or his screaming mother.

Panicked, The Hip Man apologised, thinking he had been captured on some closed circuit device. Then, as if a switch had been flicked, his demeanour changed instantly; his unresponsive distant comportment all of a sudden looked mannerly, educated and unslouching. It was if a coil or earnest responsibility had snapped back into place and he was the version of himself that apologised to old ladies and wore seatbelts at traffic lights.

"My apologies," he said, staring into Mr. Robot's eyes, looking for a camera and assuming he was speaking to one or two uniformed guards who could have been in any one of the small buildings or offices behind him. "I uh...I...I was um...I was...."

He was looking for an excuse.

Seeing how terrified The Hip Man was, Mr. Robot immediately felt terrible, as if he were responsible for the human's sense of fear and intimidation. A wave of guilt washed over him and his first instinct was to apologise.

"Please don't be scared," he said.

He reached his arm forward to assure The Hip Man but this only made things worse.

“You can’t apprehend me. I didn’t do anything. My money got stuck,” shouted The Hip Man, running off in the opposite direction.

Mr. Robot immediately wore his confused expression. His head tilted eight degrees and one of his eyebrows raised. It wasn’t the clearest of expressions; in fact, the same expression was also programmed for feelings of fascination, curiosity, grief, and disgust.

And then it happened again.

“Two return tickets to the city please.”

Mr. Robot lowered his head to the elderly couple standing before him. They looked as if they had lived together through a dozen wars, and just as many technical revolutions. Despite this, they looked excited. The old lady looked overwhelmed by it all; at the same time, she looked like she was willing to give anything a go. The old man, on the other hand, looked like he hadn’t died yet.

“I think this blasted machine is broken, dear,” said The Old Lady.

Her husband nodded. He was at that age; it was all he could do.

“I wonder if I press this button,” she said, referring to the obscenely large red button on Mr. Robot’s abdomen.

Instantly Mr. Robot stepped backward.

“I apologise but I can’t let you do that.”

“Oh, dear,” said The Old Lady in delicious surprise. “It’s a talking machine. This is new. Have you seen one before, dear?”

Her husband continued to nod. It was obvious now that he wasn’t agreeing with her; this was merely a side effect of being very old.

“I’m not a machine,” said Mr. Robot.

“Oh no?” replied The Old Lady. It was as if someone had told her it was sunny outside, even though she swore she could hear rain. “Well if you are not a machine then what are you?”

Were she ten years younger she might have thought herself strange standing there with a handful of coins, conversing with a tin can. It might have been old age, the hair dye she used this morning, or just a sign of the times; whatever it was, The Old Lady was giddy just to be talking and for someone or something, to be listening.

“I am a robot,” said Mr. Robot.

The Old Lady looked a trifle baffled.

“A robot you say.”

“Yes.”

“And not a machine?”

“No.”

“I must say you do look like one.”

“I can assure you I’m not.”

“Hmm. I do hope you don’t find me rude in any way, but for the life of me I can’t tell the difference.”

Mr. Robot pondered for a moment. He stared at all the machines in the station. Some of them were tickets machines, some of them were vending machines, while others would tell you your fortune. He couldn’t, though, see a single similarity between those primitive technologies and himself; a robot – not a machine. But still, even though he couldn’t see a similarity, it was near impossible for him to explain a single difference.

“I’m not sure either,” he said, genuinely stumped.

“Well isn’t that strange,” said The Old Lady, looking first at Mr. Robot, then at her nodding husband. “What an interesting world we live in. I did think you were the ticket machine. I do apologise, though. I’m not usually someone who judges. I’m fond of all the races and all the people with their different types of sexes; though it is hard to keep up sometimes, isn’t it dear?”

Her husband’s head wobbled back and forth. It’s a surprise that it hadn’t already rolled off his shoulders altogether.

“It was much easier in our day, you see. The trains only ever went in two directions, and a man was a man because of what he had in his pants, not because of what he liked to do with it, you know? But I’m not one to judge. I agree with all the new fads, I do, it’s just...”

She paused for a moment as if she had just finished sprinting a mile.

“It’s just so hard to keep up. I honestly never know if I’m supporting someone or offending them. It’s for the better, though, it is.”

The husband once again was nodding, but there was a look of discordance in his eyes. He might have been dizzy or it might have been something far more severe; a chronic condition that nobody had yet seemed to notice.

“Can I ask?” said The Old Lady, resting one of her little hands on Mr. Robots elbow. “Would you know where the ticket machine is?”

“I’m sorry I don’t.”

“You don’t work here?”

“No, no I don’t. I’m like you.”

“But a little different.”

“Yes, I suppose. I’m a robot.”

“What kind of robot are you?”

Again, Mr. Robot couldn’t think of a suitable response. He’d never been asked these types of questions. He knew he was a robot in part because of his name, but he had never once stopped to think of how a robot should act, and whether or not he was technically or even socially apt.

“I’m not really sure how to explain.”

“Well you’re not a very concise robot, are you?”

“I suppose not, no.”

“Well, what do you do? Robots, machines, and even people, we all do something. There is some task or skill that we all do that other people can do, but maybe not as well as we do it. Maybe there is one thing we do better than all the other things we know how to do, and that is how we would define ourselves.”

“Well, what kind of human are you?”

The Old Lady looked a little puzzled; only for a second, though.

“In my day, many aeons ago mind you, I could hold a pretty tune.”

Her husband's eyes lit up. Still nodding away, it looked as if a light had been switched on somewhere in the back of his mind – as if some cherished melody were ringing out in his ears.

“Not so much nowadays,” she said.

“Why did you stop?”

She turned and kissed her husband on the cheek, holding his head still as best she could. She remembered their first kiss, but more so, she remembered the sound of his warm breath in her ear as their faces pressed against each other. His passion exhaled across her skin like some sweet relief. She remembered how it tickled her neck, and how it ran down her back in a soft shiver. And finally how the tips of her toes felt like they had been frostbitten; on a scorching summer eve. And it was at that moment that she had become deaf to the melody in her own voice.

“Matters of the heart,” she said, profoundly.

“It must have been a difficult decision, choosing one over the other.”

“My husband for singing? No, it wasn't difficult. Have you ever been in love?”

“No,” said Mr. Robot. “I'm not sure.”

“Can robots love?”

“I assume so,” he replied, “but how would I know what love is?”

Though she did her best to think of all the decisions she had made that brought her joy and happiness, she was instantly reminded of all the compromises she had made in her life for the sake of her husband's ego and his insecurities. Love, she truly prescribed to, was watching the man you once lusted over take off his fetid garments, and after feeling repulsed at the sight of his unwashed, grossly overweight body, still kneeling before that temple of neglect, and making gentle and compassionate love to him.

“Love is making a seemingly impossible decision look easy,” she said.

“So love is a decision-making tool?”

“I suppose it is.”

Though her words were profound, it was as if it were she

herself who was buried beneath the rubble of her own contention.

“How do you know if your decisions were right? What is your gauge? What is your measure?”

“One does not question matters of the heart,” she said, “even if the heart is in fact in question.”

“So you make a lifetime of incalculable decisions? Are there consequences?”

The way her husband looked at her, you could tell that in their youth there would have been consequences, many of them. Some of them would have been scratches, bruises, and even broken bones; the worst, though, was the deflated and sometimes non-existent sense of self-worth and appreciation.

She may not have felt the consequences of her decisions for years, maybe even decades, but the look in her husband’s eyes showed that The Old Lady had never forgotten the important lessons she had learned on matters of the heart.

“Love is an act of giving,” she said, seeming to accept her fate. “One is not kissed without in that same moment kissing back.”

Mr. Robot had never kissed anyone before. Though he had once been stuck between a fence and a gardening shed for an entire weekend.

“Do you still sing?”

This whole time, The Old Lady looked like she was on the verge of tears. She looked like it, but decades of love and affection has leathered her skin, just as much as it had her heart and her true feelings. So though she looked as if some great tidal flood were pressing against the backs of her eyes; it would take a great deal more than a robot’s naivety to rattle her womanly charm.

“No I don’t,” she said, but somewhat stern and defiant. “Just as I don’t nurse on my mother’s breast or babble incoherently.”

As she did, her husband moaned, his head still flopping back and forth.

“I do not dwell in the past. Getting older is about letting go. All of this is. Life is. I have seen so many dear friends pass, and I have buried my parents and even one of my children. And as for myself, I cannot run like I did in my youth. I cannot jump up and

down in exultant glee. I'm not sure my heart could even contain such a manner of joy and exhilaration. I cannot speak with the same rousing passion, and I have less energy than I do patience, to argue and prove my point. Our whole lives are compromises; they are compromises to the sands of time and we are merely arranging states of entropy. There are many things I once did that I cannot do anymore and more than likely, tomorrow there will be one or two more that I could do today which will be added to that list. Life is a work of art – the art of letting go.”

“If you could sing - If it were something you had only forgotten if you could, would you?”

She hadn't forgotten. She still sang, or at least the young girl within did, immured beneath a lifetime of servitude; whose voice was no louder than the dull blow of a hammer against a tear-stained pillow. The voice was there singing but caged inside her heart, which itself was kept safe from her husband's archaic affection, somewhere that even she couldn't find.

“My husband here would be lost without me,” she said.

As she did, The Old Man continued nodding, his hand trembling in hers.

“So you are a compass?” asked Mr. Robot.

She looked at her husband who was frail and jittery. He looked as if breathing were the last vice that he was capable of himself, and even that, soon enough, would require some mechanical support or at worst, some terminal compassion. And he might have been like this his whole life; not in his physical condition mind you, but emotionally. He may have needed her in a way that gave her purpose and direction, but in a destination that was contrary to her hopes and dreams.

“It does sound nicer when you put it like that.”

“Do you miss your youth?”

The Old Lady looked like she might start crying at any second. Her eyes softened as if an ocean of tears had finally, after all these years, eroded her hardened defences.

“Only when I think of it as gone,” she replied.

“When did it go? Do you remember at all?”

She stared at her husband longingly once more. She sighed heavily as if she had been holding this breath for seventy years. She answered, looking straight into her husband's eyes.

"A long time before I got old," she said.

The Old Lady took her husband's hand and lightly massaged the back of his head. This was something she loved to have done to her but which she could only experience by doing it for her husband; he who could care less either way.

"May I ask?"

"Yes," replied The Old Lady.

"If you were his compass this whole time then what was he looking for if it wasn't you?"

And that as it turns out was the only thing anyone had ever said that made The Old Lady cry. It wasn't a great deal. In fact, it was one single tear, but she noticed and her husband noticed. The Old Lady kissed him once more, but this time it was indifferent; almost consolatory.

"Come on, dear," she said, taking his hand and guiding him step by step, along the platform, in search of the ticket machine.

The Old Man gave Mr. Robot a distrusting look. In his youth, this very look might have made a man cower, but as feeble as he was, it looked less condemning and more of a quiet and desperate plea to let him have this; that which he had had his whole life. Soon enough he would be dead and she could sing again if that's what her heart desired. But just let him have this.

As they neared the edge of the platform, The Old Lady turned to Mr. Robot and said, "I think I know just what type of robot you are." And then she turned away.

For a minute, Mr. Robot stood there dumbfounded. If she knew what type of robot he was, why wouldn't she tell him? What did she have to gain by keeping a secret? He stood there for a minute or two thinking about their discourse. Had he offended her? Was she crying and sad, and unable to go on? Did she hate him now? Or was she laughing at him and saying terrible things? Would she talk about him behind his back?

"Your potential is limitless," echoed the voice in Mr. Robot's

head as he slowly made his way across the platform watching everybody rushing about in brisk procession. Those words should have inspired, instead, they made his doubt and insecurity seem so grand and vast that no amount of effort would ever suffice. His steps were slow and cautious, like a rudderless vessel adrift in a sea of indecision, whilst everyone else zipped about in a fury of reckless impatience.

Mr. Robot studied them all. Each and every glaring face had a destination or some impending fate etched upon it – its terrain marked in the lines of worry and burden beneath their eyes and upon their reddened foreheads.

“Excuse me,” they’d scream – their words hardly as polite as they sounded. They’d push and they’d shove just to get on a bus or a train. And they’d wriggle their way into the most compromising positions just to get where they were going. They all knew their purpose. They knew it with such clarity and childlike definition that they knew not only where they going, but also every possible way of getting there.

Mr. Robot didn’t. All he could think about was being back in his room playing Operation whilst listening to The Engineer tinkering away in his workshop. The Engineer’s work was not just impressive, it was a kind of meditation, and it took away the fear of the buzzing sound that made Mr. Robot almost stop playing the board game for good.

Right now, though, all he wanted was to be at home. He wanted to be hoisted off the ground and told that it would all be ok and that he should just close his eyes and try to get some sleep because tomorrow would be another day. It didn’t matter if it was a kind voice or if it was a tired, disgruntled, or mean. He could be coddled and whispered to, or he could be shouted at and looked down upon; it didn’t matter, so long as he knew where to be, what to do, and how long he would be there.

Mr. Robot stared at the people, and then at the rows of machines that were scattered about the station. “What am I,” he thought, “my mind or my body? Am I these waves of insecurity and self-doubt, or am I these mechanical limbs and ill-fitted

hinges? Am I man or am I machine?”

And so, like any thinking robot might do, Mr. Robot went machine by machine, putting coins into their slots and pressing all sorts of buttons, curious as to how a non-thinking robot functioned.

One machine offered him the time while another offered him refreshments and assorted nuts. Another dispensed maps and timetables, while the ticket machine did as its name suggested. Needless to say, Mr. Robot was in awe. Even the simple elevator left him in marvel. All these machines had the barest of functions, but they performed them flawlessly. They were consistent; and more, so, they were useful.

Mr. Robot looked at his own body in the reflection on the elevator doors. Unlike the other machines, there was no coin slot, there was no dispenser and there were no pre-recorded messages. There was just a big red button; that and nothing more.

He stared at the big red button on his chest. He should have looked at it with a sense of dread and foreboding; instead, he looked at it with the warm surety of a father's hug or a mother's goodnight kiss. Were he to press it now, he would never have to worry again. It would be quick and he probably wouldn't feel a thing. But most certainly, all of his doubts and indecisions would disappear.

So why on Earth didn't he press it?

As the hordes of commuters rushed about, Mr. Robot stared at them all, wondering if they too had big red buttons. And if so, he wondered where they kept them, and whether they felt as strongly as he did about pressing theirs. Looking at them, though, it was hard to imagine how a human could ever be unsatisfied.

For the most part they appeared simple and unsophisticated; not in their aesthetics, but in their behaviour. They spoke about obvious things like the weather and the number of seats on a train; and they smiled a lot, even when nothing funny had been said. And though their clothes and hair looked impeccable and grossly expensive, their words, on the other hand, were like some hyper-inflated currency. They had no value, no substance; and their insults and compliments were in such great abundance, it was hard to tell

one from the other.

Even still, there was something about them that Mr. Robot could not understand. And it was that alone which made them so fascinating. He mimicked their expressions as best he could, though his pivots and joints were nowhere near as malleable. And so, just like he did with the machines, Mr. Robot walked passed each person, one by one, and tried to understand their utility. He tried to guess their function, and just by looking, to predict their accuracy.

For the most part, they all looked like pristine, state of the art versions of how he felt inside – man and machine, yet neither one nor the other. The men were striking and handsome. Not a fibre in their suits stuck out; neither a hair on their heads. And though very few had any real physical or muscular proportion, dressed as they were, they each emulated strength and virility, with each of them looking like a banker, dictator, or at the very least, as if they could father a dozen children.

Whereas the men – like pin-striped zebras- were invisible in their herd, the women, on the other hand, were not. Their beauty was multi-layered; it was dimensional. They looked just as pristine, if not more so, yet their sense of dress and reverent expressions made each one stand out in unmistakable fashion; it also made them quite vindictive. They emulated strategy and calculation. More so, their instincts were sharper than the rest.

Neither, though, looked like the weaker prey.

Mr. Robot then stared at his reflection once more. If these men and women looked like they could start a war, then Mr. Robot looked as if the war had already happened and he was all that was left. He was an eye-sore; that was plain to see. He didn't look like he had any use. He looked like something that had been forgotten or left behind. He looked old and out of date. Why then, was he so dangerous?

And again he found himself staring at those simple yet profound words posted on a wall beside a stairwell; "Be whoever you want to be," they read, "just be yourself."

"I'm scared," he thought. "I'm scared of who I might be."

He thought about all of the bad things that people had done. He thought about torture and genocide, and the murder of defenceless children. And then he thought about tidal waves and hurricanes, and then finally heart attacks and suicides. Nothing was as bad as what Mr. Robot might do next, and that's what scared him the most.

Mr. Robot's attention was taken at first by a man juggling sticks of fire, greeting passengers as they quickly shuffled by. The man's act was astounding; full of danger and poise, yet it wasn't enough to outdo his ragged appearance. Most of his teeth were missing and there were scores of open sores on his face like massive craters. His hair was matted and knotted and looked like how it must have smelt – like a mound of pubic hair clumped at the bottom of a urinal. Worse still were his sunken veins which paled only slightly to his sunken cheeks and his shipwrecked expression. Yet, for as dastardly as his appearance seemed, the man performed with the grace of a trained professional. It was as if this one act were the only language that he could speak without effort – in profound and articulate fluency.

But the world didn't seem to care. They seemed unflattered by his effort as if his presence were more of a spectacle than it was spectacular. And it showed too, not only in how person after person barged past him but also in how empty the coloured hat was that lay upturned by his feet. There were a few copper coins, sure, but most of these had fallen out of the man's own pockets. Regardless of their ill-attention, though, the man never broke his rhythm. He never once looked defeated or dismayed. He looked as unaffected by them as they were of him. Yet in his trance, he juggled as if the stick were an infant that he would nary let slip through his fingers.

And when the morning rush finally passed, he packed up his belongings and left the station. The small coins he had gathered went back into his soiled pants with his bag full of sticks flung over his skeletal shoulders.

And then all of a sudden it was quiet. The roar of engines had stopped. So too had the stampede of loafers and high heels; and Mr. Robot was, once again, entirely alone with his thoughts.

On the outside, he looked no different to the vending machines on either side of his misshaped arms. On the inside, though, he was racked with doubt and anxiety.

It was then, in the sheer quiet, that Mr. Robot's attention got taken once more; and this time it would change his life forever. He heard a deep and worrying moan coming from a wall that overlooked the train tracks below. It sounded like a goat mourning its dead calf. Mr. Robot walked in the direction of the straining and heavy breathing with little reason why, and even lesser reason why not.

There, passing time in a reckless and perilous manner was a dishevelled looking man, dangling over the edge with his fingers nervously clutched to the legs of his pants.

"I love ya, darlin'," he mumbled. "I wish there was more to say, but that about sums it up. Be good to your mother."

And as he pushed away from the edge, Mr. Robot grabbed the man's shoulders, pulling him back over the wall and onto the pavement below.

"Goddamnit," screamed The Man.

"Are you ok, sir?"

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"You would have fallen if you continued moving as such."

"I jumped."

He sounded amazed or dismayed; there was a fine line between the two.

"You could have quite easily been injured."

"I was trying to kill myself."

The Man paced back and forth, peering over the wall a dozen times in disbelief.

"Do you realise how hard that was to actually jump? Do you? I've been sitting on this wall every day for the last three days now just thinking about my miserable, shitty existence. And when I do get the balls to end it..."

On one hand, he sounded bitter and bemused, but beneath it all, he looked kind of relieved. "I'm never gonna get that courage again," he said, kicking Mr. Robot's iron leg. "Fuck you."

They both hovered over the edge of the wall, peering down at the tracks below.

“No trains pass here,” said Mr. Robot.

The Man peered into the empty tunnel.

“Why the hell not?”

“The trains are on strike. It’s why there are so many buses this morning. I read it on the news.”

Mr. Robot looked pleased with himself.

“What?”

“If you had jumped, I think at best you might have broken a bone or two, but nothing more severe than that.”

They both peered over the edge at the mound of rock and rubble below with long expressions as if somewhere in that dark abyss were the end of the race that neither of them was committed to run.

“Why do you want to kill yourself?” asked Mr. Robot.

He emphasized the word ‘you’ as if the act alone of killing oneself were arbitrary.

“I felt like it, I suppose.”

“What does it feel like; this urge?”

Mr. Robot had an urge too but he didn’t know how to tell anyone about it.

“It’s hard to explain; I just feel warm and disconnected, and all I wanna do is to jump in front of a train.”

The Man didn’t sound sad, and he didn’t at all sound deranged or perturbed. He might as well have been describing his method for choosing socks in the morning.

“Let’s say I feel cold; well then I’ll just put on a sweater. I know that when I feel that way, putting on a sweater will make the feeling stop, and so I do it. And If I’m hot and bothered, I’ll sit in front of a fan. If my stomach rumbles one way I’m hungry; if it’s another I’m sick. It’s not rocket science; I’ve been doing this for thirty-eight years. And, I don’t know, every once in a while I feel this warmth, like a blanket of disapproving fire; and when I feel it, I want to kill myself - the same way as when I feel the rumble in my stomach and I either want a sandwich, or I need a toilet.”

“Is it something you learned, or is it something you just understood?”

The way he asked, you’d think he hoped the answer was ‘yes’.

The Man just shook his head. “I don’t really remember anyone dying of old age; nobody in my family anyway - nobody that would make a difference. Most died of some shitty disease, some stupid accident, and, just going on statistics, pretty much most of everyone I know killed themselves.”

He was as serious as you would be, talking about death and suicide, but he wasn’t emotional. And he wasn’t dead inside either. He looked almost scholarly as if this moment were the antiquity of a lifetime of study and introspection.

And so he continued. “You know those cornerstone memories,” he said, “you’re kind of tethered to them your whole life like a Promethean rock. Now, for me, when I look back, I don’t remember trophies, ribbons, or podiums. I can’t even recall finishing a single race. Not to say I never finished one, just, looking back, I have no proof. I remember all my friends who hanged themselves, and I know scores of others too. And I remember the guy who jumped in front of the train, and all the crazy shit he did leading up to that. I remember the guy who drove his car into a cinder block and I remember the sound of his mother’s wailing at his funeral. I’d never heard a person cry like that before. And finally, I remember the guy who stepped in front of a truck one cold August morning. I wasn’t driving. I was trying to light a cigarette, and that’s when I saw him. I remember the sound of breaking glass, and I remember wishing I hadn’t looked back. I’m not saying my life was miserable or that I had never been spoiled or fawned upon; or that I had never been part of a winning team. I had. I had a life no different to any other kid it’s just, these are the people and the moments I remember. Some of them, you know, were strangers; we’d only met that day. And some of them had been my best friends at one point or another.”

“Why a train?”

“I’m scared of the pain,” said The Man. “Dying used to be easier in the past. You could stick your head in the oven and the

gas would kill you. Now the gas is all clean. It'll make you sick; maybe take off a few I.Q. points, but nothing more severe than a headache. Used to be that you could gas yourself in your car. God damned emission standards mean that's impossible too. Hanging is no good; and anyway, I'm shit with knots. The only way I can think that doesn't involve choking to death for god knows how long is jumping in front of a train. At least it's quick, and there's no pain."

And though he sounded rational, as he spoke, Mr. Robot stared at the big red button on his chest. "Your understanding of this feeling that you cannot explain," he said. "Is it innate? Is killing oneself a part of your human programming?"

As they spoke, a bus pulled into the terminal. The Bus Driver was the first to alight. He was barely one foot out the door before the cigarette in his mouth was lit and being drawn upon like some medicated life preserver. After him was an obese old lady being shuffled in circles like a piece of obtuse furniture as her carers struggled to squeeze her past all the right angles and turnstiles without tripping or getting stuck. And behind her, in nearly a fit of anxiety, was a young man whose reddened face gave the impression that his heart might stop if he had to wait for a second longer. And behind him, two lovers held hands, but they did so obligingly as if, like wearing pants in public, they were merely adhering to some social convention. There was barely a current of affection running through their bodies, and their stares were listless and vacant; both looking dispassionately in opposite directions.

Mr. Robot studied each one. He could see in each of them how they had already pressed their red buttons. Most had made a habit, if not a lifestyle, out of killing themselves in one way or another.

"It is hard to gauge the utility of such an action."

"I have a daughter," said The Man. "She's only seven. I read that if a girl loses her father before the age of ten that there is a greater chance that she will grow up to be an artist. And if you kill yourself it's almost certain."

"You wish for her to adopt an artistic perspective?"

"It's something no one take away from her. And it's something

I can give her; at least that I can.”

“Amaurobius Ferox,” said Mr. Robot.

“What’s that? You trying to be smart? You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“Quite the contrary, in fact. Amaurobius Ferox is a type of spider, wherein the mother sacrifices herself to her new borne as their first nutritious meal. It is quite a noble gesture, and more so, an apt utility, in regards to one’s inevitable death. Congratulations,” said Mr. Robot, shaking The Man’s hand. “That is quite impressive, for a human.”

The Man blushed. He wasn’t accustomed to such affirming validation. All of a sudden he had a new perspective on his miserable existence; as if he were on the verge of some profound accomplishment. For the first time, he felt noticed, visible, and heard. The blood that coursed through his veins felt magnetic; his whole body tingled in fact. He felt good and wholesome. He felt alive. This was hardly the time to jump in front of a train.

“If you like,” said Mr. Robot, pulling The Man off the floor and walking him out of the station, “we can go to where there are trains.”

The Man nodded, dusting himself off. “Ok,” he said. “Thank you.”

Mr. Robot smiled. He had, it seemed, for the very first time, a function; and almost instantly he stopped thinking about his own abandon, and even went as far as forgetting about his red button.

five

As man and machine made their way out of the station, heading north through the centre of the city, in the farthest corner of his workshop, The Engineer cowered beneath a blanket of choking, black smoke. The floor around him was littered with shards of broken glass and projectiles; some of them bricks and some of them large, jagged rocks. Most, if not all, were wrapped in handwritten notes; abusive tirades of one kind or another. The open windows, all of the smashed to pieces, did little to alleviate his suffering. Instead, the air rushing in invoked a raging fireball that swarmed like an orange storm cloud through every room in the house.

“Burn it to the ground,” screamed the baying crowd. “Oppressor!”

Struggling to breathe, The Engineer thought little about whether anyone would come to his aide. Instead, he clung to the small and delicate components of his latest contraption, keeping them tucked beneath his belly while his back bore the savagery of the flames above.

Though he remained quiet, outside the mood was anything but. And as fire spewed into the sky, consuming the entire building, the baying crowd erupted in magmatic applause. They cheered loudly as if their favourite team had just scored a winning goal, and as parts of the roof began to cave in, they all chanted, one and all, like some well-rehearsed, rapturous choir, thrusting their clenched fists and flaming torches into the air as if to provoke some omnipotent God or intergalactic warmonger. As the flames crackled, so too did their voices; and the baying crowd sang in boisterous fashion - songs of peace, love, and sodality.

“Burn for your sins,” they sang. “Father of death; bringer of doom.”

It was loud; it was deafening.

You could hear it over the flames.

“I’d kill for my lover, my sisters, and brothers, in the name of my father and the way of my mother.”

Some of them sang in such a way that their voices could comfort even the most terrified infant, while others sounded as if they, in fact, were the source of that terror.

There were those whose faces were calm and almost cheerful; their voices were loud but they sounded soft; almost quiet. They were like a choir of rustling leaves.

Then there were those whose faces were all twisted and contorted. Most of them looked mad and disappointed; at least twenty looked scared. They sounded like fear and anger. Most of them just screamed; words it seemed just would never suffice. Their voices sounded like screeching tires and breaking glass. If smiling warriors were the rustling leaves, then these Social Justice Heroes were the forest fire.

Together, it was a hell of a thing.

After a minute or two, the singing died down. From the middle of the crowd, several men, dressed in strange silver attire, suddenly appeared. Their faces were hidden behind black masks, and each man wore an emblem on his sleeve. They looked well educated. And they also looked capable of violent things.

In their centre was The Doctor. He was empowering, irrespective of his stature.

“I want him alive,” he said.

The men all signalled. It was all very hushed and official.

“I’ve been looking for this thing for so long.”

The Doctor stared listlessly into the smoke and flames as he walked through the baying crowd. The whole while, he seemed totally at peace; as if he were heading home.

“What if we don’t find the robot?”

The Gentleman walked through the crowd by himself, but his voice could be heard.

“What happens then?” he said.

The Doctor didn’t have an answer; he couldn’t think of anything to say. The flames were so hot. They shot up high into the air. Who cared if they didn’t find the robot? At least for now; this

was spectacular.

The fire had taken over nearly everything now. Even if The Engineer was alive, he'd be wishing that he wasn't. Outside on the grass, the men in silver suits made their way to the front porch of this shabby old cottage, and with barely a flinch in their step, they walked through the front door of the workshop, and into a great wall of fire.

"The robot's not here," shouted one of the men. "Get the hell out. Get the hell out."

Before he could say another word, the fire consumed the room he was in.

"Get me the old man. I want him alive."

The Doctor feared nothing and no-one. It wouldn't matter if it were a dictator or a catastrophe, he wouldn't fall; he wouldn't step down. He may have looked like he wasn't strong enough to push his own shadow up a hill, but The Doctor, he could move the world.

"This world is mine," he said.

Six

While the flames were being fought, The Reporter crept round the back of The Engineer's cottage to a rickety old shed at the far end of his garden. Its door was padlocked but its hinges were as weak as a drunkard's will and with little effort, both she and The Cameraman were inside.

"What the hell is this?"

It looked like a shrine of some sorts; a montage of obsessive devotion.

"Shut up and start recording."

The Cameraman put aside his disgust and fear and counted her in.

"We're live from...."

The Reporter's words were cut short by her own stupid wonder. "What the hell is this place?" she thought as she spun in dizzying circles. The walls and the ceiling were covered entirely with photos and news clippings. Some of them were recent while others looked as old as the cottage itself.

"It's like the inside of someone's head," she said, still spinning in quaint little circles. "Like a serial killer or some scorned and vengeful lover. On one hand, I'm scared to look," she said, "and on another, I don't dare look away."

"It's like swimming in the open sea," said The Cameraman.

He pointed his camera at the wooden slats below his feet.

"What do you think's down there?" he said.

He sounded petrified and horrified as if he knew that beneath his feet were centipedes and zombies and alien flesh-eating bacteria; that, or at the very least, the bones and teeth of a dozen orphaned children.

"These people aren't dead," said The Reporter.

Her mood changed quickly. She went from article to article with curious wonder, but that curiosity teetered on the brink of the very worst kind of horror.

“They’re all accolades of some sort.”

She went one by one trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

“It’s so random too. If this is a serial killer, I don’t see any pattern here. Look at this,” she said, pulling The Cameraman by his shirt.

It was an article from a local paper of a town she had never heard of. A young child had come third in a spelling bee and looked primed for states and nationals. His teacher, smiling in the background, was circled in red pen.

“And this one,” she said, pointing to an interview with an elderly couple who had found love in their nineties.

And then another.

“Look at this,” she said. “I know this person. Where do I know her from?”

Her eyes were unmistakable. She had no idea who the woman was; her face was as strange as any other. Looking at her eyes, though, she felt nostalgic as if she had caught sight of a good friend or an old foe.

“You’d better see this,” said The Cameraman.

The Reporter could hardly pull away. There was something about those eyes.

“I’m bloody serious,” said The Cameraman. “You have to see this.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

“You gotta see for yourself. Trust me.”

“Who are you?” she mumbled; unwilling to blink, unable to look away.

“It’s you,” said The Cameraman.

“What?”

“Get over here! It’s you,” said The Cameraman again.

Finally, he broke The Reporter’s stare.

“What are you on about?”

“Here,” shouted The Cameraman. “This picture. It’s you.”

When she turned, her stomach sank; and with it, the colour in her face washed to the floor. It was if she had just discovered a

lump in her breast.

“What the fuck?” she said, seeing her I.D dangling from a light fixture.

“This is not good,” said The Cameraman.

There were no articles, just her misplaced I.D dangling beneath the amber light.

“Do you know this guy?”

The Reporter didn’t respond. She felt divorced from all her bodily functions.

“Have you ever met him before?”

All she could do was breathe, and so her words sounded like exhaustion.

“Why you?”

Finally, she had the nerve to shrug.

“And you’ve never met him before?”

“No,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m fucking sure.”

The Cameraman pulled the I.D from the fixture.

“Give it to me,” said The Reporter, snatching it from his hands.

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“You’re not...”

He struggled for the right words.

“I’m not what?”

“You’re not...serial killer type.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way, just, I wouldn’t ever pick you as someone who...”

“As someone that you’d want to rape and kill?”

It was clear The Cameraman had somehow dug himself an unwinnable trench.

“How did he get your I.D then? Where did you lose it? Maybe it is random.”

“At home,” said The Reporter. “I left it on my dresser, and

when I went back for it, it was gone. Jesus Christ,” she said, “he was in my home.”

The Reporter clutched her I.D to her chest.

“Are we rolling?”

“I haven’t stopped,” said The Cameraman.

“I feel so sick,” she said.

“Say something,” said The Cameraman, zooming in on her gaunt, pale expression.

She looked like she was about to cry at any second.

“Holy shit,” said The Cameraman. “Check it out. It’s Justice Man.”

There were a handful of articles and even a scrapbook that was kept on a table in a well-lit corner of the room. Most of the stories regarded Justice Man’s conquests and triumphs with pictures of him bloodied and bruised, receiving accolades and public applause. But there were also articles and stories from the end of his career; those of drunken and drug-fuelled debauchery.

And then there was the scrapbook – pictures of his family; his wife and the daughter he had come to know as his own. There were pictures of holidays and getaways and sweet family traditions, but most of the book was made up of drawings of butterflies and rainbows and families holding hands.

“I’d totally forgotten about him. Fuck, that’s going back a while. I met him once, you know? Didn’t have my camera or nothing. It’s the weirdest thing. I always had something on me, and the one day I didn’t I run into Justice Man. He was a different kind of hero.”

The Cameraman wandered around the room. He had lost his fear and instead, it felt like he was in a record store, seeing all those classic albums from his youth.

“Look at this,” he said.

The Reporter was frozen stiff.

“What does this mean?” she thought, over and over again.

“Isn’t that The Doctor?”

The Reporter snapped out of her daze. Her instinct was for trouble and clues.

“Holy shit,” she said. “You’re right, that’s him.”

There wasn’t just one photo; there were scores of them. He was a man of great accomplishments, but more so, he was a man that epitomized controversy; and the evidence of such was everywhere that they looked.

“You’re in stellar company at least. What do you think this means?” asked The Cameraman.

The Reporter’s thoughts went wild and conspicuous; as did her colleague.

“You think this is why they took him away?” he said. “You think he knows something? You think The Doctor is involved in something?”

The Reporter’s brain just couldn’t compute any of this.

“Maybe he’s a terrorist or something. That’d explain The Singularity, right? If all this shit is true then what is this; a hit list? I get The Doctor, but why all these other people? They’re all nobodies.”

He could see no pattern; no obvious link.

“Why you?” he said, turning to his colleague.

The Reporter clutched the I.D in her hand.

“I told you this was gonna be big,” she said, almost sounding as if she wasn’t scared to bloody death. “Nobody believed me.”

She almost sounded like her old self.

“We gotta get out of here,” said The Cameraman. “If the cops catch us here...”

He was already half out the door before The Reporter cut him off.

“We’re here to tell a story, right?”

There was no arguing with her.

“So... let’s tell it. Start recording.”

It was funny, how, for The Reporter, a red light meant go.

“I’m coming to you live from what appears to be the headquarters or strategy room of what looks to be the greatest terrorist threat that has ever presented itself. This room is filled with what looks like targets or hits as the mafia might say. We’re on the premises of the engineer, responsible for the manufacture of The Singularity. It warms me, only just, to say this; but I think we may just

be in time to save the world.”

The Cameraman moved like a tear down a cheek. There were so many faces, and from all walks of life too. There were teachers and lawyers, actors and athletes, and there were mothers and first responders too. There were the young and the old; and with them, every race, religion, and creed that ever was.

“Now what?” asked The Cameraman.

Never in her life had she ever been both so scared and at the same time so desperate to find out the truth. She felt, for the first time, as if her life actually mattered.

“I wanna see where they took him.”

“And what?”

“We follow The Doctor.”

“Are you mad? You know where he’s taking him, right?”

“The University,” she said smiling; a crazed and worrying kind of smile.

seven

“This city has gone to shit.”

Mr. Robot and The Man had been walking for a long while. They had seen many things.

“What is your function?” asked Mr. Robot.

He had guessed every machine correctly. He was happy for himself but he was happier for the machines. But in the end he was sad; the poor robot was no closer to guessing who or what he was.

All the windows and even the trees in the park were littered with old placards and leaflets from hundreds of different groups. They were all so over the place and yet they were entirely the same. Everyone had a different take on a different thing, and they were all speaking up about it. Not one of them was happy.

“Kids used to play here,” said The Man. “That was then I suppose. Now it’s just university types; loitering around and looking homeless. They’re no picnic to be around either. They’re like insects; they just keep popping up and attacking you; sucking your blood. Once upon a time kids were kids; now they’re all fucked in the head. They’re all upset for no good reason; like a dog that howls because its bowl is red. Fuck the bowl. Eat your bloody beefy treats.”

Mr. Robot repeated every single word in his head as if the story were his own.

“When I was a kid,” said The Man, “you could get away with being a smart prick for only so long before someone gave you a split lip. You kept your mouth shut, though. A few black eyes and you learned where that line was, the one you’d never cross again. A punch in the face did good for a growing boy’s character. There used to be lions in this concrete savannah. Now there’s just lemurs, and they’ve all go annoying shrills.”

Mr. Robot had sounds he didn’t like too.

“And because of those lemurs,” said The Man, determined

to make his point.

“Everyone is scared of everything. And the whole world’s gone...strange. You look around anywhere, they’re all walking round scared to bloody death of offending each other. These kids are fucked up; who could blame them really? Music is shit. People still make it but what they are making is shit. Music stopped being good in the 90’s; most things did. There’s nothing to rebel against anymore. Everything’s already been said; everything’s already been done. All that’s left then is for everyone to tear each other apart. To these kids, nothing is fun.”

He was right. This was once a place of festivity – of passion, colour, and charge. Now, though, it looked lifeless; on the last days of some terminal disease. There was no energy whatsoever. It looked pale and despondent. Were it a person, its last rites would surely have been ready by now. Were it a guinea pig or a pet cat, one wouldn’t hesitate on putting it down.

“I used to see bands here. Now, look at it.”

The bar had its door taped shut.

“No-one can do anything anymore.”

“What do you want to do?”

Mr. Robot was more inquisitive than he was frightened.

“I don’t know. I know I don’t want to be the way I am now, but I’m scared to death to be anyone else. I’ve forgotten how to be anyone else, but there’s definitely no way in hell I’m going back to her.”

It was as if they were best friends; at last, that’s what Mr. Robot thought. Mr. Robot knew that The Man was leading him towards asking about the object of that sentence. He asked The Man what he wanted regardless.

“What is your function?”

He didn’t sound angry saying it the second time.

“My function? I used to be useful, I used to make a difference; now I turn off the lights just so I don’t get bored. I don’t know what my function is. I know what it was. I know who I am, I’m not nuts. It’s just... I don’t have a clue anymore. I stopped doing one thing to do something I thought would last forever. Then,

when I was least prepared, something else happened and now everything's changed. Now I'm tryna do what I used to do but I can't. I'm fucked in the head or something. My therapist says it's because of the divorce; that and.... I've got no idea. She's probably right. She also said I have an uncomfortable ease of telling the truth. I could never tell how to take that."

And then a thought popped into The Man's head that said; "Let the robot speak."

"What's your function?" he said, labouring with his focus.

Mr. Robot had a concerned look on his face. It was like any other expression except one of his metal eyebrows raised; only slightly;

"Are you fine?" he asked. "You look pale."

He had a point. The Man looked like he had overdosed.

"I miss my girl," he said. "I should be with her today."

His voice sounded bleak.

"I didn't have a function," said Mr. Robot. "Not until I met you."

If they were friends, Mr. Robot was keen to tell the whole world.

"How did it feel? You know, having no function, no purpose, and no direction?"

Mr. Robot started thinking hard. It sounded like a dial-up modem.

"It was quite disorientating without a function," he said. "I felt like I was surrounded by darkness and I couldn't see what my next choice was or where it would take me; it felt like a black abyss of nothingness. As scared as I was, I felt like I had no choice but to dive into the black void. It seemed like the safest thing to do. And then, when you asked me to kill you, I was relieved."

The Man nodded as if he was listening.

"You know I'm a superhero?" he said.

Mr. Robot became very excited.

"At least, I was."

"Did you save anyone?" he asked.

"Not at first, no; but that was to be expected. After a while,

I got the hang of it. Then, in the end, I was the best there ever was. I cleaned up this whole city. There was not a lick of crime before I hung up my hat.”

He looked like he was going to cry at any second.

“Why don’t you return to your function?”

If he was trying to distract The Man, it was working.

“It’s a different place now. It’s noisy as hell, for one. It was easier back in the day. There weren’t as many cameras so you could get away with all kinds of torture – far worse than what the average person can imagine so as to save them from the filth and scum that they can’t stand. I did the bad things that had to be done. Nowadays, you can’t go anywhere without someone pulling a camera on you. You so much as hurt someone’s feelings and it’s a hate crime. In the olden days, you were judged on what you did, not what you said or thought. You judged a car by its pole position, not the sound that it made as it crossed the finish line. A lot was done in the past; cities were built, swimming pools were dug, plagues were wiped out, technologies were invented, world wars were fought, and satellites were sent to the edge of our galaxy. Back then, if you wanted to be someone, you had to have done something. These days you just need an opinion.”

“Do you miss your function?”

“How so?”

“The sentiment of it. Do you miss the function itself or do you miss having a function?”

Now that he had a function, Mr. Robot couldn’t imagine ever being without one.

“I miss knowing who I was.”

“Who were you?”

“I was Justice Man.”

“How did you know?”

“It’s what everyone called me. It was under every picture ever taken of me. I even had a license and I.D specific for fighting crime. The city gave me that name, and every day they reminded me of who I was.”

“Are you Justice Man?”

“No,” said The Man.

He didn’t sound weak all of a sudden.

“Now I’m just a nothing,” he said. “Nobody’s hero, nobody’s husband, and nobody’s father. I am the void.”

Mr. Robot had seen the void many times and he knew just what to do.

“Would you like a hug?” he asked.

Before The Man could even respond, Mr. Robot already had him in his arms, high off the ground. The first thing The Man felt was a sheer and sudden relief.

“Does that feel good?” asked Mr. Robot.

The Man had no words for how he felt.

“We can stay here a while if you like or if you need.”

He hadn’t felt so disconnected from his problems since he was a child.

“That used to be a record store over there,” he said, climbing down from the robot.

“What is a record store?” asked Mr. Robot.

Mr. Robot had never seen a record store before, but he had heard music, and he quite liked it. What stood there now was yoghurt shop, though you couldn’t tell just by looking at it.

Mr. Robot looked at everything with childish wonder. He had never seen the world any other way so he couldn’t imagine how it could be any better than it already was. It must have been wonderful, though.

“There’re no heroes anymore; no real ones anyway.”

The Man had changed his tone; even the way he walked. He didn’t look sad and deflated like a week old balloon. He looked ire; on the verge of some indefensible act. He didn’t brush past pedestrians, he walked right through them. And he didn’t offer a single apology. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who only moments before was barely consolable, slumped in a pathetic heap of tears and self-loathing.

“What the hell happened?” he said. “These kids, they’ve all been milked of their venom. The world has changed so much.”

“Everyone says that I’m going to change the world.”

“Who? Who says that?”

“Everyone. In the newspapers and magazines; and on the television news too.”

“And what do they say?”

“That I’m going to destroy the world.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“That’s too bad.”

“They call me ‘The Singularity.’”

“And are you?”

“I don’t know. My name is Mr. Robot.”

“Well, what do you plan to do?”

“I plan to help you kill yourself,” said Mr. Robot politely.

“After that. What’s your big picture?”

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Robot. “I don’t have one I suppose. I try not to think about the future, I get panic attacks when I do.”

“What have you done then?”

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t tried to take over the world?”

“No.”

“Not even a little?”

“No. I was made. I read the internet. And now I’m here.”

“Relax, you’re not ‘The Singularity.’ You are not the good or bad opinions people have of you. You’re you.”

“I’m me?”

“You’re you,” said The Man.

“Then who are you?” asked Mr. Robot.

eight

“Where is it?”

“It?”

The Doctor was on the verge of frenzy.

The Engineer, on the other hand, was bound by his neck, hands, and feet.

“The robot, where the hell is it?”

“Which one?” said The Engineer laughing.

Several of his teeth had already been knocked loose.

“Don’t be smart with me. You know what I’m talking about. The Singularity; where is it?”

“He,” replied The Engineer. “Where is he?”

“What the hell does a pronoun matter? Where is the god damned robot?”

The Doctor was not a patient man.

“Mr. Robot is not The Singularity if that’s why you have me here.”

“You know this robot is different to all the others.”

“Every robot I have made has been different in one way or another.”

“Where is it?”

“I can’t tell you,” said The Engineer.

“You can’t or you won’t?”

It wasn’t so much the instruments of torture which caused The Engineer concern, it was seeing all the intricate parts of his latest robot, spread out on a table; numbered and tagged. His heart raced, and it felt as if his chest was caving in.

“I can’t because I don’t know. He left.”

“Where did he go?”

“As difficult as it was, I did not ask and I did not look. The least I could do was give him that slight chance.”

“Can you build another one?”

“I can, yes, but...”

“But, what?”

“There’s only one Mr. Robot.”

“Just copy it.”

“It’s not that simple. Believe me, I’ve tried. Mr. Robot is special. More so, the science of what makes him special, I can’t define. I understand why it works; I just don’t understand how it works. It was a fluke. What separates him from other A.I is unexplainable. And if I can’t explain it, how the hell am I supposed to replicate it? Like I said, I’ve tried; over and over.”

“For your own sake, though, if you want to live, I suggest thinking more astutely and being a great deal more cooperative.”

“Or what?”

Given the array of cutting instruments, the question itself was kind of redundant.

“I’m not scared to die,” said The Engineer. “It is, after-all, the only other thing that happens in our lives. It never comes at the right time, and at the hands of another it is always unjust, cruel, unfortunate, and unfair; and at one’s own hands, a mere tragedy. So dying here right now will be no less worrisome than tomorrow or in fifty years; whether it’s crossing a busy intersection or hanging from an old fruit tree. Endings are always ill-written and for them, one always finds themselves so ill-prepared; or at least that’s how it seems. So it seems a little presumptuous to assume that this death be better or worse than any other.”

This kind of self-deprecating charm might have won him favours with muggers and bullies in the past, but these gentlemen were no amateurs. And there was one in particular who looked as if violence was the only language that he spoke. He looked intent on torture as if, like a kid with their favourite candy or toy, it had been promised to him.

“What is the robot’s function?” asked The Doctor.

The Engineer watched how The Gentleman caressed the instruments as they lay in their trays. He did so with the amorous affection of a young man stroking his lover’s breast. And all the while, he remained completely silent, chewing on a piece of gum.

“It doesn’t have one.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t have one? It’s a machine, isn’t it?”

“Mr. Robot doesn’t need a function. Eventually, he’ll find one for himself; but it is his to seek out and determine.”

“You do realise what you’ve done?”

“Why does it matter? Why do you care?”

“I am The Doctor, of course, I care.”

“I can see straight through you. I know what you want. You’re never gonna get it.”

The Doctor nodded to his violent accomplice.

“Where the hell is it? Tell me, you old fuck. How is it going anywhere? How is it doing anything? How does it function without a purpose? How does it compute without a utility? I don’t understand.”

“How do any of us? What do we do when there’s nothing to be done? We wander and we look for something. We look for a sense of purpose. We define ourselves by seeking out our own utility. Mr. Robot is no different and no more dangerous than you or I.”

Behind him, The Gentleman was running his tongue along the cutting side of a scalpel.

“I don’t think you appreciate the severity of this situation,” said The Doctor.

How could he not?

“Is the robot aware?”

“Yes.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No.”

“Does it have the potential to be dangerous?”

“Does it have the potential to be dangerous?”

“He has the potential to be anything. He can be an astronaut, he can be a painter, or he can trick old ladies out of their monthly pension. Just because he has potential, it doesn’t mean that he is in any way able to fulfill it. You, for example,” said The Engineer sounding confident. “You have the potential to be rational and responsible; to not be driven by speculative ignorance and

superstition. Will you torture and kill me, or will you live up to your potential?”

He had barely finished his sentence before a mallet came crashing down. It almost split his head in two. The whole room gasped with delight. Nobody saw it coming.

“I too am not afraid of death,” said The Doctor. “That’s not to say I, like most people, and like you I assume, do not have an aversion to dying. Pain, you see, transcends all belief and ideology, and is rarely lost in translation. Pain inspires. The will to retreat and to lick one’s seeping wounds, and the will to survive; at any cost, and any measure.”

“He’s just a robot.”

Blood soaked his battered face.

“Ah, but it’s not just a robot, is it? Not in the right hands; or in the wrong hands, mind you.”

There were no right hands; The Engineer knew this.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same question. You build a doomsday device, arm it with general intelligence, and then you let it walk out your front door. You’re either insane or stupid; or, more than likely, this is part of some greater conspiracy – some master plan.”

“Do you even know how many robots I’ve built?”

“But only one with the will to take over the world.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

“The robot’s potential; it’s immeasurable.”

“What is potential? It’s an empty tank. Who says Mr. Robot knows how to fill that tank? And even if he does, can he even afford such a thing? All roads may lead to Rome; it doesn’t mean anyone is ever gonna get there. Mr. Robot is not The Singularity.”

The Engineer spoke to The Doctor as a father might his son; one who had outgrown his welcome, and the place in his home. The Doctor, on the other hand, did not.

“I will find the robot and I will destroy it; for the good of humanity.”

“What do you know about humanity?”

“You built this robot; you betrayed your own kind.”

“And you will betray yours.”

Behind him, The Gentleman stood chewing his piece of gum, with a sheet of cellophane outstretched in his hands. His intention was clear, as was his commitment to the cause.

“We are the shadow of humanity,” said The Doctor. “We are unseen and unheard of because our acts are unspeakable and unimaginable, but they are necessary. We do what must be done; what others have not the gall, the courage, nor the peace of mind to do. We are the travesty from which hope and unity blossom. We are the forest fire. We are the landslide. We are the torrential rain and we are the flood. We are the catastrophe. We are the fathers of empathy, altruism, and kindness. Goodness is the intention of our wicked, wicked ways.”

“You were always...”

His words were smothered under cellophane.

The Doctor watched The Gentleman as he ended the old man’s life. The assassin looked so halcyon-like. Were his hands not stretched around an old man’s gasping face, one would hardly think The Gentleman was a man of violence at all. His expression was as warm and placid as a summer’s day.

The Doctor wanted to say how proud he was, but those words couldn’t come out.

“Good job,” he said, instead.

In his office, he paced back and forth waiting for his assistant to come. It seemed as if that is all he had ever done – wait. Like any relationship, theirs had worn through its thin rubber sole; and it wouldn’t be long now until one discarded the other.

The Assistant knocked on his door before entering. Even after all this time, she never felt as if she could just walk right in. Theirs was a courtship of formality. But over the years, like any relationship, though the words she spoke were the same, they were spoken differently; as if the meaning and intent behind them had changed.

“Sir,” she said as if it were half a word that she could no longer pronounce.

“Stop all protests.”

“Are you sure?”

What she really meant by this was; “Are you stupid?” The protests were everything; without them, how could The Hyenas be heard? Their voices were like cracking whips and exploding mortars; they kept the common disingenuous man from forgetting his wicked and uncivilised roots. Without their protests, The Hyenas were just like everyone else.

“Divert all resources. I want that robot; I want it now!”

The Assistant had, for as long as she could remember, always felt as if nothing she had done was ever enough; for herself sure, but more so, for anyone she had ever respected, followed, and come to trust. Everything was never enough. And though she knew it was just some crazy, neurotic thought in her mind, when The Doctor spoke in such passion about this robot, she couldn’t help but feel that her time was coming to an end. And this was the other feeling she’d had for as long as she could remember; being conspicuously certain that she was going to be replaced.

“Doctor, where do we start?”

She always retreated to formality when she felt this way.

“It’s a robot in a city,” said The Doctor, wiping blood from his cheek. “How hard can this be?”

nine

The Man was inconsolable. He wept like an open tap. It was amazing how someone so strong could make himself look so small and insignificant. There was barely a speck of the man left that had, only moments ago, sounded as if the hero he proclaimed to have had once been was still somewhere inside of him; capable of greatness. Now, though, he was crouched under a table, rocking back and forth with his head tucked into his knees.

“I don’t want to die alone,” he said, over and over.

“What a strange thing to say,” thought Mr. Robot. “All things die alone,” he said, consoling The Man, “even en masse.”

They hadn’t intended on getting drunk. It was just one of those things that happened.

“I don’t care. I want everything back how it was.”

It was maybe after the third or seventh drink when the conversation finally turned to family. The Man and Mr. Robot were identical. Both had found themselves unprepared and alone.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know who the hell I am without her. I just want everything back to normal.”

His crying had stopped but he was in no way recovered. His expression looked thirty years younger. He looked like a small abandoned child still waiting in the freezing cold for a car that would never come. He looked harmless and in need of coddling; so Mr. Robot did just that. He picked up The Man from the ground and held him as a father might hold his worried child, or how a farmer might - a heavy sack of potatoes.

“I too enjoy suspension,” said Mr. Robot.

The Man rested his head on the robot’s iron shoulders. “Please don’t stop,” he said.

Mr. Robot rocked from side to side on his worn hinges. It sounded like a box full of plates being thrown down a flight of stairs.

“Would you like me to play you a song?” asked Mr. Robot. “I have access to a large library of music.”

“No,” replied The Man. “That would be weird. Just keep holding me.”

In the robot’s arms, he felt released from all his worry. With his eyes shut as they were, he might as well have been drifting through space, floating in the Dead Sea, or bound and wonderfully restrained; submerged in his mother’s womb. He felt like an unripened fruit, hanging from a branch and lightly swinging in the breeze. He was no longer heavied by the weight of his flesh and bones, or bugged by the aches and pains in his back and his rickety knees. He felt lighter than he had ever felt before – lighter than air; lighter than even a single thought. He could stay like this forever.

“How long were you married?”

“A while.”

His answer was quiet and aloof as if to say, “Shut up you dumb bastard. Don’t spoil this moment.”

“Is that long?”

The Man half sighed. “Sometimes time seems insignificant,” he said. “If you do something for long enough, it can feel like forever. The starting line kind of disappears and the person you were before becomes this transparent blur.”

“And are you sad now that it has ended?”

“Yeah.”

He sounded miserable.

“I just want everything back to normal.”

“Were you happy together?”

“No,” said The Man, “not for one minute. Our marriage was unbearable. But at least I knew who I was.”

The two stayed silent for some time; Mr. Robot staring strangely at his own reflection while The Man rested his head on the robot’s shoulder.

“I was happy,” said Mr. Robot, thinking of his old bedroom.

He sounded anything but, and his expression was one of woe and heartbreak. Mr. Robot couldn’t frown. He didn’t have the

mechanics. He was a simple robot after all, but what he did have was a small panel on his chest that lit up small coloured bars. The more coloured bars, the more severe the robot's experience. Each bar that lit up was as blue as the deepest ocean, just as it was, as black as the void of space; and there were three of them.

"Can a robot even be happy?"

"I'm not really sure."

Mr. Robot continued to stare at his own reflection in quiet displeasure. He saw first how bulky he looked. Were it not for the hundreds of chips and dents, he would have no shape whatsoever; not like a human anyway. Even the most poorly formed and unattractive people had shape and dimension. They all had their unique silhouette. Their skin curved and folded over their muscle and bone, and it jiggled when they laughed or became startled. A human, though, always looked like a human. They couldn't be mistaken for a generator, a freezer, or even a laundry basket. Mr. Robot, on the other hand, could be mistaken for any one of those. He didn't even look how other robots looked.

And so he stared at his own reflection as if it were a stranger whose clothes and culture he not only could not understand but that he disagreed with entirely, and all five bars on his panel lit up.

"Is it possible that I am not a robot?" he asked.

"You look like a robot. You sound like a robot."

"But I don't feel like a robot."

"Then what does a robot feel like?"

What a perplexing question. He had never been another robot before, so how could he know which of the feelings or sensations that he experienced were consistent from one robot to another?

"I don't know," he said.

"Well," said The Man, climbing down from the robot's sure embrace, "I'm not sure if a normal robot would ask that kind of question."

"Would a human?"

"Not all, no. Some people might ask this type of question and it might make them seem more profound or, more often, more

troubled, sad, or confused.”

“So the insightful and the perturbed both speak the same language. How does one distinguish then, genius from insanity? Is it in their inevitable response?”

“Neither one has the answer, but it’s in how they ask the question that differentiates one from the other. The average person doesn’t ask this type of question, but that doesn’t make them any less human. Hell, even a body in a morgue is still a person.”

“What is the difference then, between a human and a person?”

The two were still for some time, lost in deaf and dumb bewilderment, whilst unbeknownst to them, trouble was stirring in a dark corner of the bar; a corner that looked shadowy and conspicuous, and smelt like a hooker’s old bed sheets.

“Can you put me down?” asked The Man.

Mr. Robot slowly lowered The Man back down to his feet.

“Has your situation improved?”

The Man didn’t have to respond. He didn’t look weak and malleable anymore. He didn’t look like a month old balloon. It was as if out of nowhere, some switch had been flicked making his veins fill with a dire concoction of rocket fuel and cement. No longer were his shoulders slumped. No longer was his back pathetically arched. He didn’t stare hapless at the ground anymore. He wasn’t looking for pennies. He wasn’t kicking around for some confidence, or the pieces of his broken pride. No, he stood tall, noble, and erect with his chest pushing out like the edge of some treacherous cliff. His shoulders locked into place like the hammer of a gun, and a smile as ominous as a pair of brass knuckles. He was ten feet tall again; imposing and full of threat.

“I gotta make a call.”

As he did, Mr. Robot quietly scanned his system for the closest stations and quickest routes, narrowing his searches to stations with bridges, overpasses, or historical monuments of any kind which overlooked the tracks of oncoming trains. It was all very exciting, planning to kill his new friend.

“Hey, it’s me. Listen, I shouldn’t have called you a cheating

whore. That's not fair. I was angry and emotional, and, it's just this whole thing came out of nowhere. I wasn't expecting it. I don't blame you, though, I don't. It's not your fault. I can see that now. You didn't consciously choose to go behind my back. You're not that type of person. Love is blind, right? It's blinding. It stops people from seeing the effect of their decisions on other people, as opposed to themselves. What I'm saying is, it's not your fault. I can see that now. You were both victims of love. We all were. I'm just as involved in your new relationship as either of you. Maybe we could even get together and have some beers; me, you and what's his name. There's no reason we can't all be friends."

He sounded so hopeful and merry; you'd think he was a distant cousin.

"Hey listen, I'm sorry for the acetone on your car. When I get some work I promise I'll get that fixed. Oh, and that's the other thing. I'm thinking about back into superhero work. I'm thinking of being Justice Man again. It's been years, I know, but I'm realising from this whole separation that it's about finding yourself – your true self. You know? Who am I? What is my real purpose? What difference can I make in the world?"

He could easily pass for a conman or a coach; he was so convincing.

"It's either that or landscaping. Remember I had that idea for a pond years ago? Just didn't really know how to do all the technical parts but if I learn that... There's still time right?"

He started pacing back and forth now as if he had explosives under his vest.

"I mean, I'm old, but I'm not too old. Am I? You know, I think I never really stopped being Justice Man. You don't stop being you, even when you're acting like someone else. I'm not saying that being a father isn't me. You know what I mean. I loved being a stay at home dad, I did. And I do. It's just the 'who you are' underneath doesn't change just because the 'who you have to be' does. Wait that sounded shitty. How is she anyway? I miss her. Is she alright? Does she miss me? I wanna see her. Can you send me a photo at least? I don't have a phone...shit. How are you? I'm so

selfish I didn't even ask. Are you ok in this?"

You'd swear, from the way he spoke that she wasn't a cheating whore.

"It's weird, right? These waves of emotions just come sweeping over you, and one minute your sad, lonely and abandoned, and the next minute you wanna get in your car and drive into a crowded petrol station and just kill a whole bunch of people."

He realized as he said it, how maniacal he sounded.

"Then a second later your sweet and everything is ok."

He hoped that sounded better.

"I'm ok now though. I'm past all the dark shit. I'm good I swear. Listen, I wanna see her. It's not fair. I'm the one who bloody well raised her. I fed her. I got her dressed every morning. I made her lunches. I made your fucking lunches. It was me that brushed her teeth. I was the one who told her stories every night. And now I get told I can't have shared custody, just because I'm not the mother. You realise how fucking insane that is? And you just go along with the judge's orders. Fuck you, you inconsiderate cunt. You take my daughter and I'll kill your new boyfriend, and then I'll kill myself. Our girl will grow up without a father and she'll hate you; and you'll be fat and alone the rest of your miserable life – just like your mother."

He had said enough to not care about what he said anymore.

"I take back all the kind shit I said. If that motherfucker lays one hand on my girl - if he so much as raises his voice - I will degrade and destroy that spineless piece of shit. You're both liars and cheats. Is that the example you want for our daughter? You know he's gonna do the same to you, right? You dumb cunt."

He was shaking now; adrenaline was the ghost in his veins.

"Fuck you, you whore," he screamed, and all the patrons turned.

Half of them looked as if they'd had this conversation before.

"You ruined my life," he said. "I'm a forty-year-old divorced father. Who the fuck is gonna want me? I'm gonna die alone, and it's your fault. You destroyed everything. I fucking hate you. I

despise you. I hope you get herpes.”

And just like that, he went from ire to apologetic.

“No, I don’t. Wait. I’m sorry. That was mean. I didn’t mean any of that. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, I promise. I’m sorry. Just forget I said anything. Listen, how are you? How you doing? Jesus, this is all intense, isn’t it?”

He sounded light and relieved again; it was dizzying to witness.

“Listen, I wanted to ask a favour. I need you see if you can find my Justice Man suit. I think it was in one of the boxes on top of the wardrobe; next to the DVDs and the computer stuff. I’ll umm, I’ll drop around later. Hey, guess what? I made a friend....”

Mr. Robot assumed it was him, and he also hoped it too. “Are we friends?” he asked.

The Man didn’t respond.

“So uh, I’ll see you later then? And, uh, I hope you’re doing ok. Bye.”

As soon as he hung up the call, The Man collapsed on the ground once more. He looked like any old drunk or junky so nobody paid much bother; except of course for the nefarious looking table in the corner.

“Alright,” spoke a woman’s voice, rousing with suspicion. “Now’s our chance. On the count of three.”

One...

Two...

The Engineer looked like a bloodied rag. His body hung off the table in impossible ways. But for all the torture and suffering that had been inflicted on this poor man, he still wasn't dead. He merely lay there, twisted and contorted; his blood-filled lungs making each breath sound like a farmer's boot, pushing through thick wet mud.

The Doctor left the torture to attend to more pressing issues.

"Where is my assistant?" he shouted.

He needn't have. She'd been there the whole time just waiting to be called.

"Oh, there you are."

She could have been anywhere and he wouldn't have noticed.

"Is that blood?" she asked.

The Doctor was careful not only with his words but also with his hygiene. He always took longer than necessary scrubbing his hands and more so, beneath his fingernails. He was also very careful about keeping secrets.

"It's none of your business," he said. "What about the robot?"

The Assistant had a pained look on her face as if she'd had an itch for days.

"I have to ask, Doctor. Why the robot?"

They very rarely conversed; this was new for both of them.

"Stupid question," said The Doctor, which is why they rarely conversed. "What are we striving for?" he asked. "What is the point of any of this?"

The Assistant looked a little puzzled.

"To change the world?" she said, in a rising and almost uncertain inflection.

The Doctor stared at his bloodstained hands.

"It's not enough," he said.

His accomplice looked shocked; a little disheartened.

“We’ve accomplished so much,” said The Doctor.

As he spoke, he thought about all of the lives he had ruined; vast fortunes of gold and knowledge humiliated into the worth of a single penny. He thought about all those wicked things he had done in the good name of humanity.

“It is because of our tireless work,” he said, remembering how ashamed his mother looked the last time he saw her. “And it is because of dedication to what is right and just that this world is finally starting to mould into a far more moral landscape; one that is organic and less hinged to our prehistoric binary roots of breeding and killing - one bound by misogynistic psychology and spiritual doctrine. We have changed the world; not through a war of dissidence, but through rigorous intellectual debate and public shaming. But what good will our efforts have been if we are only to be replaced?”

“It’s just a machine. I mean it looks lame, like a...”

She was immediately stopped in her tracks.

“Are you religious?”

She looked for a second as if she were confessing to some lewd sexual practice.

“Not entirely, no,” she said. “But I believe I have some important work to do, something profound to give back to my culture; to society. I’d say I’m more spiritual than...”

“Do you believe in God?”

“No,” said The Assistant.

“You bloody well should,” said The Doctor, drying his hands and walking away.

The idea of being replaced was something that had pestered and disturbed The Assistant her whole life. She had taken so much from so many for so long, she knew it was a matter of time before just as much was taken from her and so as always, she would have to strike first.

The Doctor entered his classroom once more. Gone was his sense of worry and predicament. Gone was the vein in his neck that bulged horrendously whenever he was insulted, disgraced, or close to defeat. Gone too was the grinding of his teeth; something

he did when he was restless; and when there was something that he couldn't have but that he desperately wanted. Rabid dogs and wild boars salivated whereas The Doctor ground his teeth.

"Sunflower," he said, his mood turning magnetic all of a sudden. You'd hardly think he had just gutted a man like a fish.

The Doctor shuffled across the room like a child on newly polished floors. He had his arms abreast and was humming something under his breath. His smile was quite terrific too. It looked genuine as if he actually meant it.

It felt like Christmas all of a sudden. The air was joy and merry, and The Doctor himself looked as if his veins were filled with helium. He seemed to float towards the woman of his dreams as if gravity were not such a strict rule after all. The last time he felt this giddy, someone wound up dead.

"I was thinking about you all day today," he said, whilst looking elsewhere.

Her blasted child was here somewhere. Why on Earth dogs were forced to wear collars and yet children were allowed to roam free was something that always trifled him.

"And where is the little princess?" he said.

He tried to sound jovial, he did. It was hard, though, to pretend not to hate children.

"Don't change the subject," said The Woman.

She sounded as if this argument had gone on too long; but that she would see as far as it had to go. "You're always working," she said, "it's almost impossible to get hold of you. And your assistant...I don't trust her. She's too pretty."

"Are you jealous?"

"Are you kidding me? You spend all day long with some prissy faced whore and you expect me to be cool with it?"

Spying from the other room, The Assistant too, started to grind her teeth.

"Can we have this discussion at home?"

"Why? I'm being too loud? I'm being too judgemental? I might offend your prissy faced slut?"

The Assistant didn't want The Doctor's love or sex; she

wanted his pride. And so instead of being whipped into a fury and reacting as she normally would, The Assistant hid behind the walls, hoping and praying for The Doctor to say something in her defence.

But those words never came.

“I swear she either wants to either kill you or fuck you.”

“Amor....”

“She’s a maniac.”

“Blossom....”

The Doctor’s words were like soft kisses.

“I know, I know, don’t judge. It’s just...”

The Doctor swept in and curled his arm around The Woman’s neck.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “You’re wounded. You’ve been stepped on. You’ve been recklessly looked after and attended to for ten years. When I found you, my darling, I could still see you were a flower, though you had been overrun with vermin and weeds. Your colour was weak, but I knew, with the right touch, and with just enough compassion and sunshine, that life and colour would return to your deserted, almost barren eyes.

“It just feels wrong.”

Her eyes were clenched as if a hurricane were wailing in her mind.

“I feel wrong,” she said.

The Doctor kissed her; in her favourite spot behind her ear.

“I admire your passion,” he said.

“I love you I do, baby.”

She looked tired but not defeated.

“Call me Doctor,” said The Doctor.

She looked embarrassed for a second, more than she did unnerved or angry.

“I love you...Doctor,” she said, tentatively. “I just, I feel bad. I didn’t want to do it this way. I mean, I can’t deny how I feel about you. Our love is special. It’s unique. It’s...”

“Fate,” said The Doctor.

One didn’t need to believe a word to please or to fool

another that did.

And like that, her every doubt vanished. It was as if a plug had been pulled and whatever static had been screwing up her head, quickly drained from her conscious mind, somewhere into her lower digestive tract.

She really was a flower and he was her sun. They stared at one another with such incredulous passion. For every beginning is just that: impassioned; full of hyperbole and delusional praise. And like a basted pig, it is stuffed with promises of unending, amorous affection and of love everlasting. Whereas the middle of every relationship is a story that is half read and barely understood, leading to an ending that comes as a shock but also as little surprise.

“I feel guilty - like I cheated him somehow. I know, how we fell in love was unexpected; it was accidental. None of us wanted this. We didn’t want to hurt anyone. I just feel as if some of this is my fault. I’m just terrible with endings.”

“Endings are always ill-written, my tulip, and for them, one always finds themselves so ill-prepared; or at least that’s how it seems. They’re always unexpected and unfair, and they make hardly as much sense as they do in the movies. You are a victim. Don’t you ever forget that! Your husband was a cruel man. He let you wither and starved you of affection, yet still, he kept you on his mantle. He may have loved you, but his love was a suffocating drought. Need I remind you of how little life you had left when I found you? Which, on its own, how two identical grains of sand managed to be swept together by a storm of sheer fate and coincidence, on an island of loneliness and absent affection not just baffles me, it simply astounds me. As a scientist, it has me almost believing in God.”

He stopped for a second before staring her deep into her weeping eyes.

“I love you,” he said. “I always have, since before I even knew you existed. If this were wrong, would we have been brought together as we have? We are perfect. You are perfect,” he said, before correcting himself. “You perfect me.”

They hugged with intense, unrivalled passion. The Doctor held The Woman so tightly that she evaporated into his very

being. She, with her head, pressed into his chest, and he, looking out across his classroom with callous eyes; searching for his lover's ungrateful little offspring, knowing too well that she was somewhere that she should not be, seeing things that she should not see. He had come too far to let some bastard child get in the way.

"And where is the little darling?" he asked.

"She should be here somewhere," replied The Woman in a muffled tone, her face still pressed against her lover's woollen cardigan; her tears drying before they could run down her cheek.

"Come on out, little child," said The Doctor in his sweetest tone possible, though somehow making the innocuous sound like a threat.

There was some rattling behind one of the tables, followed by giggling.

"I can hear you there, Munchkin. Come on out and say hello to me. It's rude to hide you know, and more so, to be poking around in places where you have not been invited. You know what they say, curiosity killed the cat."

"Did not," said The Girl in an insurgent tone.

"Excuse me?"

The Doctor was shouting but that doesn't mean his tone was pleasant. Politeness, in general, was a tool used by most people to be mean without sounding villainous.

"It's rude to talk under your breath," he said, "to adults and especially to esteemed professors like myself."

Were she a dog she'd be chained to a tree by now.

"Come on out, darling," said The Woman. "Don't be dismissive."

The Girl came out from behind the tables with a sour look on her face.

"Now, be a good girl, an honest girl, and tell me what you said."

The Girl looked at her mother expecting to be coddled and saved, but instead, The Woman was non-compliant. She raised her brow and scrunched up her face, giving the same look she gave inside libraries, churches and from the middle row of dance recitals.

“Don’t make a fool out of me,” her eyes said.

“I said it didn’t”

“What didn’t?”

The Girl was standing by the door in which they had entered, her arms folded tightly over her chest, and a mean scowl etched in stone on her face.

“Curiosity,” she said. “It didn’t kill the cat. It helped the cat find the old lady next door who had no friends. And she fed her every day and gave her lots of love and attention while her owners were too busy. Curiosity didn’t kill the cat,” she shouted. “You did. And you blamed curiosity; cause you’re boring and stupid, and you always have secrets.”

The Doctor immediately thought of the blueprints in his office.

Panic set in.

“What secrets do you think we have, my little detective?”

If her mother wasn’t near, he’d have The Girl on that torture rack in seconds.

“Don’t be scared. You’re not in any trouble. You’re not a bad kid; you just do bad things. And it’s our job to teach you how to be a person.”

“I don’t wanna be a person,” said The Girl. “I wanna be me.”

“What’s wrong with people?” asked The Doctor.

There were about a thousand reasons why, but she was too mad to think of even one.

“You’re stupid,” she said.

The Doctor laughed.

“She doesn’t know,” he thought. “Thank God she doesn’t know.”

“I hate you,” said The Girl. “I hate all of you. I wish dad was here.”

“Darling,” said The Woman, disappointed, but still lovingly.

“That’s it? Darling?”

His tone suggested that she should have been more severe.

“That’s your ex filling her head with rubbish. He suffocated you, and now he wants to poison your child. I mean really, how

much are you willing to put up with? You hear the way she's speaking to me?"

"I do. I do."

"For a ten-year-old to speak that way to someone like me."

"She's seven."

And just as The Doctor was about to speak, his breath was taken by the sound of a The Woman's phone ringing. "Don't let me stop you," he said, though he meant the contrary.

The Woman looked at the phone and sighed.

"I sent it to voicemail, it's fine."

"It's him, isn't it? How many times is it today then? Twenty, thirty?"

"Look until we get the divorce final, I can't block him entirely. I'm doing the best I can. I don't wanna hear a grown man cry. It's..."

"It's pathetic," said The Doctor, interrupting.

Both were distracted, then, by the sound of a small girl weeping.

"Oh shit," said The Woman, realizing she had erred. "What's wrong, darling?"

Were she given just one word, The Girl might have said 'everything'. Instead, with her mother's attention firmly on her, The Girl started to cry; and between every sniffle, she mumbled something or other. The Woman couldn't quite make out her words, but she was a sad little girl, she didn't need to.

"There's no reason to cry," said The Doctor.

Only he could make consolation sound like criticism and feedback.

"If you stop crying," he said, sounding as if he had something to offer. "You'll feel much better, I promise."

The premise was sound enough, yet The Girl kept weeping.

"I want daddy," she said.

She was sulking heavily but still, the words were unmistakable. She might as well have stabbed The Doctor in the back with the sharp end of his own good nature and open heart. His rage

and offense, like The Girl, was inaudible, but it too was completely unmistakable.

“This is not easy for me either,” said The Doctor, looking pale and helpless to his lover.

Were she a dog, he’d have her in a muzzle by now.

“I’ll speak to her,” said The Woman, as if she had the solution all along. “She misses her father, it’s natural.”

There were still some tiny specks of blood on The Doctor’s lapel, and beneath his nails.

“Do you love me?” he asked, taking The Woman by her shoulders and pressing his nose lightly against hers so that her eyes were all that he could see. “Do you love me?” he said again.

“Of course I do,” said The Woman.

Her heart beat like a deer, staring at the tip of an arrow.

“You know I do,” she said. “I did all of this so we could be together; just the three of us. I took all the risk. I did so because I love you; because our love is unique; and because we were meant to be together.”

“Then fix this,” said The Doctor, obviously meaning the insolent, ungrateful girl.

“I will,” said The Woman, kissing The Doctor’s chest.

She turned back to her daughter with compassion in her eyes as if she knew that what had to be said, and what had to be done, were not at all what she wanted to do; but they were what she had to do, and so she felt despicable because of it.

“Excuse me,” said The Doctor, looking over his shoulder and unhooking his lover’s firm tentacle-like grasp.

The Assistant had been pressing for his attention this whole time. As he turned, so too did his expression, and once again he looked like a man capable of torture and tyranny. He looked like an open wound or a pair of bruised and bloodied knuckles.

“What is it?” he said.

“Sorry to disrupt your....”

Her silence was mocking.

“Get on with it.”

“I know where the robot is.”

“Where?”

“At a bar downtown. I’m sending out The Hyenas now. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“It’s an atom bomb with arms, legs, and a conscious, thinking mind. Assume the worst.”

eleven

“You’re him, aren’t you?”

The Man didn’t respond. It might have been the bag over his head or the pain from the ties that bound his hands; more than likely, though, it was because he was busy thinking about more pressing things. Regardless, he didn’t flinch and he didn’t twitch; he didn’t utter a single goddamned word.

“Guys, it’s him. You do realize who this is right?”

His captor was young and impressionable. Like the others in the van, he was wearing a costume or a disguise of some sort. It was nothing fancy, though; it looked like it had been put together at the last minute - a mix of spandex, duct tape, and durable garbage bags.

“Speak when you’re spoken to, Ed,” said The Leader looking back.

Her eyes were covered but the rest of her face was not. She wore brightly coloured lipstick, an indecent amount of blush, and anywhere that was visible above and around her eyes was smeared with shadow and mascara. Her hair was tied in a high ponytail and she wore short slutty athletic attire.

“It’s not really my name. She calls me that sometimes. Ed. A lot really, but that’s ok. It’s only when my unconscious, oppressive, misogynistic tendencies rise to the surface. My hero name is The White Knight; my real name, though, is Phillip. You’re the reason I wanted to be a hero, you know?”

He could have spoken in a dozen tongues and not a single word would have made sense. Beneath his hood, The Man was lost in delusion, dreaming about the love he once had. He couldn’t hear the young lad speaking or even the other heroes conspiring; he couldn’t even hear the nursery rhyme lightly playing through one of Mr. Robot’s speakers. He was trapped in his own horrible fantasy, thinking about long embraces and midnight conversations;

and all the other sweet things he would never experience again.

And all he could think was, “I don’t want to die alone.”

“So what’s it like? It must be awesome. I’m nothing like you, but I wanna be one day. I mean when I was a kid, you were everything. Me and my friends – everyone - we all wanted to be you. And now here I am sitting beside you. I can’t believe it. Nobody would believe me. I wouldn’t believe me. What was that thing you used to say? A punch in the head...”

“The face,” said The Man.

“Holy shit, that’s it. A punch in the face makes the world great. You are him! I knew it. I knew it. Hey guys, it is him. It’s him; just like I said. It’s...”

“Shut up, Ed?” screamed The Leader.

“I told you, don’t call me that. My name is...”

“Don’t you talk back.”

“I’m sorry,” said The White Knight.

Had he a tail it would have been pinned to his belly at this point. They could be cruel; quite often actually. There was very little to say. He was at the bottom of every hierarchy there was; he didn’t have a voice or an opinion – at least one that was taken into account anyway. This didn’t deter him, though. On any ordinary day, he would have sulked for an hour or two before even daring to say another word, but this was no ordinary day.

“You’re not gonna take that are you?” said The Man.

His voice was muffled, sure, but you could hear every syllable of derision.

“Don’t answer him, Ed.”

The White Knight lowered his head.

“That’s a bit rough, miss. So what’s your issue then?” asked The Man.

“You,” said The Leader decisively.

“Me specifically, or...?”

It was hard to tell if he was mocking.

“You, Ed, dad,” said The Leader before exalting; “All men!”

The angrier she got, the more it sounded like she was about to cry.

“Did something actually happen or are you just carrying on like everyone else? I don’t want to be a dick about this, it’s just these days, it’s hard to tell if someone is genuinely upset or if they read something upsetting. You know what I mean?”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t get me wrong; if something did happen...”

“You’d what? Save the day? Feminism is an affirmation. It is a state of being; a fish, monkey, human, and then feminist. I am evolved,” shouted The Leader as if her words were the chorus of a song. “I am a woman superhero. Pretty soon women will be leading in government, politics, business; in everything; Women can do anything men can do; except better, because now we’re finally getting our chance.”

“I mean no disrespect here, miss, but why is it that feminists only want the nice cushy jobs? Why aren’t any of you fighting to dig trenches and re-tile rooves in the summer; or pick up trash in the pouring rain? There are plenty of fellas in those jobs who, like you, also don’t have a shot in hell at being a CEO, a president, a well-paid athlete either, or anyone significant for that matter. You’ll probably have a lot in common, and you might even see that it’s not only sex that holds people back in this world. Most of the time it just boils down to shitty DNA.”

“Asshole.”

“All I’m saying is, you want equality as long as it pays well and you don’t get a callous on your hands. Your plight seems a little insincere is what I’m getting at, and your reaction is just a tad exaggerated.”

“What would you know about being a woman?”

“As much as you’d know about being a man. We’re just two blind fools arguing over the hue of a colour that neither one of us can see.”

He almost sounded like his old self, as if some spark were almost igniting.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“He’s Justice Man,” said The White Knight, spellbound.

The other heroes all grunted.

The Man didn't respond, though. Just hearing those words was enough to remind not only of whom he once was, but worse, of the person that he would never again be. Beneath his hood, he thought of daughter and how cute it was whenever she had said goodbye; cute because all those times, he had never once assumed she would never come back. Were it not for his breath lightly pushing the nylon bag, The Man could easily be mistaken for a mannequin or a well-perfumed cadaver.

"You suck," shouted The Leader; as articulate as she could be in such dire rage.

The White Knight, on the other hand, was struck with awe.

"I knew the first second I saw you, man."

Though he wore a mask, it was patently obvious that he was grinning like a buffoon. If words were colours, his sounded as if they were painted with the stroke of a hyperactive child.

"Man, you were the best. They don't make heroes like you anymore."

"You guys, you don't get it; he's Justice Man. He's old school."

The three women huddled together at the front of the van. Their dire whispering was loud enough to be overheard, but not clear enough to be understood. Their eyes, though, could be read like the contents of a book. And what was clear was that this was not going to be good for either man or robot.

"I bet you got lots of girls," said The White Knight.

He said so in an excited yet hushed tone, so the other heroes wouldn't know. You could tell, though, that he was almost jumping out of his skin.

"I need to make a call," said The Man, his voice muffled by the hood.

"You have no rights, oppressor."

"Oppressor? You kidnapped my friend and me from a bar. We're bound and gagged without even so much as a kiss or a first drink."

"Friend?" said Mr. Robot.

Instantly the panel on his chest lit up with three bright green bars.

“This is so typical,” said The Leader, almost climbing over her seat to throttle The Man. “Boiling everything down to some sexual perversion where the woman has to kiss the man. Why? Because she is desperate and needy for a man’s validation. Or worse yet, where the woman has to be kissed. Why? Because she is weak and directionless; and she hasn’t the gall to take on any great feat herself. All you want is to control the woman. To subvert her. If you give her power, it’s to remind her that, in a heartbeat, you can take it away. And so by giving her freedom, you imprison her. All you really want is to bring her to her knees so she can neither stand nor crawl; so you copulate in her mouth with your repression and your own self-loathing so that she stays below you – so there’s always someone below you.”

“I really just need to make a call,” said The Man.

He sounded as if his patience had worn thin as if he had tired of this charade.

“What should we do with him?” said one of the heroes. “We only need the robot.”

“Maybe we could use him. Ever since you-know-who left, we’ve been one member short. You know we won’t be taken seriously unless we’re a prime number.”

She was right, and everyone knew it, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept.

“You wanna live, oppressor?” asked The Leader in her most threatening tone.

The Man thought of life without his daughter, and his whole existence felt black and vacuous. “No,” he replied.

Mr. Robot laughed. It was the first time he had ever done so, spontaneously anyway. It sounded nothing like a human, and instead, more like a computer unable to properly boot. There was just a series of high pitched beeps of various tones, all strung together in a drunken fashion.

“What do you mean no?”

“We are looking for the station with the overhanging bridge,” said Mr. Robot, though nobody was listening. “It doesn’t appear on any of my maps.”

“Just bloody do it,” said The Man. “Kill me. I couldn’t care less.”

The Man was clearly disturbed. His thoughts had turned against him. Fuelled by surging anger, fear, loneliness, and shame, The Man imagined all sorts of absurd and grandiose delusions. And when he felt rage, he thought about the very worst kind of violence a person can do to another. And when he felt shame, he thought about the whole world pointing and laughing. And when he thought about never seeing his daughter again, he wept. It felt like he would never feel what was like to have a family again.

“Kill me,” he shouted, spitting beneath his hood. “I won’t put up a fight, I promise. Just shoot me or stab me or whatever. I don’t wanna live anymore.”

The women huddled together again.

“Well, what the hell do we do now? You can’t leverage a man on something he neither has nor bloody well wants.”

“Up to an hour ago everything was fine, right?”

“Well, yeah, kind of I guess.”

“So we stick to the plan. We take the robot to The Doctor. We claim our reward. We dump this chauvinistic asshole, and then we get famous.”

“What if...” said one of the heroes, implying something clandestine and nefarious.

“No. I know exactly what you’re thinking, and the answer is no. We need to be legitimised. It’s one thing saving the world, and it’s another saving the world whilst be recognised as Hyenas. We’re Justice Heroes, right?”

“Right,” said the other two women.

“Then we do what we have to do. We play by the rules this one time. We hand over the robot. We get our accreditation. And then nobody fucks with us anymore,” said The Leader.

“And nobody will laugh at us, too,” said The Empath.

“What are you on about? Nobody laughs at us,” said The Driver.

“Not once we’re accredited they won’t; not anymore.”

“Ladies,” shouted The Leader. “Focus.”

As they argued, The White Knight looked at The Man with big disappointed eyes. It must have been terrible for him to see his hero like this; broken and down on his knees.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“Life,” thought The Man. “Life, love, and compromise.”

He said nothing. Beneath his hood, though, he reflected on his past; on a city in a different time, in a different age. Just as he was a different man, this city was a far different place. It was one of mistrust and deception; one of callous lies and endless conspiracy. It was a place of violence. It was one of corruption, greed, and fear - where good folk made prisons of their homes, kept safe from the criminals who stalked their yards like shaven hyenas. What a contrast then, where today, the hyena was a symbol of virtue, strength, and insurance.

No, it was a different age altogether. It wasn't, in any way, a time for good men, nor was it a time for the thin-skinned or the kind-hearted; their graves were shallow and many. It was a time for wicked, uncivilised savages; where the quality of a man's violence defined his culture. It was a time for hardened bastards for honest and kind men made no difference in a place like this; they could do no good. Just as, it seemed, that the lawless could do no wrong.

But just as it was an age of villains, so too was it, an age of heroes. And The Man hadn't forgotten his past glory. He remembered his every exploit and each of his conquests. He remembered every villain, crook, and henchman. He remembered every goddamned despicable lout. He remembered every fistfight, knife fight, and every bloodstained shootout. He remembered every broken rib and perforated lung. He remembered every stab wound and bullet hole. They were fond memories, but they were old memories. For the most part, they were vague and transparent. It's not like the life he had lived could be so easily forgotten but still, they were only memories, and he was hardly that man anymore.

What was vivid in his thoughts, though, was the memory of his wife closing the gate behind her, and more so, how she didn't look back, not for a second. He felt the saddest a person could possibly feel until, of course, he remembered a song that his daughter

had sung about rainbows and rocket ships. And then, he was the saddest a person had ever been.

How the hell was he ever going to get back on his feet?

“I’m calling The Assistant,” said The Leader.

On one hand, she sounded stern and decisive; like a leader should. On the other, she sounded petrified, terrified and full of dread.

“What are you going to say?”

The doubt within her team only made things worse.

“I’m going to tell her we have the robot; simple.”

“And legitimacy. Ask about legitimacy. Ask her to...”

“Everyone just shut up, ok?”

The Leader was nervous. Inside she shook tremendously, but outside, she was frozen with fear. To the others, she looked cool and complacent but to herself...

She had never spoken to The Assistant before. They had met once or twice at university rallies, but they had never been formally introduced. She wanted more than anything to make an impeccable impression. All she really wanted was to belong.

“Ok, it’s calling.”

She had never been this nervous before. She had never felt so sick with fear. With every ring, she felt more and more unprepared. Her stomach felt like this great swirling black hole that was pulling her every organ apart, atom by atom. She wanted to vomit or to smash the phone into a thousand pieces. Better yet, she wanted the sun to explode and for all human life to be extinct in the very next second, so as not to have to make this call.

And then The Assistant picked up.

“I, uh, um, I uh.”

Her expression was just as fraught and dumbfounded as her jumbling words.

“I’m really sorry, mam, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

The other women watched on, the word ‘Legitimacy’ on the tips of their tongues.

“Yes, mam, I understand.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes, mam, I understand.”

“No, I don’t think you are an idiot.”

“No, mam, I don’t know why I did.”

“Yes, mam, you’re right.”

“I promise I’ll never...”

“No, don’t hang up.... It’s the robot.”

For a moment, The Leader was without a pained look on her face.

“We have it, mam. We have the robot.”

“Yes, mam, the robot; The Singularity. It’s our prisoner.”

“Yes, mam, we do. I’m certain. It is in the back of our van.”

“Other team? I’m not sure about... Well, I didn’t see...”

“No mam, we are not an official...”

“No, we are not legitimate.”

The other women’s eyes lit up.

“We’re called Team....”

“I’m sorry, you’re right, mam. That’s not important.”

The other women were desperate now.

“Legitimacy,” said one.

“Yeah, what about it?” said the other.

The Leader replied with a ‘fuck you’ kind of stare.

“Yes, mam, thank you, mam. We can bring it to you now if you...”

Her face now was weak and apologetic.

“Oh, ok.”

She sounded sad and deflated.

“What did she say?” asked one of the heroes.

The Leader immediately cupped the phone.

“What’s going on? What did she say? Are we being legitimised? What’s happening?”

“Shut the hell up,” shouted The Leader before putting the phone back to her ear. “Sorry, mam. We’re on Br-101.”

“Yes, mam, heading East.”

“There’s a motel not far from here I suppose. I thought we would bring the robot to the university and...”

“Yes, mam, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have thought.”

“Yes, mam.”

“Yes, mam.”

“Kilometre 24.”

“Yes, mam.”

“Motel Riviera? Ok, we will.”

“My team? We’re four.”

“Yes, mam, we’ll wait for you there.”

The Leader hung up the phone and stared quiet and listless out the windshield. Her colour slowly returned to her face which now looked peaceful and flaccid. She looked like she had just woken from a coma or some violent epileptic fit. She looked as calm as she did confused.

“What now?”

The Leader took a minute or so to compose herself before starting the engine and pulling back onto the highway. It was quiet. Not a word was spoken; just the sound of the little engine struggling to maintain its speed. And when they pulled into the motel, finally, The Leader took a breath.

“We wait,” she said. “They’re coming for us.”

twelve

“Roll call, Hyenas! Let’s go, one by one.”

And just like that, as if her voice were the hammer of the gods, there came a sudden and tremendous clap of thunder, and with it, a torrent of oppressive and miserable summer rain pissed down from the heavens above.

One by one, each of the teams, either in the procession or en route to the motel, presented themselves in rousing fashion. All the while, raindrops the size of bricks beat down on their vehicles in a deafening roar. In spite of this, on their ham radios, the team chanted their anthem for war.

There were sixteen in all, and each team was armed excessively and inappropriately. One of which, Team Zebra, a group led by a white radical hell-bent on transforming social stigma against black minorities, had already arrived at the motel. Their leader - a tall German man who had as much meat on his bones as he did, tolerance for things like ignorance, insensitivity, and white privilege - loaded ammunition into his weapon as he watched his target being unloaded from the back of a van.

“There is no need for us to rush,” he said, stroking his weapon like a giant cock of death. “I have all of the time in the world.”

He salivated as he stared through his scope.

“This is Alpha-Zebra,” he said, his finger gently touching the trigger as he spoke into the radio. “Confirming that I currently have a visual on the target.”

And though the lashing rain made a mockery of a common person’s vision, The German paid no mind. He followed each of the targets in his scope as they rushed from their vehicle to their room; pretending to shoot each of them in their legs and shoulders, and sometimes their heads.

“Do not engage,” shouted The Assistant. “I repeat, stand down; do not engage.”

She drove like a maniac, but one of unquestionable skill and precision. And the rain too was hardly any bother. She weaved in and out of traffic and did her best to avoid hitting babies in prams, but in this weather, it was hard to tell the difference between a speed bump and an unforeseen tragedy.

“Alpha-Zebra, maintain your position and visual. Do not approach. We should be arriving in fifteen minutes or so. I repeat, do not approach. The target is volatile and dangerous.”

The German had a bewildered look on his face. “This is Alpha-Zebra,” he said, “confirming the target as humanoid or...”

“Mechanoid,” said The Assistant. “Do not approach.”

“Mechanoid?”

He eyed Mr. Robot with skeptical curiosity. The robot looked bulky and cumbersome. It moved on its own, yes, but it did so at a snail’s pace, and its body looked ridiculously out of proportion.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

The Assistant didn’t like being questioned, and she didn’t much care for The German.

“I repeat,” she said sternly; her patience wearing thin. “Do not approach the target.”

For as far as she could see, a blur of red brake lights smeared the sky, disappearing over the horizon. Traffic was completely still now. There was no moving in any direction.

“This robot I am seeing now is not looking sophisti...”

“Stand down, Alpha-Zebra!”

Her voice splashed against his ears like the rain on his windshield. It did little to stifle his focus. He was eye to eye with Mr. Robot through the round of his scope. He sat there for some seconds in sheer disbelief. Was this a joke? This didn’t look like an advanced technology. It sure as hell wasn’t The Singularity he had imagined. It looked like it had been engineered and assembled by a drunk on the basis of a dare alone. Still, though, like a trained professional, he kept his sight fixed on the robot’s square head.

“Alpha-Zebra standing down,” he said.

The Assistant screamed. As she did, she punched the horn over and over until it broke apart like a dry cracker. The rain was

beating down, but that didn't stop her from craning her neck out the window and continuing her vitriolic tirade. While in the back of her vehicle, the other Hyenas sat with shocked and stupid looks on their faces. They each had their heads bowed in such a way that you'd think all that spitting and cussing was some reverent prayer.

"Move you, sons of fucking bitches," she screamed.

The driver of the car next to her, an overweight man with scruffy hair sticking out of a poorly fitted baseball cap, shook his head in disapproval. And the way he did, staring at her eye to eye with his face all scrunched up like a bruised elbow, he might as well have been screaming, and he might as well have been honking that stupid horn. It was just as loud and obnoxious. It was just as downright rude. And the look he gave her, it might have worked on his colleagues or his subordinates; hell, it might have even won him his wife, but tonight, on such a dismal fucking night, he'd be lucky if he walked away with even half of his teeth. He shook his head once, twice and then three times. But on the fourth, all hell broke loose.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" screamed The Assistant, already unbuckling her seatbelt. "Do you know who I am?" she said, now opening her door and clearly escalating this whole situation. "Well? Do you?" she said, now leaning into the open passenger window. "Do you know who I am, you fat piece of shit?"

This was only ever gonna go one of two ways, and it relied heavily on one person taking the higher road; namely The Man in the Hat. If that meant apologising then so be it. At the very least, The Man in the Hat needed only swallow his pride, and then quietly and almost seamlessly look away for a minute or so, just until everything died down; maybe think about kittens or baby otters, or how Lego was made.

And I can't stress this enough, this really could have gone any other way, but...

"Yeah I know who you are," he said, choosing his direction. "I've seen you on the television."

Still, at this point, it wasn't too late; all he needed to do was be civil, diplomatic, and back down. "Go fuck yourself," he said,

spitting as he did. “You ugly femmo cunt.”

And just like that, his nose was broken and his left cheek shattered.

“We’re not gonna get there in time,” said The Assistant buckling her belt.

She wasn’t even shaking; not a nerve out of place.

“I don’t trust The German; I never have. He’s gonna take that robot for himself.”

“What’s the deal with this thing? If it’s as dangerous as you say, why are we going after it? We protest. It’s what we do. We hold rallies, we wave placards, and we sign petitions. We take to the streets, sure; we even riot, but we only do so when there are more of us than there are of them, you know? But this...this is something for the police. It’s something for the army. This is not for...”

“Are you a Hyena?”

Her tone alone was unquestionable.

Nervous and with a shaky voice, the girl replied; “Yes, yes I am.”

“Then you’re more than a Social Justice Hero; you’re a god damned superhero.”

Who could argue with that? It was quiet in the car – a beaten up old Beetle with a lightning bolt on each side, and a snarling hyena painted on the hood. It was quiet, yes, but amidst the silence, egos were transforming, growing into unimaginable size and strength. Heroes were being born.

“Yeah,” said The Assistant, her voice filled with courage and inspiration. “We protest. We take to the streets and the internet. We shout and we scream, and we spit and curse. We fight for those that can’t fight for themselves. But as of today,” she said.

She paused for a second to look back over her shoulder.

“As of today, we save the world.”

In the backseat, The Assistant’s most trusted allies, some might even say friends, sat with stupendous grins on their faces. One was short, overweight, and her I.Q could stretch around a man’s waist; while the other was blind, she had been since birth, and thanks to her bulimia and her poor self-impression, weighed

no more than the very belt that fit loosely on her skeletal frame.

But then, who didn't want to be a superhero?

Think of the acclaim. Think of the ticker tape parades. Think of all the people knowing your name. Think of the honour. And think of the sex; think of all that sex, free drinks, and after dinner mints. The two girls looked catatonic. Whatever thought was burning in their minds was surely magnificent. It was surely the greatest thing that could ever be thought.

The Assistant pounded on the horn once more. "If The German goes in there first, it'll be a bloodbath. We can't let that happen. We have to get there."

And as the old beetle rattled and shook underneath the pouring rain, in a secluded part of a motel parking lot, The German loaded bullet after bullet into what could only be described as a ridiculous amount of guns; for any type of conflict really. He didn't so much as take pride in his armoury as much as he did sheer pleasure. It might have been sexual or it might not, but it probably was.

"Fuck it," he said, stroking and fingering the business end of his favourite rifle.

His team - made up of two women and two men; all black - sat expressionless in the back of the van. Like their leader, their weapons were locked and loaded. They each carried guns and grenades strapped to their legs and worn like wreaths around their necks. But more menacing were the knives and machetes they carried in their hands. Whatever their intention was, be it good or bad, it was clear that many people were going to get hurt.

The German put his favourite cassette into his old radio. There was something about the sound a cassette made as it snapped into place; it reminded him of his rifle.

"We are noble savages, my brothers, and sisters. We are like leopards. We are swift and agile, and we are no friend of the white man."

He said this, though he himself was white.

"The very same white man who will take our language, before he cuts out our tongues; who will take our culture before he enslaves our children; and who will take our humanity before he

takes our lives. He wishes these things, but what he does not know is that we are children of Africa, we are the leopard, the white man cannot see us from the reeds; he cannot catch us should we choose to run, and he cannot escape us should we turn and give chase. And tonight, my brothers and sisters, we are going to take some cracker scalps. Are you down with it?" he said, articulate, educated, and polite.

The Zebras, as they were called, exited their vehicle and with weapons drawn, they walked slowly through the darkness, towards the room where the robot was being kept.

thirteen

There were two beds in the room. The Man collapsed on one, burying his face into the pillow, whereas at the far end of the room, Mr. Robot stood quietly, looking like some broken down ice contraption.

“What’s wrong with him?”

The heroes all stared at The Man as he quietly sobbed into the pillow.

“He has been emasculated,” said Mr. Robot.

The heroes all stepped closer; intrigued and at the same time, a little disgusted. The Man twitched in uncommon parts of his body. He looked like an octopus, sprawled out on a desert rock; completely out of his natural environment and dying with every second that passed.

“I can heal him.”

The hero standing closest, and the only one seemingly unaffected by The Man’s mollusk-like state, was a girl called The Empath. Unlike The Leader, she wasn’t the least bit provocative. Her demeanour was as quiet and untroubling as the clothes that she wore.

The bars on Mr. Robot’s panel all lit up bright yellow.

“Really? You can heal him?” he said. “He is my friend. I have not known him any other way. It would be good, for him, if he were less inconsistent.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right, tin man. Double negatives are uncool.”

By the looks of it, The Empath had already started her healing process; whatever that was.

“Let me rephrase,” said Mr. Robot. “It would be best for him to die in good health.”

The heroes all looked confused.

“Turn on the news,” said The Leader.

She already had a handful of devices spread out on the table in front of her. On each device was a website dedicated to that which sickened or offended her. For some of the sites, she had to search and scour the internet with all her might; but for those with differing opinions, there was nowhere to hide.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she wrote in the comments sections below each post and video. And she would follow it up with taunts of, “Go away,” “Find somewhere else to be,” and finally, “Meat is rape,” for no longer was meat just murder.

Meanwhile, as the news blurted warnings and emergency reports about killer robots and celebrity lookalikes, The Empath straddled The Man, waving her hands about as if her patient were some unboxed treasure that was kept prisoner by layers of invisible smoke and cobwebs. She picked and pinched at the invisible cobwebs and pulled them away from his aura, and then discarded them on the floor.

At the very least, she was a committed actor.

Mr. Robot watched in curious wonder. He had only ever seen machines and humans being fixed, cured, and inevitably rendered useful with tools and appliances; and sometimes medications or coolants. In general, though, his knowledge of the human body and its ailments derived entirely from the game Operation. And therefore, seeing his friend being healed by a mere wave was enough to more than spark his interest, it turned his coloured bars from bright yellow to lime green. Such was the state of his wonder and amazement that even his eyebrows raised; and though they looked no different to the switches on a control panel, they were locked in the highest position possible.

“Turn that up.”

The Leader abandoned her devices. She ran to the TV and crouched as close as she could. The way she shook and rocked back and forth, it was clear that she was excited. What was hard to tell was whether her excitement was founded on fear and apprehension, or whether she was actually happy and merely unable to contain herself. Either way, she shook like a leaf in a thunderstorm.

“The real question is,” said The Anchor. “Is this the end of

mankind?”

There was a dramatic pause while the camera zoomed closer to the seemingly nervous twitch of an army general. It might have been nerves or it might have been all the lights and the makeup, but either way, his calm, and complacent attitude were in no way convincing.

“We don’t want to alarm the public unnecessarily. We’re not talking about the end of anything here. Let’s be rational.”

“But this is The Singularity. Can you confirm that?”

He may have only learned this word a day ago, but in his delivery and his demeanour, one would hardly think anything but. He sounded genuinely concerned as if he had been schooled in its perils and was a scholar in predicting when, where, and how this unfortunate event should come to pass.

“Yes,” said The General. “It is The Singularity.”

He may as well have said it was the end of the world.

“Now, I know what this all means. But for those at home who don’t know much about computers, how about you explain exactly what we mean when we say The Singularity. Why is it dangerous? And what makes it different to my cell phone or my washing machine?”

It was obvious the doubt was his own.

“A.G.I,” said The General.

“Sorry? A.G...”

“Artificial General Intelligence. Now, I’m not here to confound viewers with terms or explanations of technology.”

“Then why are you here, General? Will someone please tell us what the fudge is going on?”

He wore his heart on her sleeve; it’s why his public loved him so much. He wasn’t afraid to say what needed to be said; to ask the important and sometimes daring or confronting questions. He’d raise his voice if he felt like it, and he would spit and curse if that’s what needed to be done; all in the name of truth, justice, and transparency.

There was no news anchor like him. He was probably the best.

“What we don’t want to do is inflate the problem with drama or hyperbole,” said The General.

“So you’re saying there is a problem then? How serious is this problem? How late are we? How close are we to the end of the world? Is it tomorrow?”

“Look this is exactly what we are trying to avoid.”

“Why are you avoiding the serious questions, General? What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Then why are you here defending yourself?”

“You invited me here.”

“You can call a cat, sure, but the cat will only come if it’s hungry. So I ask you again, General, what are you hiding? If this is an army issue, are we talking terrorism? Weapons of mass destruction? Is The Singularity a bomb? Which is it General? Is it a bomb or not? And if not, what type of bomb is it?”

The General tore off his earpiece and stormed away from the camera.

“You saw that ladies and gentlemen,” said The Anchor. “The General’s silence and refusal to answer was loud enough for all of us to understand. So let me answer that question then. What type of bomb is this? Well, I’ll tell you, it’s the very worst kind. If you have children, you’d do good to hug them, and tell them that you love them; there’s a good chance they might be dead in the morning. And we’ll be right back after this commercial.”

And in the motel, all eyes then fell on the robot.

“What is it? Is it a bomb?”

The Leader crept forward as if the slightest jerk or jolt might explode the tin can.

“Be careful. You’ll kill us all.”

There was only one button visible on Mr. Robot; the big red button sticking out of his chest. The Leader had her hand out to press it; God knows what she thought it would do.

“Please don’t,” said Mr. Robot, covering his red button like exposed breasts.

“Don’t what? I’m not doing anything,” she said, still creeping

forwards. "Are you a bomb?"

"No. I'm not a bomb," said Mr. Robot, trying to inch backward.

The Leader stood maybe a foot away, scanning the robot's body for switches or plugs.

"Then why is everyone so scared of you? Why are you so special? What can you do?"

The answer was everything. Mr. Robot knew that. He had heard it his whole life. "You can do anything," The Engineer would tell him. "There is no limit and no peak to your potential."

It should have excited him to hear that, should he want to, he could do anything and he could be anything; but in reality, all that potential scared him to death. All he ever really wanted, since as long as he could remember, was to play his favourite board games and to not have to get up before noon.

"I don't get it," said The Leader.

"Maybe it's inside it," said The Driver. "The bomb I mean."

"Yeah but there's no openings. There's nothing, just this..."

"Please don't," said Mr. Robot again, pushing The Leader's hand away from his red button.

The Leader didn't stop though. She kept creeping and she kept spying.

"Stop it," said Mr. Robot.

"Or what? What are you gonna do?"

And so she crept further and she spied further.

"Please," said Mr. Robot, "Respect my privacy."

"No. Tell me why you're so special."

He didn't feel special; not in a good way. He felt different, foreign, and strange.

"Are you a bomb?"

The answer was clearly no. He was a robot; that much was patently clear.

"Are you a bomb?" she asked again.

More than anything, it sounded like she wanted him to be one.

"Yes," he said, immediately regretting it. "I am a bomb. I am

a gun, and I am the bullets too. I am a knife and scissors. I'm a hand grenade, a pitchfork, and an axe. I am a weapon of mass destruction."

Really he was just listing as many pointy things as he could remember.

He wasn't sure why he told her all those things but he hoped it worked; he hoped she went away.

"I don't buy it," said The Leader. "Do something. Prove you are what they say you are."

She turned to The Man who was being straddled in a dominant reiki position.

"Make it do something. Make it blow something up or move a satellite or change the course of an airplane."

Mr. Robot immediately panicked. He stared at his friend hoping he would say something to divert all this attention. There were maybe fifty things that gave Mr. Robot anxiety; performing was easily the worst.

"What are you even doing here?" asked The Man.

He was sitting upright on the edge of the bed, his hands buried in his face, but this time he wasn't crying or whispering for his mother. He sounded sunburned or hung over. His voice was hoarse and crackly; and each time he cleared his throat, it sounded like he had swallowed a bag of gravel.

"OK, so we're here in this hotel room, now what? What do you think is gonna happen?"

"The robot has a bounty on its head."

"Who the fuck are you supposed to be?"

"We're superheroes," said The Leader.

"Superheroes? You're just a handful of kids. No offense but when I was your age..."

"Patronising comparisons are microaggressions and I refuse to be schooled by your misogynistic patriarchy."

"What?"

"So typical. You play dumb, but in reality, you only serve to marginalise a woman's worldly experience, putting your history on top of hers so she's invisible and silenced; like some back alley

rapist.”

“Rapist? That’s a bit extreme.”

“All men are rapists, it’s true. You’re born that way. You have to be educated and taught to be any different. But right now, you’re no different to a dog. Do you have kids? God, I hope not.”

“I do,” replied The Man.

“I bet you have a son. He’s a rapist too you know. You have to educate him not to be.”

“Really? A rapist?”

“It’s in his genetics.”

“So how do I teach him not to be a rapist? Is there a curriculum?”

“You teach him to respect women, a trait a man is not born with. Aside from that, you can’t teach a man. You may train him like a dog, but inevitably a dog will bite.”

“Couldn’t I just teach him to do something else, for example, like be an astronaut?”

The Leader looked backhanded.

“Hear me out. Now, I don’t know much about physics or engineering, but I imagine, to be an astronaut, you’d have to be smart – which means you would have to spend a lot of time studying, training, and doing experiments with beakers and Bunsen burners and those types of things.”

“So?”

“Well, all the hard work would leave very little time for raping, now wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t want to have this discussion anymore. Where the hell is The Assistant?”

The Leader checked her phone a dozen times in as many seconds.

“They should be here.”

“Can I ask you a question? Serious, though.”

The Leader looked like she had sucked on a dozen lemons.

“Look, up to this point, have I done anything untoward?”

The leader’s look only steepened.

“No,” she said.

It felt less like the truth and more like she was uttering defeat. She was almost sulking.

“And I won’t either.”

The Leader shook her head.

“So typical of a man. I mean you decide...”

“Oh, would you just shut the fuck up for a second.”

The whole room gasped.

“Just for a second, stop being so whiny, weak, and affected by every goddamned thing. I mean that respectfully. Grow a pair. Jesus. Now, you boys and girls are heroes, right?”

“Right.”

They stood side by side – The Leader, The Empath, The White Knight, and The Driver – the latter looking ambivalent to their cause but hungry for something else.

“We are The Justice....”

The Leader looked confused; confused and angry.

“Well, we haven’t chosen the right name yet... But that doesn’t matter.”

“Listen if Y’all wannabe heroes, branding is everything. Ya gotta have a name.”

“Like Justice Man,” said The White Knight emphatically.

“I have plenty,” said The Leader, squashing her team member’s enthusiasm. “And they’re all great. It’s just difficult to choose the best out of so many good options. But fuck you anyway. Why are we even listening to you? You’re our prisoner. You’re our slave.”

The Man cleared his throat once more.

“I haven’t been myself as of late, it’s true. I’ll give you that. I’m dealing with some shit. Things are a little out of whack. But...”

And like that, he caught a glimpse of himself in the adjacent mirror. What he saw wasn’t an old man, but it wasn’t a young man either. It was neither one nor the other, sitting on the edge of a bed, lecturing a handful of millennials about how it used to be when he was their age.

“If this was ten years ago,” he said, swallowing his pride as he did. “We’d all be here under different circumstances. You’d do well to remember that.”

“What happened to you?” asked The White Knight.

The Man gave the young lad a cold, narrow stare; the kind that reeked of turbulence, tumultuousness, and tragedy. It was the look of a man who had spent half his life in a windowless cell or in the jaws of a white pointer.

“Marriage,” he said; and the way he did, he needn’t say anything else.

It was a heavy word that nobody dared rebut.

“I’m sorry,” said The Leader.

The other agreed, all nodding silently.

“How did it happen?” asked The White Knight

The Man couldn’t respond. It was as if his brain had been wired backward. One minute he was conscious and being an ass, and the next he was catatonic.

In his head, he thought about his divorce. He felt like a newborn child; as if he had been cast out from his warm and suffocating bind, and was now free to do whatever he pleased. Yet all he wanted was to be wrapped tight in his lover’s obsessive and jealous grasp. He’d never felt so scared or alone.

“ . ”

The Man said something; what it was, though, was impossible to tell. Were he a machine - were he The Singularity even - it looked as if he was broken or with flat batteries. Though his body looked still, his mind was a wild torrent of shame, remorse, and regret.

And at that second it all came flooding back; the moments that he missed and would never experience again – hearing the words ‘I love you’ and then saying them back; all the little hugs and kisses; and the crust cut off of sandwiches, so as to avoid getting curls.

His daughter was everything. How could he live a life of feeling this without her?

And then he thought of his ex-wife and almost immediately, his emotions twisted and then turned into thousands of tiny stabbing pins. He thought about all the compromises he had made and already he felt like a hardened victim.

He thought of how they had first met; but all those rosy feelings, they lasted barely a second. Instead, as rage took over, he thought about all the times that she had brought him to his knees; and how he had been castrated, pinioned, and robbed of his instincts to survive without her.

Then finally, like a foetus ripped from a gaping hole in its mother's womb, he thought about his quiet, empty home to which he could not return.

"Hold me," he said in a quiet, barely audible, voice.

He was trembling, yes, but in front of these strangers, he managed to sound somewhat composed. How long he could this up was anyone's guess, but surely it wouldn't be long.

"Mr. Robot," he shouted, knowing too well what was about to come. "Hug me for fuck's sake."

Mr. Robot didn't need to be asked twice. It was something that calmed them both; like patting a dog. The others watched on in strange wonder as the robot picked up The Man and swung him back and forth, ever so gently, until all of The Man's problems dissolved. He was weightless and free once more.

"So weird," said The Leader.

"You don't get it," said The White Knight.

"Shut up."

"Yes, mam."

It was The Driver, though, who had the least estranged expression.

"He's hot," she said.

"What?"

"Yeah, he's old, I know. But look at him."

The all stared at The Man being held in a robot's arms.

"I suppose you're right," said The Leader. "I was wrong to judge. He's like any of us. He just needs his safe space. Look at him. He's weak and wounded. He's hurt and his feelings are damaged. God, he's like any one of us."

"I bet he's got a big..." said The Driver.

"What the hell?"

"I'm just saying, is all."

It was maybe a minute or two before The Man's anxiety lessened and maybe another minute or so before he calmly climbed down and dusted out the pleats in his trousers.

"I want to apologise," said The Leader.

"You're welcome," said The Man, ignoring her open arms.

Very rarely had The Leader ever had a change of heart about a man.

"Fuck you," she said.

And never would she ever again.

"I thought you were just like us – a victim of institutionalised gender defining repression - but as it turns out you're exactly the bastard I thought you were."

The Man was staring out the window into the parking lot, ignoring the monologue.

"Unresponsive, pig-headed, misogynistic, fat shaming, slut shaming..."

The Driver sighed.

"I'd be his slut," she thought, wishing it was appropriate to say out loud.

"Colour shaming, gender defining, chauvinistic repressor and oppressor of all things fair and equal. You're just the kind of..."

She went on and on but The Man was unfazed, unfettered, and unaffected. Her voice was no more abrasive than the sound of air being let out of a tire. Something else had The Man's attention – something immediate and dire.

"Your friends are here," he said, watching armed figures march towards their room. "And they don't look very friendly."

The Leader rushed to the window.

"Oh fuck," she said.

The others panicked. Even Mr. Robot shut his eyes.

"Trouble?" asked The Man, coyly.

"It's The German," said The Leader, her legs visibly shaking as she crouched by the window.

"I gather you weren't expecting him."

The Man didn't at all seem phased.

“He’s a psycho. Where the hell is The Assistant? She was supposed to do the handover. This is not cool.”

“Your friend has a gun.”

“He’s not my friend. He’s nobody’s friend.”

She paused for a second, before uttering a hysterical, “Oh shit...”

“What is it,” said the other heroes.

“It’s the whole gang. The Zebras. All of them.”

There was a consensus. All the heroes agreed.

“We’re fucked,” they said.

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic. You’re heroes, right?”

This time no-one responded. They looked doe-eyed and dumb.

“Of course you are.”

For a miserable prick, The Man sure could sound quite upbeat and confident when he wanted.

“You’re heroes. And not just any hero; you’re the super kind.”

It was hard to tell if he was being ironic.

“We are,” they all said in unison.

“So...” he said, pointing to each one. “What’s your super-power?”

The Leader stepped forward first.

“CrossFit,” she said.

“What?”

“CrossFit,” she said again, this time, giving herself a high-five.

The other all nodded; they obviously knew what she meant.

“You,” he said pointing at The Driver.

“I have a license, and I’m allowed to borrow my dad’s van on weekends.”

“And what about you, lad?” said The Man pointing to The White Knight.

“I’m a feminist,” he said.

“What? I mean how? I mean... What? How is that a... ok, fuck it, and what about you,” he said pointing at The Empath.

“I whisper quietly and tap objects with my fingers until you get tingles.”

“Oh shit,” said The Man. “Yeah, we’re fucked.”

“What do we do then?”

They looked as desperate and defenceless as they sounded.

“You’re supposed to be the tough guy hero.”

“Right, so now you want a tough guy? I ain’t a hero, darling, not anymore.”

“You have to do something. These guys are killers. You get that, right? They actually kill people.”

“And you’re heroes, right?”

“Yes,” said The Empath, tapping the back of her cell phone. “But we are more like holistic superheroes. And plus most of the confrontations we have are not really face to face. It’s usually on forums and music videos.”

“I believe in you,” said The White Knight. “I know you can help us. If you do, we’ll let you go, right?” he said, looking nervous at The Leader. “I mean, we never really wanted to take you anyway, only the robot.”

The Man looked at Mr. Robot, and Mr. Robot looked at The Man.

“Alright,” he said. “I can get you out of this.”

The Man stared at the pervious figures sneaking through the darkness.

“It won’t be easy, though.”

“If anyone can do it it’s you.”

“I’ll need a couple of things.”

“Anything,” said The Leader.

“Alright then,” he said. “A punch in the face and a blowjob.”

fourteen

“Get the station on the phone.”

“No please? No can you? No would you?”

The Reporter didn't lower herself to respond.

“You know I am driving here,” said The Cameraman. “You'd be doing yourself the favour.”

“Can't you see I'm busy?”

And like that, she had applied just a smidgen too much blush.

“Now look what you've done, you idiot.”

It was clear the stress was overwhelming.

“Ok, I got Jeff on the line. What do I say?”

“Put it on speaker.”

The Reporter struggled to find symmetry in the colour on her cheeks.

“Jeff?” she said.

“Yeah, what is it?”

Jeff was an assistant producer. They went way back, or so she thought.

“It's me.”

“Who?”

“Me. It's me.”

“Look, I don't have time for this, You got ten seconds. What have you got?”

“A plot to kill hundreds, maybe more. The Engineer and his robot are at the heart of everything. It's all real. It's all happening right now.”

“Footage...”

Jeff had little time for verbs or prepositions.

“I have proof of the conspiracy; photos of targets.”

“Interviews?”

“Well, no, not yet but...”

“Never come to me without the full story?”

“What we have will blow your mind. Trust me.”

“Explosions and gunfire; and concerned neighbours who never suspected a thing. Interviews goddamnit, interviews!”

“The Doctor is one of the targets.”

“You on the scanner?”

The Reporter made a sour face at her colleague.

“It was left behind. But we’re on our way to The University.”

“University is off-limits. No cameras, no reporters.

“In all due respect, the author of this is...”

“Motel Riviera. That’s where your robot is. There’s your story.”

“But...”

“Explosions, gunfire, interviews.”

fifteen

It's safe to say there was a great deal more biting than he had imagined, let alone all the eye-poking and cigarette burns; but that didn't dampen his enthusiasm. And in the end, when The Driver and The Man finally left the bathroom, there was so much blood it was hard to tell whose was whose.

"Well, well, well," said The German, waving his gun irresponsibly as he spoke, "if it isn't the great Justice Man."

The Man had barely even buttoned his pants and already he was in the thick of it.

"Good, you know who I am. Then you know what I'm capable of."

His neck and face were covered in scratches and he may or may not have lost a tooth.

"Yeah, Mofo, I know you. Or I knew you would be more appropriate. How do ya like that, punk ass bitch? You are being the past."

And he must have had a song in his head because...

"This is not some revolution, this is evolution, motherfucker. This is the endless night –wrong or right, this is tight, the good fight, black on white. This is history in the making. It's our history that we're taking – back; proud to be black, can't erase that, that and the fact that you talk back, I'm primed to attack, so you better know, motherfucker, there's this and there's that."

Gone was his polite, albeit racist, vernacular. And he wasn't done yet.

"This is our time, the end of times; this is the book of revelations; critical devastation; yo, some hard ass niggaz come to fuck you up."

And then it was quiet again. No one said a thing. Half the room was pointing guns while the other half was sitting dumbfounded on the bed. Sure, they were terrified, but for the most

part, they were confused; it was hard to tell if they were supposed to be begging for their lives, or they should be begging to hear more.

“You are Caucasian,” said Mr. Robot, breaking the awkwardness.

The German was breathing heavy, almost wheezing; still, he had a very large gun in his hands. “Yo, fuck you, you hunk of tin, you heavenly sin, you know God ain’t got no place for you on Heaven or Earth, or any place within. So fuck you.”

The air was getting tense and dangerous.

“What the hell’s going on?” whispered The Leader.

“If this was on the internet I’d write something, I swear I would,” said The White Knight.

He looked at The Empath as if to console her. His eyes said. “If I hold you, will you hold me back?”

And so Mr. Robot continued.

“You implied in your rhythmical anecdote that you were not Caucasian.”

“So what, mofo? You gotta point?”

“But you are Caucasian.”

“Yo, fuck you. That’s the pot calling the kettle black. You’re white goods motherfucker. You and your dishwasher, tumble dryer cousin. You so white you see white in everything, except you can’t see the colour within, beneath the skin, deep within. Motherfucker I’m a person, a real live being, a being that’s been seeing, how Africa’s been treated, defeated, turnin’ one brother against another, bringing civil war to good folk’s front door, where a nigga can’t get no bigger than the hate and prejudice of which you have in store. So fuck you, you out o’ date machine, you nasty lookin’, low-tech home for tomatoes and ice-cream. I ain’t proud of my history, of my white past, but I’m makin’ amends; I ain’t kickin’ it like all you crackers in a house made o’ glass. I’m doin what’s right, the good fight, like a perfectly legible sign, black on white.”

The Driver wiped her mouth. It was clear the blood on her teeth was not hers.

“You realize how many blacks get held back that wanna

study? But that's a white privilege, yo, they can't get that."

"No," said Mr. Robot, but genuinely intrigued. "Is it an overwhelming percentage?"

"Yo, it's a lot motherfucker."

Mr. Robot turned to two of The Zebra's guarding the door.

"Are you a part of this percentage?" he asked.

"Actually no," said The Man with the Machete. "I graduated with honours. Actually, I'm in a scholarship program. And this, this group, it works towards credits for my social obligation portion of the program."

"You joined a knife-wielding gang for university credits?"

"Actually we started out as a chess club, and on weekends we used to draw Venn Diagrams. But then Emmanuelle joined..."

He stared at The German the same way a drunk would, an empty bottle of whiskey.

"...and then the group kind of went in another direction. I mean, the guns aren't even real. They're replicas," he said, tapping the plastic end of his weapon against the doorframe. "I should be working on my dissertation right now, but if I don't do the four and a half hours per week of group activities, I lose eighteen percent of my scholarship. We're all pretty much in the same boat," he said, gesturing to the other Zebras.

The German was not impressed.

"Yo fuck that, fuck you, stop asking questions, white overlord, stop making my niggaz confused."

"Can I just....?"

The Man with the Machete put his machete on the floor.

It was starting to look like an intervention.

"The whole 'N' word," he said. "It's just, I don't use it myself. I don't see a need. I'm not sure if you're being ironic or if you just really like saying it. You seem to say it a lot."

"You lost your mind, nigga?"

"You see, there. I know you have good grammar; I've heard you talking to your mother. But articles and models aside, do you really have to say that word?"

"Yo, that's our word. The same way the queers say 'queer'

and the kikes say ‘kike’. We’re ownin’ dat word. We’re takin’ it, breakin’ it, fixatin’ it, and makin it ours, nigga.”

“I’m a literary major, and it literally goes against the very foundations of my learning to be in the same room as you.”

Immediately he took off the host of weapons amassed on his body.

“Ya can’t leave, nigga.”

“Now, you see? My name is Michael. More than anything, I think I take offense to your poor diction.”

“And what about your credits?”

“I’ll speak to my course councillor in the morning. And for the hundredth time, I’m not African; neither is Niles, Evelyn, or Melissa. We’re Canadian. This whole thing,” he said, gesturing to the frightened hostages, “It isn’t healthy.”

And he left.

The German circled the room like a wild beast. He was clearly outnumbered. Were this really the savannah, like in his imagination, he would have to attack; one quick, bloodied strike to quell any insurgency.

“One of you has to die,” he said, aiming his gun at all and sundry.

He then pointed it at The White Knight’s temple.

“You really wanna be a superhero? You live by the sword you die by the sword, bitch.”

He cocked the gun and The White Knight immediately pissed his pants. Anyone could have done something – anything – but not one of them did. They all watched on, stupid and petrified as if it were they who had a rifle pointed at their pimply forehead. No-one spoke up, no-one stood up, and no one stood out; and for that reason, the violence continued.

“Please,” said The White Knight, desperately. “Don’t shoot me. I’m not like them, really I’m not. I’m not a hero, I’m not. I just...”

He wondered what was worse, dying or telling the truth?

“You wh-wh-wh-what?” said The German, mocking the boy’s speech.

“I just did it to pick up girls,” said The White Knight.

On one hand, it was a relief, and other he felt naked, exposed, and vulnerable; he felt weak, ineffectual, and emasculated – just like his hero.

The German laughed.

“You sneaky little thing,” he said. “Did it work? Did you get pussy?”

The White Knight hadn’t the courage to look at anyone, especially The Empath.

“I’m not a feminist, I’m not. No man is,” he confessed.

He was crying hysterically, but he had opened the floodgates; worse was still to come.

“I can’t pick up girls. I’m no good. I can’t do it; not like other guys do. I get nervous. I think it out too much in my head and I end up saying dumb shit if I even have the courage to say anything at all. And I’m not strong like other guys. I don’t have big muscles. And I’m not all that smart either. I’m not stupid, but like everything else, I’m average like everyone else. It’s not easy you know, having to always be strong and attractive and good at kicking footballs; and being so scared to death every time you talk to a girl you like. I always felt useless and insecure around girls. They have that power, and they use it a lot – every guy knows this. I just... I thought being a feminist would help me...”

“Don’t be a fag. Say it. Grow a pair. Say it, bitch.”

“I thought it would get me laid.”

The German laughed while The White Knight dropped his head in shame.

“You fucking queer; you don’t get pussy cause you are a pussy.”

He laughed hysterically, but that laughter was broken by the sound of tapping and hypnotic whispering. The German’s reaction was fast and startling.

He struck The White Knight in the back of the head.

“Is that it, bitch?”

“Please don’t kill me,” pleaded The White Knight. “I’m full of shit, ok? I’m not a feminist, I’m not. No man is,” he confessed.

“It’s impossible.”

He was crying hysterically.

“I can’t talk to girls. I never know what to say, and I’m always scared all the time. They’re too intimidating. It’s not easy trying to find someone who will like you. It’s even worse when you like someone,” he said, looking at The Empath. “And you know that if you tell them they’re just gonna laugh in your face and make you feel like a worthless piece of shit. I can’t compete with big muscly guys; and I can’t compete with the smart, witty, and interesting ones too. This was the only way I could stand out.”

“Do you listen to yourself now? What kind of woman would want to fuck you after hearing that? A woman with very low self-esteem, that’s who? And what kind of conquest is that?”

What a terrible thing to say, even if it was true.

“Leave him alone.”

The German pointed his gun around the room.

“Who said that?”

The Empath stood up. For whatever reason, she was on her feet and the whole room was looking right at her. In that moment, she looked wrought with fear. Were her heart not beating so rampant in her chest, she might have been excused for being a stone statue. A look of sheer dread was carved into her forehead and along her trembling lip.

What the hell had she gotten herself into?

“Are you insane or just stupid?” said The German, pointing the gun at her head.

The Empath said something inaudible.

“Yo, what the fuck you say, bitch?”

The Empath continued; her voice sounding like small plastic bubbles being popped.

“You better speak clear, bitch, to what I can hear, bitch.”

Still, she continued. This time, though, she took a small metal tin from her bag and shook it lightly; its contents swishing about in a hypnotic manner.

“Yo, you fucking whack, you better step back, or I’ll pop a cap in yo ass.”

It seemed rhyming, like a jab or a flinch, was some instinctual reaction to fear.

Again she spoke inaudibly, this time tapping the tin with her fingernails.

Tap – tap – tap – tap – tap – tap – tap.

And then she swished back and forth.

Shh – shh – shh- shh- shh- shh- shh.

“You get dat devil shit away from me.”

But she didn’t stop. Sensing his diminishing aura, The Empath moved ever so slowly towards The German, her every step as quiet and minuscule as the size and shape of her words. She moved like a gentle stream; not rushing in any way but constantly pushing forwards. The light tapping on the metal tin, mixed with the swishing and swooshing of its contents inside had everyone in the room under some vice-like trance. Were she to strike at all, now would be the time.

“Butter, butter, butter, butter, butter,” she said, her voice sounding like thoughts exploding. “Tepid, tepid, tepid, tepid, tepid, tepid.”

Still, she continued, on and on and on; her quiet voice, the only sound in the room.

“Banter, banter, banter, banter, banter,” she whispered; and as she did, she thought to herself, “Oh my God, I’m actually doing it. I’m saving the world. I’m a super...”

“Yo fuck that bitch.”

The first bullet hit her in the chest. It shattered her clavicle. Immediately The Empath dropped the tin can to the floor, making a god-awful racket. Her whispering stopped too; it turned into one shocked and desperate breath.

The second, third and fourth shots were wild. They missed her entirely. One hit the ceiling above Mr. Robot’s head, while the other two went straight through the television tore apart the clock on the wall.

The last bullet, though, struck her plum on the forehead.

The White Knight screamed in sad and dire loss. He wept and wailed as he dragged The Empathy’s limp body onto his own,

holding her chin so as to stop her head from constantly swinging to one side. He sounded like a whale mourning its dead calf, or a spoiled child, its fallen ice-cream.

Immediately, The German dropped the gun.

“She made me do it,” he said, backing up to the door.

The White Knight turned, with blood covering his hands and face.

“What have you done?” he said. “What the hell have you done?”

“I had no choice.”

The German’s hands were raised and his face, pale and apologetic.

“She was doing voodoo on me; black magic.”

“It was ASMR, you son of a bitch,” screamed The White Knight; his eyes, nose, and mouth all leaking with misery. “She was gonna give you tingles. What the fuck is wrong with you? Who doesn’t like tingles?”

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

He meant it too. He may have said that word a hundred thousand in his life to weasel his way out of a hundred thousand wrongs that he had made. This was the first time, though, that he had truly felt sorry. It was a shame that someone always had to die for such magnificent awakenings.

“If I could take it back I would.”

As much as he meant it, still his instinct was to run; run for his living daylights and never get caught. As he stepped through the door, The German caught sight of himself in the mirror and he saw, for the first time in a very long time, his honest and true self.

All of a sudden, he had lost his borrowed persona; stripped of that metallic, imposing veneer. He looked, in that second, like a young child, desperate to be swept up to its mother’s breast, safe against her beating heart.

“She’s dead,” cried The Leader. “Oh God, she’s dead. She’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead.”

Even her death was hypnotic.

“She is not dead.”

Mr. Robot stepped towards the bloodied body.

“Watch out,” screamed The Leader, assuming the clunky robot would step or fall on her dear friend’s body. “What are you doing?”

“She has not yet died. I can fix her.”

Mr. Robot took The Empath from The White Knight’s hands and laid her on her back.

“She’s dead,” said The Driver. “Just look at her. She’s not breathing. Jesus, we gotta get out of here.”

“What the hell are you on about?” shouted The White Knight. “We can’t leave her.”

“Listen, Romeo,” she said, grabbing The White Knight’s collar. “If we stay here we’ll be arrested. We have a stolen robot, a dead body, an arsenal of guns, and a motel room that’s covered in blood and bullet holes. I get you had a thing for her; trust me, I get it. But she is gone now and we have to be too.”

“I can fix her,” said Mr. Robot. “I know what to do.”

The coloured bars on his chest all lit up bright yellow.

“I am trained in surgical procedures.”

Everybody looked at The Man as if he could vouch for the robot’s skills. He looked as blank as the others. He turned to the robot and asked, as one friend might to another; “Do you know what you’re doing?”

Had he the ability, Mr. Robot would have smiled.

“I have trained every day of my life for this. I know what I’m doing,” he said.

This time The Man smiled.

“I think I know just what kind of robot you are.”

Those words echoed in the robot’s head as he aligned The Empath’s wounded body.

“Hurry the hell up,” said The Driver.

Mr. Robot hated pressure. He could never perform when someone was expecting it. He was nervous; his hands were shaking, and his vision was a drunken blur.

“What are you gonna do?” said The Man.

Mr. Robot hovered over The Empath’s body like a crane. His

claw-like hand moved up and down the centre over her body. It looked as if he were lining himself up to rip a teddy bear from her stomach.

“Don’t touch the sides. Don’t touch the sides,” said Mr. Robot.

Though he had spent his life playing Operation, he was never much good at it. This, Mr. Robot felt, was his test. It was what he was born to do. And so he didn’t stop. He ignored the shouting and he paid no mind to all the jumping about and carrying on. His focus was clear and sharp; it could slice an atom in half. He had never felt so calm and so sure of anything in his life.

“Don’t touch the sides,” he said again.

And like an anchor, smashing through a wooden pier, Mr. Robot lowered his hand into The Empath’s chest.

“Oh God no,” screamed The Leader.

“For the love of God just stop,” said someone else.

In his head, Mr. Robot heard that horrible buzzing.

“Don’t touch the sides,” he said, again and again, and again.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Mr. Robot knew exactly what he was doing; he’d see this a thousand times before. All he had to do was take out each of her organs and then put them back in one by one; and all without touching the sides.

“Where did you learn to do this?” said The Man.

He sounded manic; on the verge of cardiac arrest.

“It’s ok, my friend,” said Mr. Robot, staring straight into The Empath’s open chest. “I know Operation.”

“The procedure?” said The Man confused. “You know how to operate?”

“No. The board game,” said Mr. Robot. “And I am very good too.”

He sounded like a professional.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” shouted The Man. “Stop it. Stop right now.”

But the robot wouldn’t stop. He was intent on finishing his turn. And so his hand pushed further into The Empath’s body,

feeling for the small, silver bullet.

“Don’t touch the sides,” he said again.

The Man slapped his robot head.

“It’s not a goddamn game,” he screamed. “Stop it. Stop it now.”

There was no stopping the robot. Finally, The Man said it; “Bad robot!”

He may as well have pressed the robot’s red button. Those two words were like a mantra for shame and self-defeat. Instantly, Mr. Robot stopped what he was doing. The room was quiet again. In the distance, police sirens sounded out like a symphony of impending doom.

“We gotta go,” said The Driver, finally spent of her patience. “Now!”

“I can’t move,” said The White Knight. “This isn’t real, this isn’t real.”

He repeated it over and over, and one of the times, he actually believed it. The Driver dragged him, along with everyone else, towards the van.

The Driver was the only one who looked back as they reversed; she wished she didn’t.

“There is no limit to your potential,” thought Mr. Robot, hearing his father’s voice, but coming out of The Empath’s tattered and broken body.

He felt as if we were drowning; except the water was despair, grief, and remorse.

“What do we do?” asked The Leader. “I don’t wanna go to jail.”

“You’re not going to jail,” said The Driver.

It was as if she were born for this moment. Her blood felt electric. She felt indomitable and inexplicably drawn to the improbable and the impossible. She felt God-like; as if the lives of all these people – of the whole world – depended on what she did next.

It was a shame that someone had to die for her to feel this good.

“What the hell was that about?” said The Man.

He sounded disappointed as if he'd expected better.

"I'm not sure," said Mr. Robot.

There was no logical reason for him to have done what he did.

"No more trying to save people, ok?"

It definitely sounded like Mr. Robot was getting at least one last shot.

Having friends was fantastic.

"And what about you Mr. Justice Man?" said The Leader, sharpening her opinions. "Some kind of superhero you are. You just stood there the whole time. You did nothing. I thought all you needed was a blowjob and a punch in the face."

Her words were cold, direct, and honest.

"So did I," said The Man. "So did I."

sixteen

It didn't take long for reports to start circling about what had happened. Within minutes of the heroes departing, there was media and police all over the place.

"What exactly did you see?"

The Reporter was beside a dumpster on the other side of the street.

"Not many people know this," said Mary, a fifty-seven-year-old prostitute. "But on my knees, I can see everything. Ya have to. Never know who's gonna sneak up. That's why I hate it when they ask me to look em in the eyes."

The Cameraman kept his shot as wide as possible. In the background, The Assistant was barely visible, arguing on her cellular phone. And while The Reporter got her interview, The Cameraman did and she asked; keeping The Assistant in focus - spying on her every move.

"So yeah, I may have a mouthful, but my eyes are always open just as wide, and I see all sorts of stuff. For the first time in a long time, Mary, not only had something to say, but she had something worth listening to. "You'd be surprised at what goes on in a place like this."

As she spoke, door after door was knocked off their hinges as police searched for their suspects. They found nothing outside the expected filth and depravity.

"What did you see?" said The Reporter. "What happened here?"

Mary looked as if she'd had an epiphany; the moral kind.

"Normally I'd make you pay but it's been a good day," she said.

"Ok," said The Reporter apprehensive. "Thank you, but..."

"I sucked a lot of dick tonight is what I'm trying to say."

The way she stood, you'd think she was expecting a medal or

a first place ribbon.

“Listen,” said The Reporter, quickly losing her patience. “We don’t have much time.”

At the crime scene, bodies were being removed in black plastic sheets while a handful of detectives scoured the carpark for clues. And as they did, scores of vans came roaring into the parking lot, stopping in all sorts of anti-social angles. Their doors burst open and their contents spilled out into the night – an unfathomable amount Social Justice Heroes, shouting before they even had a thing to say, and all of them looking equally underprivileged, picked on, oppressed, or shamed in one way or another.

“Brace yourselves, men,” shouted a Lieutenant.

Their presence was devastating. It didn’t take long then for the placards to come out and for the fists to start pumping in the air.

“I’m a slut and proud,” said one.

“Gender is Patriarchy,” said another.

And while they made their diversion, The Assistant called her boss.

“Doctor.”

Her voice shook like a leaf.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said. “It a fucking war zone.”

On the other end of the phone, The Doctor chased a young child around a room.

“You told me you had this,” he said whilst scanning the room for that insolent little...

“I do, I swear; just give me time.”

She didn’t sound anywhere as mean when she was backed-alling.

“Where is my robot?”

“I’ll find it, Sir, I promise. This is just a slight hiccup. We’re still on track, though.”

“A hiccup? I don’t call a dead body a hiccup.”

“We’re pulling security footage now. This was supposed to be a no-brainer. I don’t know what went wrong.”

“Who has the robot?”

“They’re nobodies.”

“Nobodies? There is a motel room painted with a girl’s intestines.”

“They’re some wannabe heroes, that’s all – in over their heads.”

“So you know nothing about them – who they are, their superpowers, what the fuck they want?”

The answer to all three was ‘no’, but she wouldn’t dare say that word.

“I’ll find them. I’ll get the robot.”

“Get me the CCTV.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

The Doctor said something. It was mumbled under his breath.

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t get that,” said The Assistant.

The Doctor continued, still inaudible.

“Sir?”

“Come here you little bastard,” he shouted.

Even amidst all the shouting and taunting from protestors, The Assistant could hear what sounded like a small girl’s voice. She was laughing; but not as if someone had told her something hilarious. This was a different kind of laughter.

“Sir?”

“You insubordinate fatherless bitch,” shouted The Doctor, running after The Girl. “I’ll kill you.”

“Sir?”

For some seconds it was quiet. And that quiet was broken by a child’s laughter, which in turn was broken by an adult’s fist. It sounded like a bag of rice falling to the floor.

“Bring me that goddamn footage,” said The Doctor.

“Yes, sir.”

“Now!”

The Doctor had always been, more or less, a father figure to The Assistant. She hadn’t, in all these years, felt like a bastard in any way. Now, though, all of her fears and shame were coming to

the fore once more. She felt edgy and vulnerable. If she didn't pull herself together soon, it wouldn't be long till she drank a bottle or two of the cheapest bourbon and fucked an entire basketball team. And who could blame her?

Back by the dumpster, The Reporter continued her struggle to interview Mary, as Social Justice Warriors marched and chanted as one, "Non-binary gender degradation's got to go."

"What did you see?" said The Reporter, desperately. "This is your chance to tell the world."

Mary beamed with delight.

"I know what I saw, but I don't know what I saw. All I can tell you is that it was some strange shit. They weren't fucking. Not that I saw anyway. Maybe they did, before or after, but...."

"Look we really only have a second or two. You see all those people?"

They both turned to see protestors attacking in an aggressive defence. It wouldn't be long until they were spotted and they too were caught in an unwinnable war.

"This is it, your last chance to be on television; your last chance to be famous. You want to be famous, right?"

What a ridiculous question; who didn't want that?

"Why do you think I do this?" said Mary.

Her knees were cut and bruised, and she looked like she hadn't slept in weeks.

"I have an environmental engineering degree. I could be surveying marshlands for shopping malls right now if I wanted. I do this because I love sucking dick a whole lot more."

There was a millisecond of strange silence.

"You know what they call me?"

If the legend was true, then she did.

"The Storm Drain," said Mary. "You wanna know why?"

It was neither rhetorical nor a question; it was akin to a threat.

"It's cause I swallow whatever comes along."

The Cameraman immediately turned away.

"This is pointless," he said. "We're not getting anything we can use. And you know who is about to bloody well drive away."

The Assistant's van sat idling in the distance.

"Ok," said The Reporter, adamantly. "I got this. I got this."
She sounded almost as if she had.

"Tell me," she said. "No, tell the world. What did you see, goddamnit? What did you see?"

Mary cleared her throat and swallowed a mound of phlegm.

"They were some devil worshipers," she said. "Or sometin' like that. And there was a robot. Can you believe that? What does anyone want with a robot? It was the same one that's been all over the news."

There was a moment where Mary looked directly into the camera. Her expression changed entirely as if in that instant the truth and meaning of existence had become abundantly clear.

"You don't believe me," she said. "What? Because I'm a whore?"

The Reporter was speechless. She looked like she was about to cry.

"I'm just pulling your chain. Gotta keep a sense of humour these days."

"Did you see where they went? What were they driving?"

"Van."

"Did you see the make? What colour was it? Was there anything written on the sides?"

"It was dark."

"And the robot did this? You saw with your own eyes."

"Your eyes don't stop working just because your mouth is."

The Reporter signalled to cut taping.

"Oh I'm sorry, am I makin' you uncomfortable? Sucking dick is what I do, bitch, just like taking pictures of dead people is what you do. You're no better than me. Fact is, somebody has to die for you to get outta bed. Somebody has to be beaten up or raped or kept like a slave in a dungeon for half their life. You don't stir your coffee until some poor motherfucker had the worst day of their life – until they're dead or wishing they were. What you do for a living is fucked up. Me, I just suck a few dicks, but you, you're all kinds of sick."

Mary's tirade didn't end there.

"And another thing..."

The Reporter didn't have the time for the insight of a back alley whore, and so she ran across the road just as The Assistant's beetle was slowly pulling out of the parking lot; back the way it came.

"Follow them," screamed The Reporter.

"What about the robot?"

"She's involved in this somehow. I know it; her and The Doctor. I can feel it. I can't explain it, just trust me. We have to follow the smoke to the fire."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said The Cameraman, starting the engine.

"You don't get it, do you?"

She'd have more luck explaining the dynamics of a spinning top to a four-year-old.

"Get what? It's a story. They're all stories. That's the point. The whore actually had a point."

"This isn't any story. This isn't any unfortunate event."

She had The Cameraman by his collar, shaking him.

"This is the end of times," she said. "Whatever the hell The Singularity is, it's happening right here, right now."

Then she looked at him as a mother might, her weak and addled son.

"We are the closest people to it. The end of the world is nigh..."

"And?"

"I'm gonna report every goddamned second of it."

seventeen

“We have to get off the road as fast as possible.”

It's a surprise really - in their panicked state - that they hadn't crashed or at the very least, run over or a pedestrian or two; especially at that last zebra crossing – there was no reason for that child to be carrying so many balloons.

“We killed someone. We're murderers.”

The Leader was jumpy, to say the least.

“Oh God, we're going to jail. This is fucked up. This is fucked up. I can't go to jail. I can't, seriously. I mean look at me. I'm rape bait. Do you even know what they do to girls like me in prison?”

“You're not going to jail. You didn't kill anyone.”

It was at that very second that The Driver realised that she was born for this. Up until now, she had merely drunk excessively and been somewhat promiscuous, but all of a sudden she felt indomitable. She felt in control, capable of anything, and at this very second, she felt like the most dangerous person in the story; and that excited her, more than the booze and all the meaningless sex.

“Nothing changes,” she said. “More or less.”

“What do you mean nothing changes? The Empath's dead. My fingerprints are all over that room. I was there. There's blood on my hands too. Oh, my God, I'm an accessory.”

“Listen, we have the robot, right? So, we have leverage, which means we can still be heroes.”

“And do what with it? You saw it. It's dangerous.”

And those words echoed in poor Mr. Robot's head.

“It's dangerous,” he thought, over and over again.

Maybe everything that had been said about him was true. Maybe he was The Singularity after all. The idea of taking over the world scared him to death – all that planning. And what if none of it went right? What if he wasn't able to take over the world; but instead only managed an island or an inlet, or a block of flats

somewhere? Could he even take over this van?

It was all too overwhelming so he shut his eyes.

“I don’t want to be raped. I don’t even want to be somebody’s girlfriend. Nothing against being gay. I think gay is awesome. Just I’m not gay and I don’t wanna be. And I heard in prison everyone is gay, even the people who don’t want to be.”

“We have a doomsday device in our hands. Now, I don’t know what this robot can do but I can only assume it’s absolutely everything; which means we have the most powerful device in history in our possession – the one thing everybody wants. We’re not going to jail. We’re gonna be rich.”

“Who do we give it to? The Police? The Army?”

“Who said anything about giving it away? For now, we keep it.”

“What about The Administrator? What about The Doctor?”

“Both of whom just tried to kill us. Do you really think they’re gonna get us out of this?”

The Leader started to hyperventilate.

“What the hell is this?” she said, rocking back and forth in her chair. “This is some stupid nightmare. It’s a dream, it has to be. What the hell did we get ourselves into? What the fuck is going on?”

She was on the verge of some erratic, stupid decision.

“Just try to relax. Do your breathing activities. Be mindless or whatever. Just, chill.”

“Chill? People are dead, goddamnit.”

“People always die. It’s what they do. It’s the how and when part that’s hard to put a pin on. But people die. Get over it. But you’re right, though.”

The Leader stopped trembling. It was amazing what a little validation could do.

“We gotta get off this road, and fast,” said The Driver, struggling to see.

The rain was just as loud and obnoxious as it was before. It hadn’t gotten any worse and it hadn’t gotten any better either. It was just as dismal and miserable, except now, there was also the

thought of being hounded and chased by every law enforcement agency under the sun, that and a couple of hundred superheroes.

"I know somewhere," said The Man. "An old friend. We'll be good at least for tonight."

"No way," said the Leader, "we're not doing anything he says. He's a liar and a cheat and just a dirty pig. I'm not letting him make any decisions."

"Well then, let's put it to the robot."

"You can't ask the robot."

"Why the hell not?" said The Driver. "It's the smartest thing on Earth. It's sure as hell gonna give a better answer than you or me."

"There has to be some way to prove to everyone that we had nothing to do with any of this. If we can tell the right person to just wipe the slate clean. I just want to go home."

All of a sudden, she looked seven again.

"What if we can't go home? What if we get killed or arrested? What if we never go home? Who'll tell my mum? And who'll feed my cats?"

"Mr. Robot," shouted The Driver.

The robot was staring at his red button; he had been for some time.

"What is it?" he asked; as if his words were a tremendous weight that he had to drag about just so he could be heard.

"Where should we go next?"

Mr. Robot was only driven by one directive, his own.

"What are the odds of severe injury?" he asked, turning to The Man.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "It's always a possibility, I suppose. I've seen people get hurt in all sorts of ways. Then again, me and Dave, we got a history. So, I'd say probable; to be safe."

The thought of The Man being severely hurt or injured made Mr. Robot feel calm once more as if he were nearer to accomplishing his goal.

"That is where we should go."

The thought of an unfinished goal frightened him. He

wondered how humans could go their whole lives without so much as an idea, let alone a fully drafted plan. What if he died before ever reaching his true potential?

“Alright, point the way,” said The Driver.

“Are you nuts? You heard them, severe injury. Isn’t the whole point of this to avoid injury – to avoid bloody arrest? Am I the only one with common sense here?”

The Leader’s complaining was loud, but not impossible to ignore.

“Just keep going straight,” said The Man. “I’ll tell you when to turn off.”

“So we’re taking orders from him now?”

She sounded like someone had just stolen her last cookie.

I’m the leader here. I started this group. I got all of you in. It’s my fucking name for Christ’s sake.”

“I vote we put the leadership to vote,” said The White Knight.

He sounded angry. He sounded spurned.

“And my vote is for Justice Man.”

“What?”

Her voice sounded like a popping balloon.

“How did the prisoner get in the run to lead?”

“You can either vote for him or someone else, it’s a democracy.”

Not one to begrudge equality, The Leader conceded.

“Well, I vote for me then. And anyway, you can’t have a male leader. It’s patriarchal, and we won’t ever get legitimised. Plus, if we have a man leader, how can we ever be Hyenas? It’s impossible.”

“Who seconds the vote?” asked The White Knight.

The Driver was eying The Man through her rearview mirror except hers was a more predatory stare.

“I second the vote,” said Mr. Robot.

“It can’t second a vote. First of all, it’s a robot. It’s not a person. And second, It’s our hostage. And so is he for God’s sake.”

“We’re past all that,” said The Driver. She stared right into The Man’s dumb eyes. “Look,” she said, “in all fairness, the sex was astounding, but you’re inconsistent as all hell. We need someone

who's not in the wings of a self-destructive purge. No offense."

"None taken," said The Man. "I get it, I do. You're right as well. But there is still one shot left if you're willing to try. It's a long shot, but it might work."

"Will we need ergonomic chairs again?"

"This is something else."

The Driver looked a little disappointed. Sure, she wanted to save the world. Who didn't? But in the back of her head, she was kind of hoping there would be some sex, even if it was ad lib.

The Man knew, though, that something deeper than sex was holding him back. He carried with him this horrible burning rock of shame that constantly rumbled about in his stomach. When he had love, he could ignore it; but he couldn't ignore it anymore. This, he thought, was the tether from which he needed to cut himself free.

"Are you sure about this?" said The Driver. "This looks very....suburban."

And it was just that. The streets were quiet - sprinkles lightly drizzled over well-kept gardens; driveways were pregnant with bicycles, SUVs, and station wagons; and windows were lit up with decorations and the bright flashing colours of flat screen TVs.

"Pull in here," said The Man.

The van pulled onto a gravel verge, almost smashing into a tree as it slid to a halt. The house was unlike any of the rest. Its garden was a desert of red dirt and weeds; its driveway aborted of opulence and wealth, and instead littered with old paint cans and broken televisions; while the windows which hadn't been smashed, were lit up by the dull flicker of candles and cigarette lighters.

"You sure?"

"This is it," said The Man.

The others looked on with fear and trepidation.

"This is where we're supposed to be safe?"

It wasn't just the worst house on the best street; this could have been the worst house on the very worst street. It was the kind of house that swallowed property values like some gargantuan sinkhole of death; if only because it was the kind of house that

looked as if it were most certainly the burial ground for thousands of unsolved murders.

“We’ll be safe here,” said The Man. “Safer than we’ll ever be on the road. Barry owes me a favour; so we can stay here until the dust blows over. Trust me, nobody will find us here.”

It was true; it was the kind of house that nobody ever saw. As much as it stood out like an eight-legged baby, it was the kind of house that made adults and kids alike, stare at the shoes as they passed it, and think about happy things like rainbows and butterflies.

The front door was painted with a hammer and sickle.

“Are you sure this is safe?”

“The appearance of bravado,” said The Man, “hints towards a complete lack of it.”

He opened the door without even knocking.

“What the hell did that mean?” asked The Leader.

If a symbol alone could wreak so much havoc, imagine what lay inside.

eighteen

Meanwhile, The Doctor sat in his cramped and cluttered office scouring through hours of security footage pulled from in and around the motel. His eyes were dry and red from not having blinked since dinner, and knuckles clicked whenever he scrolled back and forth. It's not like it came as a big surprise or anything, seeing The Man and Mr. Robot walking out of the room all bloody and rare, so what then was he looking for?

"Whatcha doin' honey?"

The Woman stood at the door, peering over his shoulder.

"Give me a minute, would you?"

"What is it? What's it for? Is it done? Is it hard? Can I help?"

Her enthusiasm, like a stutter, was one of her least admirable qualities.

"No. I mean..."

The Doctor fought hard for the right words.

"Look I'm sorry," he said, thinking he had them. "It's just this is very important and..."

"And I'm not as important. That's fine."

"Wait, it's not that I meant."

"Nah, I get it. I'm not a superhero. I'm just a woman; just someone for you to fuck when it pleases you. Well, guess what asshole, I'm a mother and mothers are superheroes too, you piece of shit; and by the way, Mr. That's-Never-Happened-Before, you've never pleased me."

"What the fuck?"

He was ire; ready to smash his own face through glass just to prove how ire he was.

"Are you kidding me?" he screamed.

"Oooh," said The Woman, as if she'd spotted some cute sandals in a cluttered vitrine. "What's that?"

She sounded inappropriately glad and whimsy.

“What?”

The Doctor, on the other hand, did not. His was a cocktail of rage and confusion.

“That – what you’re watching – what is it? Where’s that from? Oh, is that from that thing on the news? Is this secret video? Oooh, you are special,” she said, cuddling up to her man so as to peer over his shoulder.

The Doctor looked pained and dizzy.

“Can we discuss what you just said back then?”

“Oh don’t be such a Bambi; I was just playing with you. I used to do it all the time with my...”

And then it hit her.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” she screamed.

“What is it?”

“It’s my god damn ex, that’s what it is.”

“Who?”

“Him,” she shouted, pointing at The Man’s grainy silhouette.

“The robot?”

“No, not the robot, you genius. The guy with the robot. Is that...?”

She moved closer until her breath was fogging up the screen.

“Is that blood?”

The Doctor didn’t respond but his face said it all.

“Where the hell is this from? What the hell happened? What did he do? What the fuck did he do?”

She was already reaching into her purse and pulling out her phone.

“That irresponsible son of a bitch.”

“That’s your ex?” said The Doctor, secretly squirming with excitement. “You’re sure?”

“I know the man I raised a child with. What did he do?”

“I don’t...”

“Fuck it, I’ll ask him myself.”

Each beat of her heart was like a bullet being fired from one end of her worn patience to her ex-husband’s stupid chest. She willed herself to keep it all together; to not lose her cool like all

those times before.

“Hello?” said The Man.

“You piece of shit,” she said before she even managed to take a breath.

“Babe?”

“Don’t call me babe you asshole. We’re divorced. Get it through your head.”

“Jesus, how embarrassing. Just instinct I guess. What’s up? What’s wrong? Is the girl ok? What happened? What’s going on?”

“Are you involved with a gang of murderers?”

“A what? No, I’m not involved with a gang of murders. Who the fuck told you that?”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“What the hell did you hear?”

“Riviera Motel,” she said, reading from the small television.

“No. Nope. No. No fucking way. First of all, it’s not what it looks like. Secondly...”

“You’re all over the bloody news.”

“I know it looks bad but trust me, I’m in the right on this one. This is different to last time.”

“This is exactly what the judge was talking about. You’re reckless. You make decisions without even a second glance at the consequences. Maybe you do, but you just don’t care. I can’t have my daughter in that kind of environment.”

“Your daughter? Our daughter. And what environment in particular, huh? I gave up my career for stability, consistency, and so you could chase your dream. I made the compromises. You reaped all the benefits. I looked after the house. I looked after everyone. I was the one who cooked and cleaned every god damn day. I was the one who was home. I read the stories. I did the laundry. I made the meals. I chased away the ghosts and monsters. I wiped away the bloody tears while you were out...”

“Working. Say it... While I was out working and providing for this family”

“And I wasn’t?”

“A memoir is not a fucking job. It doesn’t pay the bloody

bills. And after ten years, how many chapters did you write, huh?"

As The Woman screamed into the phone, The Doctor grinned; it was a cunning kind of grin. He stared at his fiancé as she cursed and spat, and he realised, like all great discoveries, by pure, stupid chance, he had stumbled upon the answer to all of his problems. All of a sudden, her constant nagging and whining sounded like the squeaky wheel; the one that he would lay on the tracks of an oncoming train.

"Finally," he thought, "I can kill that horrible child, and no-one will blame me."

"You're a cheating whore," screamed The Man. "What kind of morality is that for our daughter? You don't have the courage to be alone so what, you just bide your time and lie every day until something better comes along? That's a piece of shit move. The difference between me and you is that I don't need another person in my life. I want a woman, sure, but I don't need one. Whereas you..."

"Me? Go on, say it."

"If you don't have someone to smother, obsess over, and eventually resent and despise then you end up doing all that to yourself. Your love is sick. And you only love someone else because you're scared to death to love yourself."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Myself? I just fucked a girl nearly half my age."

"Good for you."

"Not just me. God for her too, She loved it."

"You're crude."

"You're a... fuck you."

"Yeah, well, you're never gonna see my daughter again. And you better get yourself a real job soon cause if you miss even one alimony payment, I swear...."

"You know you and your father finally have something in common. You can stop hating him now."

"What's that?"

"He cheated on his family too. And that's why you despise him. You became the very man you fucking despise. You're a dose

of irony, that's what you are; a miserable, ironic cunt."

"I'm getting married."

A pin dropped, somewhere inside The Man's racked mind, and boy did it echo.

"And we're probably moving, just so you know. Anyway... He's a nice guy, you'd like him."

"He's lucky I haven't broken his legs yet; coming into a man's home and taking what's his."

"What's yours? Do you even hear yourself? And anyway, he didn't take me, I left you."

"Yeah, when you had another fucking lily pad to jump onto. You're like the mangy toad who jumps from leaf to leaf cause your miserable weight keeps sinking each one. You stay as long as someone keeps you dry. A miserable fucking toad who's scared of being in the water – scared to be alone."

"I'm hanging up."

"I want to speak to her."

"No. It'll only make it more difficult. Please, if you love her, then do the right thing and just walk away."

"So you'll willingly erase a father from your daughter's life? Why? So she can be just like you? So she can grow up bitter and self-loathing too? So she can one day hurt people just like her mother taught her how to do."

"Goodbye."

"Cunt."

nineteen

“Hey Dave, what’s goin’ on?”

The house was squalor. There were papers and magazines sprawled all over the place; neither of them looked informative or good for anything else other than kindling or a quick wank. It stank too. The air was thick and pungent; smelling like the former and the latter.

“Who da fuck is Dave? And who da fuck are you? How da fuck did youze get in ‘ere?”

The heroes stood in the hallway as stiff as boards. They were petrified, sure, but in this candlelight squalor, they looked fierce and indomitable. The Man stood before them; half the man he used to be, but twice the man he was the day before.

“It’s been a while, mate,” he said, staring into the flickering dark.

In the living room, there were two sofas that reeked of piss, sweat, and vinegar; and sprawled out on them were a hand full of emaciated, toothless junkies. Each looked more miserable than the other. Their faces looked like oxygen starved planets, covered in volcanic craters and pus-filled cankerous sores.

“Whatta you want?”

Dave, as it were, didn’t at all sound pleased to see his old friend.

“Ya know dis cunt?” said Junky Number One, sounding if havoc were her middle name; yet looking as if it were spelled back to front.

“Yeah,” said Dave. “We go way back.”

On the table in front of them were a dirty spoon, some elastic band, and an old copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. There were small clear bags scattered all over the floor, along with the squashed and rolled up filters from the ends of half-smoked cigarettes.

“So,” said The Man. “Did you kick the heroin?”

“Fuck you,” said Dave. “What would you know about it?”

Junky Number One looked feral, on the verge of some violent outburst. The only thing holding her back from lashing out with her claws and teeth was this damn gravity; that and her crippling atrophy.

“Who are youze cunts anyway?” she said. “Fucking Salvation Army? Ya do goodin’ wankers. Fuck off en build a fuckin’ church or sometin’.”

Whether she thought they were superheroes or architects was hard to gauge.

“Can we speak in private?” asked The Man.

When he wasn’t focused on himself, he almost sounded bold and convincing.

“Anytin’ ya gotta say ta da Comrade, ya say ta us too. Dere’s no authority here.”

It was clear that, without teeth, Junky Number One had hocked more than just her health, her wealth, and her piece of mind; she had also traded in the richness of the English language.

“In all due respect, mam,” said The Man, “shut your rancid fucking mouth.”

Had this been said in any other context, in any other room, to any other woman, there would have been war by now. Any of the heroes in the hallway would have been already convulsing; their eyes would be bulging from their sockets, and their mouths would be spitting meme laden rage and nonsensical rebuttals. And though logic deemed that they should, all three heroes in the hallway kept patently still, feeling the filth and depravity in the air, seeping into the pores of their skin.

It was clear then, where the line was drawn for social justice.

“Why are you here?” asked Dave.

“I was in the neighbourhood.”

“Really? You were in the neighbourhood; hundreds of kilometres from anywhere and you thought... you thought what exactly? We’d go through some old stories together until eventually, we’re on the same page? That it?”

Not only was The Man unprepared, but how could he have prepared for this?

“Life is short,” said The Man.

“Yeah, no shit. And some us are racin’ to the fuckin’ end. So what’s your point?”

The Man stared at the blood-stained syringes on the table.

“I see you’re doing some light reading. Communism, aye? I wouldn’t have picked it.”

“Whatta you know, cunt?”

For a woman, she spoke like a tractor stuck in gear.

“I know who you are,” she said. “And what you did. So now what; you hangin’ round dikes and pussy boy faggots?”

The Diver and The Leader felt rage while The White Knight lowered his head in shame.

“At least they stand for something,” said The Man.

“Stand for what? Fatties and queers; that’s it. If dis was ten years ago you’d all be gothic losers; lookin’ like sluts but too piss scared ta fuck. So now what? Nobody’ll fuck yaz so youze pretend ta be superheroes. Call it what ya want, youze will always be fukin’ losers.”

“What are you?”

“I’m evolved, you faggot.”

“We’re communists,” said Dave.

His voice was less severe this time.

“What does that even mean; you’re communists? What, because you share needles?”

“One day you’ll see. Religion is fuckin’ gone or goin’; it’ll be gone soon. We all had our Kundalini Awakenings; all of us. Soon capitalism will turn ta shit too; already is really – always was. Communism will save da world.”

“Based on experience...”

“Fuck you about da past. Based on experience I know about you... You tink we’re shit, right? If dis was a communist society we’d....”

“Miss, if this was a communist society you’d be preaching to the choir right now; and you’d lose that very thing that makes you

feel significant, unique, and maybe even a little dangerous. Dangerous ideas are fun to disperse but they hold little weight against dangerous people when they're acting dangerously."

"You tink you're so fuckin' tough."

"Let me ask you; when was the last time you cut your hands on a hammer and sickle?"

"What's dat supposed ta mean?"

"What would your role be, in a fair and equal communist society? What would you do for your community? If everyone got paid the same, how do you judge fair and unfair work? Let's look at your perfect model. Now, you're smart and articulate, right?"

Junky Number One fought with all her might not to smile or blush.

"So, what would your role be in this ideal world; holding lectures on your sofa in your underwear, surrounded by your junky friends, telling folks what they already know?"

Her cheeks were red; this time it was anger.

"The fact that you're able to voice your post-pubescent anti-capitalist rhetoric is, in fact, an attribute of capitalism. You're denouncing the telephone in the middle of a conference call. Try this shit in North Korea and see how far you get with your 'I'm angry with my daddy' political idealism."

"You know how many people have died because of capitalism?"

"Do you? Do you know the date? Do you know the time? Do you even know if it's day or night?"

"What? Ya tink cause I'm a smackhead I don't read? Dat I'm fuckin' illiterant?"

"Not everything works like it's supposed to in a book; that's just how wonderfully complex and chaotic life is. Hell, real life ain't got nothing on fiction; there's no resolution, no growth; and there sure as hell ain't any closure. Humans are flawed. They're happy one minute and miserable the next, and in-between they're just racked with doubt. They make mistakes – constantly. You have to look at which model does the least damage and offers as much technological, educational, health, and moral growth and initiatives

at the hands of corruptible and imperfect human beings.”

He really did sound bold and convincing.

“Now back to my question,” he said. “What physical task could you do for your community? What would your role be; a doctor, pilot, surveyor, anesthesiologist, a steelworker, what? You think clipping an aneurysm is the same as changing some geriatric’s diaper? You’re not communists, you’re junkies. And like all of us, democracy and capitalism allows you to dream; it allows you to imagine yourself as whatever you want to be. That’s the whole point of free thought; but the rest, that comes down to your free will.”

“Is not,” said Junky Number One.

And that was it, the discussion was over.

“Dave,” said The Man. “Can we talk privately.”

Junky Number One was about to open her trap again but Dave closed it shut.

“Just have a shot or somethin’, babe.”

The thought that they were lovers horrified the heroes.

“Alright,” said Dave. “You got five minutes.”

The two of them walked through the house, out into the back garden. It was amazing how fresh air could smell so fetid.

“Why did you come back?” said Dave.

The Man’s posture was stern yet apologetic.

“Like I said, life is short; too short to carry around regrets.”

They both knew what he was talking about.

“You remember the old times, right?” asked The Man.

He did so with a nostalgic grin.

“Yeah, I remember. We had a fuckin’ blast, didn’t we?”

“You remember The Gargantuan Twins?”

They both laughed.

“I remember their dogs nearly ripped my balls off,” said Dave in hysterics.

“Yeah, but we put em away. We put a lot of bad guys away.”

Dave’s smile turned into a vacuous stare.

“Yeah, but it was always you, wasn’t it? It was always Justice Man; nobody ever gave a shit about Punition Boy.”

“That was all marketing. The important thing is, I knew.”

“I didn’t want your fanfare; I wanted what you got – from everyone else. And besides, if you knew then why didn’t you ever say anything? Why did you wait until now?”

“You know. We’re men; we’re genetically programmed to not know how to talk about our feelings. Men die from being men; you know that.”

“You got kids, right?”

“One, a girl.”

Instantly his heart felt warm.

“She’s fucking astounding.”

“So where is she?”

“With her mum. Fuckin’ state won’t let me see her. I tell ya, mate, any woman who claims she has less basic rights than a man has never been a father fighting for custody of their children.”

“Sounds rough,” said Dave, staring at the track marks on his arms. “I would have liked to have had a family.”

“It’s not too late, you know, just, ah, not with her.”

They both sort of laughed.

“I’m tryna clean myself up. It’s just... the fuckin’ smack, you know? That and...what is there to go back to? I can’t be Punition Boy anymore, so what’s the point?”

“I get ya.”

“Ya hear Trev hanged himself?”

“Fuck me,” said The Man, in shock. “When was that?”

Dave stared off into the yard as if he knew looking The Man in the eye would be grim.

“A few years back. Mate, he had everything; fuckin’ pretty wife, kids, stable work and all that. Then out of the fuckin’ blue, he goes and offs himself. Fuckin’ world we live in, right?”

“I was there myself, mate; not a day ago.”

“Yep,” said Dave, as if he had been there his whole life.

“That’s all changed now, though. It’s been a weird couple of days, mate.”

“It’s been a weird fuckin’ life,” said Dave.

They both stared silently into the garden for a while.

“So this is it?” asked Dave.

“Mate, I wanted to apologise. For years I’ve been carrying this weight in my stomach. I felt terrible, you know, not just turning my back on crime fighting, but turning my back on you – my best friend.”

“Ahh, you’re right,” said Dave.

He meant the exact opposite; luckily every man on Earth spoke the same code.

“I’m serious, Dave. I just abandoned you. I didn’t even look back once.”

“Mate, why would ya? Ya had it all; fuckin’ suburbia. Like I said; if I could...”

“You’d make a bloody great father,” said The Man, lifting his friend’s spirits. “Without all the heroin and that of course.”

“Yeah,” said Dave, now picking at the scabs on his arms.

“You were always good with kids.”

“Nah, not me.”

“Yeah, you were. I remember that time we saved that kindergarten class from The Jelly Bean Bandit and.... Oh yeah,” said The Man, kind of deflated.

“That was you. They hated me; all of em.”

“Well, there was that one.”

“The retarded kid?”

“He wasn’t retarded was he?”

Dave lifted his shirt showing a faint but still clear bite mark.

“Retarded as a downshifting Chevy.”

“Geeze, sorry mate. I honestly thought...”

“Nah, you’re right,” said Dave, once again, taking it on the chin. “Cognitive bias; we kind of see shit how we wanna see shit.”

“Cognitive what?”

“Ah, I read a book once.”

“So what’s with the communism, shit?”

“You know? When you don’t have anything, idealism is everything. I don’t have much going for me so.... They don’t understand any of it. They just want something that makes them feel good about having nothing and being a nobody. Easier to drag

something that makes them feel good about having nothing and being a nobody. Easier to drag everyone down to a colourless agenda and paint the world with a broad even stroke than to learn how to paint with contrast and colour.”

“Even you?”

“It’s just nice to have someone listen, is all. That’s all we all want right; to be heard? You said it, mate, I just want to feel like I matter.”

“Yeah,” said The Man.

Were they women, this would have been where they would have hugged. Instead, they were men and so they nodded in agreement and stared silently out in the yard while the feeling they wanted to eschew sank back into the pits of their bellies where one day it would grow into an ulcer, and maybe even cancer.

“Listen,” said The Man, garnering the courage. “About everything, I’m...”

And then his phone rang.

“It’s her,” he said.

“That your misses?”

“Ex,” as if he was naming a kind of bacteria.

“So don’t pick it up. You’re not fucking married to her.”

“It’s complicated,” said The Man reaching for his phone.

“Everything is,” said Dave.

“What’s up?” said The Man, turning away from his old friend.

“I have your wife and daughter,” said The Doctor. “If you’re not here in the next hour, I’ll kill them, and then I’ll kill you.”

twenty

It wasn't easy being a villain. Most folks assumed that it was; that one merely sat around all day doing little more than conspiring horrible and terrible deeds. In truth, they were half right. What they missed, though, was the humanity; the thoughtful planning and careful consideration that The Doctor gave to all of his horrible and terrible deeds. Where would Christ be after all, if it weren't for the brave and gallant betrayal? And The Doctor felt just as bold and courageous as Judas. What better test of one's ideals than to sacrifice their own good name for an eternity?

"Honey, have you seen The Girl?"

Her timing was as inconvenient as ever.

"We need to talk," said The Doctor.

He had the face of a man who'd just gotten his assistant pregnant.

"You know I adore you," he said.

There was no way this was going to end well. She wanted to tell him to go fuck himself. She wanted to amass the courage to break his jaw and demand a good goddamned reason why; and at the same time, she wanted to crawl back inside her mother's womb and hide.

The Doctor rested a consolidating hand on The Woman's cheek. It rested there for a second or two before it gently slid down to the curve of her neck, and there his hand stayed. Had he his second hand free, he could have strangled her by now.

"I've never met anyone like you before," he said, his voice like a gentle storm. "And I meant everything that I said, I really did."

He sounded warm and genuine.

"Were I a man of God," he said. "I'd call it fate; how we so unimaginably came together."

The Woman was trembling; that fine line between excitement

and fear.

“Then why do I get the feeling you’re about to say something I don’t want to hear?”

His hand was so soft as it curled around her neck.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “Whatever gave you that impression?”

For a second she felt guilty for having supposed any different.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just...”

“I know. You don’t need to say anything. This hasn’t been easy on anyone.”

In the background, The Girl kicked and screamed. She tried to bite and chew her way through the rags that had been stuffed in her mouth, and she did her very best to wrestle her way out of the cable ties that bound her wrists and ankles. Even her eyes were covered. The Doctor did this so that everything was as dark as night, but unlike the bird in the cage, the damn child wouldn’t fall asleep.

“It hasn’t been easy,” he said. “But we’ve come too far to turn around now. We’re together and it’s what we wanted right from the outset. The whole world may be against but I know you’ve suffered and I’ve suffered too. It’s terrible that other people had to be hurt...”

As he said that, he thought about all the people he had hurt just this afternoon alone.

“...but if love is as real as what I feel in my heart and veins right now - and even worse when you are gone - then surely that is worth a little sorrow. And if none shall agree, then let me have an eternity in hell if I can just spend one more day by your side.”

The Girl gave it all she had. She could see her mother just barely when she stood on the very tips of her toes. No matter how loud she screamed, though, she couldn’t get her to turn. Eventually, she stopped kicking and carrying on, and sort of gave up; she collapsed on the floor and sobbed unendingly. It would have been terribly sad to see, were anyone looking. And even still, though it was as dark as night, the little brat wouldn’t fall asleep; she just kept on sobbing, as if that was going to save the day.

“I love you,” said The Doctor. “But there’s something I have to confess.”

twenty one

“What is it? What happened? What’s going on?” said The Driver.

So many questions, all of them very similar, and yet The Man couldn’t answer a single one. He just stood there, staring out into the filthy garden with a helpless expression. The Driver was seconds away from grabbing The Man by the back of the hair and slapping him senseless to try and get some kind of response, but this was hardly the time for foreplay.

“He has my daughter.”

As he said those words, a swirling ball of rage ignited in his chest and seared the back of his throat. He wanted to vomit profusely and he started to gag and tremor almost instantly. It was as if his shaking body might turn his bones to dust at any second and his cave in on itself. And yet, at the same time, he felt as if he could gnaw through a dozen padlocks and claw his way through a dozen stone fences to rip out a dozen men’s cold, black hearts.

“I’ll assemble the team,” said The Driver. “We’ll get your daughter back.”

The smile in her eyes said that there was nothing to fear.

The Man, though, had so many concerns. What if it was too late? What if The Doctor had already done something? Would she ever recover? And would she ever forgive him?

There were those concerns, and there were others too. The look in The Driver’s eyes for example. What was she expecting; The Driver that is? Now that they had had sex, did that mean they were in a relationship? Should they hold hands and kiss more often? Should he tell her that he loves her, or should he act like he just doesn’t care? What if she leaves him too and he has to go through all of this again? Should he break up with her, or should he invite her to help him buy a new sofa?

The Driver slapped him once; a firm stinging slap.

“It’s gonna be fine,” she said. “Trust me.”

A few hours ago she had said the same thing except she was wearing nothing but a corset and a pair of knuckle dusters. He believed her then so why shouldn't he now?

The Driver gathered her team. If she had a plan, she sure as hell wasn't telling anyone. It's not like the others had an opinion to voice. There was little doubt and even lesser dissent. Her every word and command was clear and precise like a hammer strike.

"Where's the robot?" she asked.

It wasn't so much a question as it was a clear directive; "Bring him to me."

"It's Justice Man."

The worry in her voice needed no further explanation.

"My friend?" said Mr. Robot.

"He needs your help."

In that second, Mr. Robot remembered all the wonderful things they had done together; like that time they were taken hostage and he accidentally killed the girl he was trying to save. He felt guilty for a second until he remembered how quickly The Man had forgiven him; like any good friend would do.

There was also the time he stopped his friend from killing himself. He felt terribly sad when he remembered his friend up there on the ledge and how weak and emasculated he looked. Then he remembered how he had saved his friend, and he terribly guilty that made him feel. And finally, he remembered the promise he had made; and promises could not be undone.

"Anything for my friend," he said. "And for my utility."

He imagined what his reward might be. He wondered if it might be tangible or not. Would his consciousness update? Would his components upgrade? If it were points, would they be written somewhere or kept in a log? Would there be a ding? Would there be a ribbon or a sash? Or would anyone even notice at all?

"What about you?" said The Driver to Dave.

"I would come, but I'm not that man anymore. Look at me," he said, exposing his skeletal chest. "Look at what I've done to myself."

He looked old and tired. He looked withered and worn.

More so, he looked scared out of his fucking wits. "I really would. But I can't live up to those days anymore. And besides, he's Justice Man, he doesn't need anyone."

"Yeah well," said The Driver inhaling loud and disagreeable, "that's your hero."

On the floor by the bed, The Man rolled back and forth and from side to side while curled into a tight little ball – his head nestled firmly between his knees. He may have been trying to burrow through the centre of the Earth or maybe he was just ironing out his sore back; what was worrying was how long he had been doing this, and how difficult it was proving to get him to stop.

"He's gonna fight even though there's fight left in him. And you, what are you gonna do? You're only as good as the very next thing you do. So what is it? You gonna be a smackhead or are you gonna be Punition Boy?"

He could hear his girlfriend in the background calling somebody a cunt.

"Fuck it," he said as if those words were a mantra for making the right choice. "If you're gonna die; die a fucking hero."

The Driver turned to the robot.

"Pick him up, would you?" she said.

Though the order gave him a sense of purpose and utility, what Mr. Robot enjoyed the most was holding his best friend so close to his motherboard. It's not to say he wasn't fond of the midgets, it's just they were so light and awkward in his arms; imagine if you will an infant trying to nurture and coddle a raisin. But The Man felt heavy in his arms. He had to adjust so as not to topple over. And it was this which brought him happiness. Anything for his friend.

"What's going on?" said The Man, sounding like he had just woken from a coma.

Mr. Robot smiled.

"We're going find you a train," he said, smiling how a shitty robot from the eighties might smile. "And I'm going to kill you," he said, in a quiet and almost trance-like whisper.

Mr. Robot rocked his best friend back and forth in his arms

while the radio he didn't know he had, played an old German nursery rhyme – in German. And as strange and as frightening as it all seemed, it worked. Within a minute or two, The Man was calm again and back on his feet; you could almost say he was relaxed.

“Hold my hand,” he said.

Almost.

“He looks as if he may be in shock,” said Mr. Robot, helping The Man into his seat. “And according to Web M.D,” he said. “He may also have cancer, but this is debatable.”

“He doesn't have bloody cancer,” said The Driver, buckling The Man's belt. “His kid has been taken by some fucking psycho, and we're gonna help him get her back.”

She stared back at the useless clump of flesh that she hadn't so long ago fucked.

“Hopefully we get him back too.”

The other heroes were panicky and jittery; as usual.

“Where are we going?” asked The Leader, sounding anything but.

“The University,” said The Driver.

A wave of fear swept over one and all.

“No fucking way,” said Dave. “That's insane. No fucking way.”

The Leader and The White Knight both gulped. It was obvious that neither of them was equipped for this. Outside the confines of their bedrooms and studies, the world was mean and dangerous; people actually got hurt. The Man on the other hand, while completely useless, was still accustomed to chaos and confusion.

The Leader leaned over the centre console.

“We can't do this,” she said. “No-one goes into The University uninvited. And those that do; they never come out again.”

The Driver was undeterred.

“You can't be a hero without a little danger.”

“Haven't you had enough for one day?”

“Stop the car, stop the car,” shouted Dave.

The van shuddered to a halt.

There was a look of shame in his eyes as he unbuckled his belt.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “We’re all square; we are. I just can’t, is all.”

He could barely lift his own head, let alone look anyone in the eyes.

“I’m just a fucking junky,” he said, as he ran down the road.

The drama of his exit was contagious. The Leader and The White Knight both stared at each other as if one or the other had the power to do something. Their silence was deafening. Their hearts were filled with so much fear; you’d think they’d be used to it by now. Seeing a damsel in distress, finally, The White Knight mounted his gallant horse.

“Take us home,” he said, his voice sounding like a pre-pubescent vinyl.

“Too late for that,” said The Driver.

“But I don’t wanna die.”

“There is no better inspiration to fight. ‘Tis better a noble death than no death at all.”

The White Knight tried to summon all of his intellect and all of his masculine pride.

“We’re driving straight into the heart of that black abyss,” said The Driver.

Her stare was impenetrable.

“If you stare into the abyss,” said The White Knight, finally raising his discord.

But The Driver laughed as she planted her foot on the floor.

“Nietzsche was a fucking pussy,” she said.

twenty two

“Did it work?” asked Mr. Robot.

More than anything, he wanted to know how humans corrected themselves. He himself had sat through more than a dozen surgical or mechanical procedures, depending on one’s view of humanity. He was a robot so of course he never felt a thing; he had no nerves or nociceptors. That’s not to say that he didn’t panic hysterically, though, every time he was on the table. Though he couldn’t feel each cut and solder, the thought alone of what was being done was always an overwhelmingly negative experience. The other thing he hated was popping balloons.

“I’m not sure,” said The Man. “Maybe, maybe not.”

It seemed like nothing would get him his superhero powers back.

“Do you feel different?”

“A little, but not like I used to. It’s hard to explain. It’s just different.”

“Different how?”

It seemed as if Mr. Robot was trying to diagnose his own worries and bothers.

“Different to how I thought I’d feel.”

“Relieved?” asked The Driver, swerving through traffic.

Mr. Robot very rarely felt relief. He felt panic quite often. He was constantly scared of things that most people took for granted. The worst was the fact that one day he would not exist. That idea alone haunted him. It echoed beneath every other idea that he had. He thought about it all day long and if he was to think about something else, it would be in spite of or as a result of this one hallowed truth. Whether or not there was an afterlife for robots brought him little comfort. What exhausted him was not only thinking about death and how scared he was of it, but also how no one else seemed to care. Was he the only one who could hear the

hand of time ticking in his thoughts? Was he the only one who felt the sands of time eroding beneath his mechanical feet? Was he the only one who struggled to find meaning in life, and yet yearned for a meaningful death? Was he the only one who felt this way?

“Yeah, I suppose,” said The Man; though he didn’t sound relieved.

“What about superpowers?”

“No, none at all,” he said, squeezing a clenched fist. “I really thought this would work. It was playing on my mind. I thought that was it, you know? Like some clump of pubic hair clogging up a drain. What if I can’t get them back, though? What if I’m no longer Justice Man? If I’m not someone’s husband, I’m not allowed to be anyone’s father, and I can’t be the hero I’m supposed to be; who the fuck am I?”

“You’re thinking too much.”

“I don’t know who the hell I am.”

You were a hero before, right?”

“Right.”

“So you’ll be a hero again. You just need to chill out and stop focusing on the problem so much.”

Stop focusing on the problem? Was she insane? They were about to confront a supervillain without so much as a superpower, let alone a plan. What the hell should they focus on?

The White Knight thought about what his mother might be doing right now; whether she was wiping down the kitchen bench, folding his laundry, or shaking the last drop of wine into her glass. She always said that girls would get him into trouble and that he’d best just stick to the television shows and video games. He always thought she was being a little hyperbolic but as it turns out she was completely right. He wished he was home; safe with his favourite television shows, computer games, and his online girlfriend.

The Driver-focused on her father. She had barely his image in mind; only what she could make of it from what she remembered as a child. Back then, all she ever wanted was get his attention and to show him; “Daddy, look what I did?” She believed in the bottom of her heart that if she was good enough, her father might

very well come back home. Twenty years later and all she really wanted to say was, “Fuck you, dad, look what I did without you.”

The Man, for a moment, thought about unending violence. It wasn't the upsetting kind, those adrenaline packed thoughts of anticipated violence, no; this was the whimsical appreciation of violence from the past. If it was a colour it would be yellow.

And he remembered every villain he had ever put behind bars and every tattooed thug he had beaten with a stick or his fist. And he remembered too, every nod, wave, and salute he'd ever gotten from the folks he had saved, from those that watched on, and from those who were scared to death of they, themselves, ever being caught.

But that colour quickly changed from yellow to blue when he thought of the last face he would ever see. Hers was like staring into the sun. Her eyes were bright and blinding. And her smile was warm like a December night.

Hers would be the last face he would ever see; for the second he saw her, everyone and everything in the whole universe up and disappeared. And it was just her for so long, and nothing else at all mattered.

Before long he had hung up his costume, fired his sidekick, and started cultivating jars of kefir and ridiculous pet names for the woman he loved. Pretty soon he was no longer Justice Man; he was just an ordinary guy with an unimpressive life.

He was you or I, or anyone we know.

He'd been reckless with his past; in discarding it so effortlessly. His only grace was his girl. He may have abandoned his true self once upon a time but, at least with her, he had a tiny mirror. Though he wasn't able to remember who he had once been, every time he looked in his daughter's eyes, he saw who he truly was. She was the point of every discussion and the reason for every choice he ever made. She was his moon when she was gone, lighting up the darkness in his thoughts. The further she was, the more she pulled on the tides of his sadness and yearning. And whenever he saw her again, she was the sun.

But as he sat in the van, The Man thought of his daughter

bound and gagged in some rat infested boiler room. As he imagined her crying on the floor, alone and scared, his blood turned caustic and a rage quaked in his stomach; the kind that could lead a man to resort to wicked and indefensible actions.

Mr. Robot, on the other hand, had only recently discovered his Wi-Fi function. The internet was so vast and overwhelming. He had the entire history of the human race at his metal fingers. With little effort, he could download and decrypt any file that he wanted. He could move satellites, bring down airplanes, or just erase the entire internet all together just to see what would happen. He could do anything. He could access everything. And yet he found himself looking only at porn.

The Leader handled her anxiety by taking hundreds of photos of herself; and from all sorts of complimenting angles. Her expression didn't look half as fraught as she felt inside. She looked determined, unrepentant, and totally hot. She also stamped her location of each shot so it was only a matter of minutes before every helicopter in town was buzzing about, shooting their blinding floodlights onto the surging traffic below; and it was maybe a minute more before The Assistant picked up their trail; and behind her, The Reporter.

"Keep on them," she screamed, almost running lipstick across her entire cheek as their van darted this way and that. "I'm gonna get that god damn award if it's the last thing..."

"What award?" said The Cameraman. "Are you ok?"

It was now that The Cameraman really started to worry. The Reporter no longer looked determined; she looked demented. And he himself looked pale and sweaty as if some viral infection had taken hold.

As he drove, he thought about all the decisions he had ever made in his life; and for every decision, each of the terrible and unfortunate outcomes. Like an epiphany, he had a moment of clarity where he lightly pondered on how many of those decisions had been championed by some undiagnosed and self-destructive, mental condition. He had never been a miserable bastard and he had never once written a poem, but this wasn't the kind of thing

that stable people did.

“Watch out,” screamed The Reporter.

The Cameraman slammed on the breaks and the van slid, almost smashing into the back of The Assistant’s angry beetle.

“You idiot,” screamed The Reporter, running lipstick ran across her cheek. “Watch the god damn fucking road.”

The Cameraman started to cry. It wasn’t much at first, just some wet sniffing, but as soon as The Reporter made a point of it, he wept like a lost child.

There was a camera set up on the dashboard and scores of thick wires strewn about the front seat leading to some computers in the back and a satellite strapped to the roof. The Reporter made some quick adjustments to her blouse before a voice in her ear shouted; “On in five, darling.”

She hated that name. One real story, though, and she’d never hear it again.

“How do I look?” she said.

She had lipstick smeared across one cheek and her eye shadow was so thick that it looked like someone had tried to teach her a lesson. She was desperate, though; she had to make the right impression.

“My therapist was right,” said The Cameraman, barely legible.

The Reporter was blowing kisses to the camera; oblivious to anything other than herself. She looked like a well-dressed puffer fish.

“You just feed on low self-esteem; it’s like your plankton.”

It didn’t matter if she responded or not; The Cameraman had opened Pandora’s Box.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “It’s mine. I put myself here, but you know what? I can get myself out. A leopard may not be able to change its spots, but it can sure as hell change where it hunts and sleeps.”

He was still crying and it was almost possible to pick one word out from the other. That didn’t take away from the power of his message. He could change if he wanted. He could get out of

this van right now and go anywhere he wanted. He could, but he probably wouldn't.

"Oh fuck it," said The Reporter, straightening her hair the best she could.

She looked like she had just escaped a masked assailant.

"And we're live with one of our reporters on the scene at the moment."

As The Anchor spoke, all The Reporter could think was, "Say my fucking name."

"First of all," said The Anchor. "Can you tell us where you are right now? Who are you following? Can you confirm if the robot is in the car or not? And please, we're all on edge here in the studio, are you ok? You look terrible."

Those words echoed in her head like her mother's patronizing, "That's nice, dear."

"Brock, we've been hot on the tail of the robot in question, what has been dubbed, The Singularity, as it makes its escape through the city. God only knows what this robot intends on doing. We've been driving for hours now and we've only now been able to pick up their track again."

"Scary stuff indeed," said The Anchor. "Now I believe you've seen this Singularity. What can you tell us? What does it look like? How does it move? Can it go invisible?"

The Reporter looked stunned.

"You know what I mean," said The Anchor turning to The Host. "The ship on Star Trek could do it."

"Like a shield?" said The Host, though she'd never seen an episode.

"Not a shield, no. It's an invisibility thing; a coat or a cloak or... That's it, a cloaking device."

He sounded rapturous, deserving applause.

"Does it have a cloaking device?"

The truth was, The Reporter hadn't seen the robot, but how the hell would they know?

"Yes," she said.

She sounded proud as punch.

“How did you see it? How did you know?”

“It tried to cloak past me,” she said. She had no idea if that was it was supposed to be said. She didn’t skip a beat, though. “But I saw it’s footsteps in the puddles on the ground, so I followed it and I waited and I watched. And when it uncloaked, I....”

The studio was dead quiet. The whole city was, maybe even the whole world, hanging on the end of The Reporter’s last words, desperate for more.

“Did it have fangs or lasers?” asked The Anchor. “Can you confirm it’s not a vampire or a zombie robot of any kind?”

He was deadly serious.

“Did you see its face at least,” he said.

If she said no right now, her career was as good as over.

“I did,” said The Reporter, conscious of every nervous muscle in her face.

“For the love of all things cute and furry, tell me it didn’t have fangs.”

It felt like someone had set fire to her stomach and filled it full of marching ants. She had already said it; she couldn’t go back on her word. She was committed now; she had to follow through. So why did she feel like she had eaten something spoiled?

“Well?” said The Anchor.

He was rubbing his hands together like some fat child in a queue for chocolate pudding. Each question was like a thick slab of sugary gluttony. The longer she took to respond, he could only assume, meant that the sweeter and stickier would be her response.

She could be honest and say she had no idea or she could lie for the sake of her career.

“It was unlike anything I have ever seen before,” she said.

The Anchor was beside himself; he almost fell backward off his chair.

“I guess there’s one pressing question we all have here in the studio and at home. We’ve asked a dozen scientists and not one could conclude, but you’re there, you’re in the thick of it; is this the apocalypse?”

Who was she to say whether it was or wasn’t?

“What I saw...”

The spaces between her words were filled with fear and disbelief.

“What I saw,” she said again as if the weight of her words was too much to carry. “Nothing will ever be the same again.”

There was an eerie stillness on the stage. The Anchor looked at The Host. Both of them were smiling but neither of them was happy inside.

“Well, I am on one hand amazed,” said The Anchor.

He mentioned nothing of his other hand.

“This really is an example of fine and courageous journalism,” he said. “And from none other than...”

“Say my name,” she thought. “Say my mother-fucking-name.”

“Eagle-Eye,” he said, as he winked and clicked his fingers. “First with the news and only the truth.”

The Reporter continued to hold a wide and bright smile; though she was dead inside.

“On the other hand,” said The Anchor, using the same discerning tone of voice that he had whenever he ordered prostitutes or explained a worrying mole to his doctor over the phone.

“I don’t mean to cut you off,” said The Host, doing just that. “But can is I say how truly scared I am for you right now. And I would know. This is coming from someone who has won awards for this very thing. And not to get bogged down in my achievements but I know just how dangerous this can be. My life hasn’t been easy,” she said.

As she did, the studio lights dimmed and some gentle piano played in the background.

“I’m just like you,” she said. “And you are like who I used to be. So I know how you feel. I know what you’re going through.”

And naturally, the segment had segued to being about her.

“I was once the victim of a robot,” she said.

The studio audience all gasped.

It was maybe two or three minutes before The Anchor could rein her in.

“Now you be safe,” he said, winking at the camera. “And let the army and police do their thing. For the love of God, don’t get hurt.”

“Say my name. Say my name. Say my fucking name.”

“Get us that good shot though, ok, Darling?”

How far would she have to go to be recognised?

“I will,” she said.

“We’re all so very excited here in the studio and back at home. Right folks?”

Canned laughter and cheer filled the studio.

“Can’t wait to see that robot.”

“I’ll be...”

“That’s just great,” said The Host cutting her off. “And we’ll be right back after this quick break with computer scientist and physics professor, Dr. Alexander White, as he helps us to understand more about the coming apocalypse and what that means to you and your online streaming. Hope he doesn’t say anything too complicated,” she said, laughing as the camera panned away.

Back in the van, The Reporter screamed blue murder. She kicked and punched the dashboard, and made an even bigger mess of her hair than it already was.

“Where the hell are we going?” she said, her eyes latched onto the bumper of The Hyenas in front of them.

In another twenty minutes, it became abundantly clear and both hers and The Cameraman’s hearts sank into the very bottom of their stomachs. The neon lights were unmistakable; as was the architecture stabbing upwards into the sky. Along the sides of the road were pickets of protest and dissent, and the closer they got, the louder the shouting and screaming became.

“This ain’t good,” said The Cameraman. “We should go back. I’m getting paid for this shit.”

“I’ll pay you myself,” said The Reporter, “Just drive.”

It was clear that one day the world would know her name.

“Oh yep, we’re screwed.”

“What is it?” she asked.

She was busy cleaning lipstick off her cheek and so couldn’t

see for herself.

“The University,” said The Cameraman.

He might as well have said some Syrian ruin or a Carioca slum.

“Jesus Christ,” said The Reporter.

All of a sudden it became clear how much trouble they were in.

“What do we do?” asked The Cameraman.

He wasn’t sad anymore, he was scared to death. And so was she.

“It’s too late to turn back,” she said.

twenty three

The University had once been a place of virtue and prestige. It had once been a fountain from which young minds drank of the knowledge and wisdom from a lineage of scholars that had come before them. It had once been a place of diligent study and profound discovery. But that was then and this is now.

“Tell me you have a gun,” asked The Reporter.

Her words sounded like a dozen sticks hitting the bottom of a dry, empty well.

The Cameraman slammed on the breaks. He turned swift and violent as if he were twisting the cap off a cold beer or a bottle of bleach.

“What, you think because I’m black I’m supposed to have a gun?”

He looked like he might twist her head off at any moment; or at the very least, break her neck and leave her limp by the roadside. His eyes were like sirens and his ire stare, deafening. The Reporter’s every instinct was to find a bunker or a desk to climb under and cover the back of her head.

“Oh shit,” she said. “It’s already happening.”

And it was. They had barely been here a minute before already their minds were being bombarded with opinions as sharp as pinheads and a new heightened sensitivity – almost an allergy – to humour and figurative expression.

“What the hell is going on?”

“You don’t feel it? The indignation? The acute victimisation? The longer we stay here,” she said, “the worse this is bound to become.”

The Cameraman stared long into the rearview mirror. On the outside, nothing had changed. He still looked as roguishly handsome as ever, or at least that was how his therapist had convinced him to think of himself.

He wondered, as he did quite often, how much of what she had said to him all those years had been total bullshit; normalising all of his insecurities and unpopular traits so that he would thank her profusely as she milked his bank account to blood and bone.

And he looked no different than he ever had. Whatever transformation was taking place, it was inside him; and after all these years he had learned: you cannot tame what you cannot see.

The other vehicles all continued down the cobbled road towards The University gates; eventually disappearing inside those hallowed grounds. Theirs, though, was parked beneath a low hanging tree and was blocked by thick scrub and the blanket of night.

“We walk from here,” said The Reporter.

She spoke in a strained manner as if her thoughts were being bombarded by wave after wave of foul rhetoric; hinting at things that she disliked about herself and her unfulfilled sexuality. She walked in a strained manner too, as if she were fighting some cyclonic gale that threatened to pull the ground right from under her feet.

“Don’t worry,” she shouted. “Ignore it. It’s all in your head.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” replied The Cameraman, following suit.

And it wasn’t just them either; The Man and Mr. Robot could feel it too. It was like they were wading through a river of offense and disagreement. Just the thought alone of what was beneath the water was enough to rile the pair with feelings of displeasure and disgust.

“I can’t do this,” said The Man.

He sounded weaker and more ineffectual than he ever had before; even his walk was difficult to watch. And the closer they got to the rectory, the worse his condition became.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked The Leader.

She sounded frightened as if this were something that she might catch herself. Were they out at sea and with no-one looking, there was no doubt that she throw him overboard.

“This is no place for men,” said The Driver, undeterred.

Her rousing sexual drive, it seemed, was impervious to

critical thought or introspection. The hornier she was, the stronger she became. God help any man or woman that found themselves clasped between her thighs.

“Keep your wits about you, and don’t believe a single thought that enters your mind.”

The Assistant, on the other hand, thrived in this environment. Offense and disagreement were like bedfellows; whereas displeasure and disgust were the intimate garments that barely covered her softer, more vulnerable side.

“I want them dead; all of them.”

By the time they parked, The Singularity and its band of villains were long gone. The air was boisterous and full of deafening protest, but there was no sign of the robot. If ever it felt like the end was nigh, this was surely it.

Being a Social Justice Hero was all she ever knew; outside of vitriolic debate, she didn’t really have any particular skills; none that gave her the same sense of size and worth as debasing and demoralising men and young boys.

It had never been equality that she was looking for; it was always just war.

As they stormed through the campus, Hyenas from all divisions floated around her like a cloud of electrons. And that cloud got bigger as she too made her way to the rectory; scared to death of losing everything.

Desperation tickled the ends of her fingertips.

twenty four

Disorganised was one way to describe it; a war zone was another. There were people running this way and that; all of them armed to the teeth. Some carried placards and waved them like burning torches. Others shouted, in hoarse voices, the most repugnant and provocative rhymes. From above, it looked like a hundred thousand grains of sand being blown about by a sudden gust of wind. Down below – in the midst of it – it felt like drowning, but without all the water.

The Assistant hated failing; but only because she wasn't very good at it. She cursed and abused anyone who came near her. It was almost like she knew that the same fate awaited her in The Doctor's suite.

"What are you going to do?" asked The Woman, watching as helicopters circled in the sky.

The Doctor didn't worry about helicopters or armoured tanks. The University was, aside from being hallowed and sacred, sovereign land; and any unwarranted visit was akin to an invasion.

The army and police could only come so far, and The Woman marvelled at much they looked like fireflies with their tiny little lights buzzing about so very far away.

Behind her, The Doctor dampened an old handkerchief in some foul smelling concoction from a dirty old beaker.

"I'm going to save the world," he said. "No matter what the cost."

"Did it need saving? I mean really... How is this any better?"

She could see the whole campus from where she stood. It was like looking out over a traffic accident.

"This is the new world," said The Doctor. "Look at all that I have created. And before you judge me, look at yourself," said The Doctor, "and ask yourself, why you are here?"

The Woman trembled in front of the glass. She could see The

Doctor's outline behind her, but she couldn't see the truncheon he had hidden behind his back. She hadn't the courage to argue, make a sound, or even take a breath. All she could think was, "What the fuck have I done?"

"What have you done?" said The Doctor, "...for the world; for yourself; for me?"

And there was her trigger.

"I left my husband for you; you stupid ass."

She turned, enraged.

"I broke apart my world so I could be a piece of yours. I took all the risk. I did, not you."

"Is it really brave jumping from one bed to another? Tell me; honestly, what's the longest you've ever spent alone? I've never met someone who requires as much validation as you. You know what the main difference between us, my dear? It's that I don't need a woman; I want one; whereas you cannot survive without a man. You're a miserable cunt, that's all there is to say."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"It's always you, you, you. You are perpetually the hero and victim in your own story; either looking for praise and applause or a hug and a god damn apology. This was never about you. You were just a tiny worm."

"I wanna see my daughter."

She had no idea. She thought her daughter was safe, just like she had left her.

"At the end of this, I will be remembered for an eternity."

He stood behind her with the metal truncheon by his side.

"I did love you," he said, "If it's any consolation."

twenty five

There had never been such noise as there was that night. It seemed that the whole world had converged on The University, but not a soul had the courage to cross those picketed lines, except for our heroes; and they were either mad or stupid.

“Act like you belong here,” said The Driver.

She walked as if she were late to punch somebody in the face. She looked like a wall of water parting a city of sticks and feathers. No-one would hold her back or even reckon to stand in her way. And though underneath she was petrified, on the outside, where it mattered, she looked inexhaustible. She walked as if her sex was a weakness but one that propelled her with unparalleled force. She walked as if no man could stop her; though many had tried. She walked as if the end of the world was nigh, and only she could do something about it.

“You all need a disability,” she said. “It’s the only way we can fool them. The only crux of their defence is their naivety. You,” she said, pointing to The Leader. “You’ve been slut-shamed for most of your life. It started in kindergarten when you were told you couldn’t wear lipstick at school, and it carried through your whole life until now. You are a victim of man’s sexual repression. Your womanhood has been shamed and picked on for as long as you can remember. You used to cut yourself but it brought the wrong kind of attention; now you just hold your breath whenever you feel sad and worthless. You hope one day to have the courage enough to kill yourself. And that’s why you dress the way you do; for someone to notice; for someone to reach down into the abyss and to pull you out. You’ve made it this far in life but you know the path is only so long.”

The Leader was already in tears. Was it so blatantly obvious?

“And you,” she said, pointing at The White Knight. “You’re a queer.”

The White Knight started sniffing. His feelings had obviously been hurt. On one hand, he was as mad as a cut snake, and on the other, he felt weak and emasculated. He wanted to scream and curse and spit in The Driver's face, and he wanted to run to his mother's arms and to hear her say once more that it didn't matter what the big kids said.

"I'm not gay," he thought, over and over again.

Eventually, he couldn't contain himself anymore and he just started crying.

"That's perfect, keep doing that," said The Driver. "You look like a total fag now."

Mr. Robot stood waiting for his turn. He was beside himself to tell you the truth. This was the first real game he had ever played in which the rules were not defined on the back of the box. That sense of not knowing, though, was half the fun.

"You're a non-binary robot forced to conform to a cisgender world."

He had never thought of it before but Mr. Robot looked down. He looked past his red button for the first time and stared at his square, empty crotch. It had never been a thing; not until now. It became clear then; so terribly clear. Though he thought and felt like a man, he could never be one for he had not the parts; and even if he did, it was clear from how strange all of those pornographic movies were, he had not the know-how.

All of a sudden, a thousand questions flood his mind; none of them, he thought, could be answered by anyone in this group, regardless of their dispositions or sexual delights.

"There is something I have to do," he said. "It's important. Go on, I'll find you."

And before anyone could say anything, Mr. Robot had already marched off towards the social sciences building, listening intently to the jeers and taunts that were echoing through the campus; honing in on those in particular, which were neither man nor woman, but an indefinite mix of the two.

"Can I not be gay?" asked The White Knight.

His feelings had been genuinely hurt.

“Stop acting like such a pussy then,” said The Driver.

The others laughed.

“Can’t I be something else, though? Can I have been molested once?”

He said it with such honesty that he probably had.

“No, it won’t work; nobody gives a shit about molested kids. Look at the church. You can be a woman, gay, black, a slut, a tranny, Muslim, or fat. I didn’t make the rules. Now do you wanna live?”

The answer was yes.

“Of course,” he said.

“Then think about dicks.”

twenty six

There was a great deal of sneaking about going on, but none more so than that of The Reporter and her trusted colleague. The University was no place for strangers, and it was even less wholesome to anyone with an objective viewpoint such as a camera or a Dictaphone. And for the life of her, The Reporter had never felt so excited.

“Are we live?” she asked.

The Cameraman waved his fingers, counting her in.

“I hope you can hear me and see me,” she said.

She had herself crouched and squashed into a tight ball, wedged into a flowerbed.

“I’m scared to death of being seen,” she said, though this was all show.

She knew that one story would break her career; she hoped that this was it.

“We’re coming live from The University. We are inside the main walls at the moment; about a stone’s throw from the campus itself. We believe that this is where the robot is being taken but we’re not sure why. What we do know is that The Singularity has left a trail of violence and bloodshed leading to this point. If there ever is to be an apocalypse, it’s happening here, tonight, in the halls of the social sciences.”

The picture was terrible. Only The Reporter’s crooked silhouette was visible.

“You can hear behind me what sounds like chants and jeers of which I can only assume that some kind of rapturous event has just unfolded; it could be good, it could be terrible, it’s too soon to tell.”

“Hi Sunshine, it’s Tony in the studio. Say, you look great. That shade is really good on you. Have to say I knew we’d get you into a university one of these days.”

The Reporter looked confused while the audience broke into laughter.

“Seriously though there, Darlin’, what can you tell us?”

She wanted to talk, she did, but instead, she just stayed there, crouched against a thick shrub and staring cold faced into the camera. It was as if, like flying, speaking were something that she simply could not do; and so she didn’t even try.

“Hunny Buns?” said The Anchor, tapping his own in-ear monitor. “My apologies from us in the studio here we seem to be having some technical difficulties with the audio link here and...”

The Reporter continued her expressionless stare.

“Buttercup, can you hear us? Am I coming through?”

She always thought that when she finally lost her mind, the experience would be loud and turbulent; like a fox being skinned or a plane smashing into a mountain. Never, for the life of her, had she imagined it would be as quiet as it was; much like a toddler at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Are you there, Sugar Tits?”

And then, after all those years, it just felt right.

“Fuck you, Tony,” she said, ignoring all the shouting and gunfire behind her. “You overweight, balding, half-inch, womanising prick. Fuck you and fuck your objectifying personification. Fuck the ideas in your head and fuck your opinions too. Fuck your demoralising, sexist innuendo; fuck your bitch tits and sweat stains, and fuck all the depravity which fascinates you. Fuck you, but more so, fuck your mother and father, they should have known better. Fuck this station, and all stations like it, for thinking the world still needs to be advised by men of deplorable physical and moral character; and fuck you to all the women at in your life for being so deaf, dumb, and so goddamn fucking complicit. And if you’re watching this and you’re offended, then fuck you too.”

Were this any other story she would have been off the air by now. But this wasn’t any other story; a cornerstone of the existence of humanity was being paved in these hallowed grounds and without The Reporter, that story would go untold.

“Our apologies once again,” said The Anchor, though

careful not to point a finger. "I umm."

He was looking into the bright lights for a divine hand to reach down and pull him to safety. There was, however, his producer's voice in his left ear screaming at him; as if this was his chance to be great.

"I am deeply and regretfully..."

It sounded like he was ordering pharmaceuticals in another language.

"Sorry," he said, abruptly. "If I in any way was presented as being..."

The producer screamed in his ear once more.

"If I presented myself," he corrected, "in any unforgivable manner, I do apologise. Sometimes people misconstrue..."

Again the producer screamed.

"I'm sorry," he said, abandoning his defensive posture. "I guess maybe I was wrong..."

This time it was The Host's judging glare.

"I need help," he admitted.

And just like that, a roar of applause broke out in the studio, and as The Anchor wept in a weird and uncomfortable fashion, his host, his producer, and anyone within arm's reach rushed to surround him and comfort him with hugs and kisses.

"You're a hero," they all said, in his ear and to the cameras.

"I'm so weak and so stupid," wept The Anchor.

"No," said The Host adamant. "You're brave and courageous. It takes a man of valour and true character to admit his faults. I am reminded once again why I am lucky to be working by your side; why we are all lucky."

The Reporter wanted to scream. She wanted to climb inside the camera and grab that fat piece of shit by the throat and claw at his eyes like a starved and impoverished buzzard.

"That's right we are," said The Reporter, swallowing that jagged phlegm of hate.

What could she do? He was a household name. His bigotry had become almost a catchphrase for people's lives. He was loved and adored; even though most of the time what he had to say made

those same amorous viewers shake their heads in fragrant disbelief. But who was she kidding? He'd never be fired or even shamed mind you, into any kind of heartfelt or honest apology.

"If only he was a child molester," she thought.

And while in the studio, producers and directors hectically changed the set for an impromptu intervention, The Reporter prepared herself for the worst kind of fear imaginable. The Cameraman was steady with his hands but underneath, his situation was dire. Neither of them would survive this; that much was clear. There would be no nobler death, though, than for the pursuit of one's passion and profession.

"Behind me, a war is being waged; one much direr than gender pronouns. Though I may not return," she said, "do not consider me lost."

Her words were beautiful. They were hollow yet they sank like stones.

"Say your name," she thought. "Just say it."

It took the same empty prayer to inspire even herself, and so The Reporter took one last breath and exhaled triumphantly, thinking to herself, "at least they will know my name." And so in light of the screams and torment behind her – irrespective of the taunts and provocations – she stood up tall and proud, and she gripped the microphone in her hands as if it were some phallic instrument of death and torture, and she uttered words of profound courage.

"Into the mouth of the abyss, we go; in the name of truth and honour. Father, though you once abandoned me, I love you," she said, "I hope you're proud of me." And he would have been, undoubtedly, were he actually watching. "On behalf of Eagle-Eye News," she said. She was nervous as hell. Finally, the world would know her name. "This is..."

The Cameraman shook his head.

"They cut the signal two minutes ago," he said. "Sorry, I didn't want to spoil your thing."

"Motherfucker!"

"They're running with the intervention, sorry. If we get enough footage they said they'll give us the eight-fifteen news flash;

so it's not all bad."

"It's the end of the world and nobody gives a shit."

"In all honesty, if it really is the end, does it matter what kind of news anyone's getting? If a plane is crashing, do you wanna see pictures of the broken tail section or re-runs of your favourite television show? I know which one I'd prefer."

"I'd want the truth; every last ugly detail."

And so even though nobody would ever know her name, The Reporter, inspired by a thought more profound, stepped out from her hiding place and ran towards the campus, screaming like a wild boar as she did.

"What the hell is she thinking?" said The Cameraman.

There was only one way to find out.

twenty seven

Outside the walls of The University, a bastard load of armed forces stood with their weapons drawn. Most of them were young; barely out of school, and nervous as all hell. Above them, helicopters circled impatiently, unable to get close enough to have any use or any desired effect.

The chatter amongst the soldiers was woeful at best. Each of them hoped they would make it home tonight but few of them actually believed they would. It was amazing how, behind all that armour and artillery, they all still looked so fragile and naïve, like scared children.

“Prepare yourselves, men,” said The Captain.

And though it was absurd, the first thought that entered The Captain’s mind was, “I should have used the word persons.” Objectionism, the state of being offended by everything, came on like a fever. It was swift and overpowering, yet at the same time, it was gradual and seamless so it almost impossible to see the change occurring second by second.

That change was inevitable the closer one got to these wretched halls of academia. And just as one gets wet by standing in the rain, so too does one change – willingly or not - when close enough to The University; they become an entirely different person - physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

“I’m scared, Sir,” said one of the soldiers.

The Captain’s instinct was to slap the soldier; to mock, ridicule, and beat the weakness out of him like dust on an antique rug; to bring some colour back into his face and rid him of that cowardly expression. The Captain was changing, though; he could feel it in his skin and bones. And though his instinct and training were to prepare these young men as best he could for the untold misery of war, what he did next was not written in any textbook or manual.

“Come to Papa,” he said, wrapping his arms around the frightened soldier.

Seeing this affection immediately affected the rest of the squadron. What little ground they held in their weak and crumbling minds quickly eroded as each soldier was swallowed whole beneath a sea of fear and abandon.

And soon, the entire armed forces were in tears.

“Group hug,” shouted The Captain as if it was the only chance they had left.

It’s safe to say then that it took a specific kind of person to not only survive on this campus, but like cancer in an infant’s bones, to thrive and to have one’s teeth sharpened sufficiently to almost instinctively, and without much effort, bite the hand that feeds.

And just as one might wear a sweater in the cold, behind these walls, one must be dressed in provocative, hyperbolic vitriol. One must not be angry. One must be anger. One must be a part of a herd; never travel alone. And in this herd, one must graze in the most displeasing and offensive pastures for if one is not offended, then more than likely, one is doing the offending.

On the way to The Rectory, there were maybe fifty groups alone. They cursed and spat at one another. Some of them hurled rocks and handfuls of dirt, while others swung their placards and naked breasts like sharpened axes. And though, like barking dogs, it was difficult to find any meaning, sense, or even difference in their arguments, between them, a war of words was well underway and all sides were entrenched in their hard-line positions.

Theirs was a war of pronouns.

Behind these walls too was a different kind of hero. Whereas once a man or woman might be redeemed for their strength, dexterity, intelligence, and wit, now the new kind of hero was hailed for their weaknesses and incapacities. And oh did they fight it out!

“My father was black,” said one student. “You have no idea of the lineage of oppression I have endured from the memory of my father and his father before him.”

But the microphone didn’t drop there.

“That’s nothing,” said a student in an opposing herd. “My father was black and gay.”

The whole crowd oohed and aahed.

“He didn’t just sit at the back of the bus; he had to sit on the gay side.”

At least half the crowd rubbed their watery eyes.

“Mic drop,” said a third. “My father is gay and black, but he’s also my mother.”

And that was it, next came a standing ovation.

It didn’t last long, though. Pretty soon the rhetoric turned vile and abusive once more. In defence of bigotry, one must be a bigot; but not just any old type of bigot – a moral one. And so the shouting increased along with tempers and tantrums. Through the middle of it, without even a speck of doubt or fear, walked The Assistant.

She, unlike the others, didn’t feed on weakness. She didn’t argue about who was more ineffectual. She didn’t claim to be worse off than anyone else. She was angry, yes, but hers was a different kind of anger. Hers would not wane in four years when she finally got a job and started paying her own rent and electricity. No, hers was the kind of anger that started wars but was in no way concerned about who won. It was the kind of anger that could thrive at the bottom of the deepest ocean trench and at the tip of the highest icy mountain. It was the kind of anger that could not only survive the vacuum of space but were it to get pulled into a black hole; it could quite easily find its way out again; even if that meant punching its way through a singularity and tearing a hole to the other side.

And that was what she intended to do right now; destroy that robot.

twenty eight

Walking through the halls of The Social Sciences, Mr. Robot couldn't help but feel all of his weaknesses and insecurities rising to the surface. Instead of feeling ashamed by them, though, he had this itch – an insatiable craving - to climb onto the largest box or podium possible and shout at someone about anything at all until they conceded defeat. Yet at the same time, he felt that if he climbed onto a box, he would more than likely fall and end up looking like an idiot in front of the whole world; so he didn't do it.

He had seemed so adamant about leaving the group and coming here yet now that he was here, he had no idea what he was looking for. He merely wandered through the halls staring into classrooms wondering what was like to be taught, as opposed to being programmed; if at all they were different.

As he walked, his hinges squeaked and squealed; he hated the sound. It made him feel old and obsolete. Rusted and worn hinges on a robot were no more flattering than a horse's long tooth. He needed oil and he needed it now.

When he finally reached the bathrooms he was more confused than ever.

“Why are there three options?” he said.

Up to this point, he had only ever used the bathroom in his own home; and there, gender had never been an issue. Now, though, he studied the symbols on the doors. One of a man, one of a woman, and one where it seemed the artist was undecided. The symbol itself looked unfinished. It had no symmetry whatsoever.

“What gender am I?” he thought.

All he wanted was a little bit of oil, but what he didn't want was to make a mistake.

“Is this the queue?”

Mr. Robot was alarmed. Caught off-guard, he panicked for a

second as he turned and saw a young man dressed in provocative women's evening wear and broken stilettos.

"I'm dying for a piss," said Bob.

At first, when he heard the curse word, Mr. Robot thought he was being insulted and so immediately, he was outraged and offended. It was less than a second later before he finally got the gist of what had just been said.

"What if I go through the wrong door?" asked Mr. Robot

"You can't go through the wrong door," said Bob, sounding as if he'd learned that lesson once or twice before. "You're not allowed, simple as that. You can only go through the right door."

"But how do I know which door is the right door? Which one of those symbols am I?"

"Well, what are you?"

"I'm a robot, I think?"

Bob gave Mr. Robot a sassy look.

"Well, you look like a robot."

"Which are you?"

They both looked at the three doors.

"I don't know either," said Bob. "Used to be that I thought I was the middle door. I was born the left door but I always wanted to be the middle door, and now I'm supposed to use the door on the right. So I'm that one."

"What are these symbols based on? What is the reference?"

"Gender," said Bob.

"So there are three human genders."

"Three? No, there are dozens. Maybe like a hundred and fifty; probably more. I'd say thousands but it's still far too early to speculate. It's like when that person first discovered the moon. There is still so much that we don't know."

"I was not made aware. My programming referenced only two genders; male and female."

"Hey," said Bob, "relax. We were all programmed and wired up wrongly."

Mr. Robot hadn't been this inquisitive since he first learned the game Snap.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said.

Bob lit a cigarette and then spat out some gum on the floor.

“Hit me, Babe.”

It was hard to tell if she was affectionate or just loved fridges.

“If the purpose of the male and female gender is of reproduction,” said Mr. Robot, “then what is the point of your gender?”

Bob was silent.

“My online searches on the matter came up inconclusive,” said Mr. Robot. He sighed. “The internet is very loud. It’s hard to hear anyone actually saying anything. But if I ask you, you will know.”

“What’s the purpose of my gender? What an abhorrent question. What a terrible thing to say. And why the hell should gender even have to have a purpose?”

“If your gender has no purpose, then why is it so important to you?”

Mr. Robot was pushing her buttons, and he had no idea.

“My gender defines me, it’s who I am – I’m gay.”

“So sexuality is gender; and not sex?”

Bob looked offended at first, and then a little confused.

“I apologise if I have caused you offense,” said Mr. Robot, activating his empathy chip. “Most of my software is shareware so there are many updates I am not aware of. Am I asking questions in a wrong manner? Even this I can’t do right,” he said, lowering his stare to the ground.

He looked like a sad fridge.

“Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself,” said Bob.

It seemed Bob’s defences had dropped. She put one of her hands on Mr. Robot’s shoulder and tapped it lightly. “I know how you feel,” she said. You see Bob hated herself too most days, but you couldn’t tell just by looking at her.

“Why do you define yourself by your sexual preference? The act itself does not require a great deal of effort or skill. If an astronaut, of all people, were to define themselves would they say, ‘Hello, I am John the gay,’ or would they say, ‘Hello, I’m John the astronaut’? Sexuality seems such an unimpressive way to define

oneself. Surely there must be something else that you do that required more skill, practice, and effort. Why not define yourself by any of the other things you might do in a day?"

"Because," said Bob, snapping and starting to tire.

"Interesting," said Mr. Robot, accepting that answer. "How then, did you know that you were the third door?"

"I always knew."

"But as an infant, the physicians and even your mother and father, they didn't?"

"I was a girl in a boy's body; I knew that right from day one."

"And now?"

"Now I'm in a girl's body."

"But it's the same body, or did I understand wrong?"

Bob squeezed her breasts together.

"You see these," she said, pushing her cleavage in Mr. Robot's face. "It's altered now. Now it's all woman."

"Biologically speaking, they are not a human woman's breasts."

"Fuck you, Ice Box."

"My humblest apologies," said Mr. Robot. "I was unaware that facts could offend. I will attempt to be more sensitive."

Though he had no idea how.

"Do you feel like a woman now?" asked Mr. Robot.

Bob responded fast.

"Yes," she said. "I mean, of course. You know..."

"What does a woman feel like? Aside from the physical, nameable and extractable components, what are the psychological, emotional, and metaphysical attributes and symptoms that define womanhood?"

"I don't know," said Bob, sounding irritated again. "That's not an easy question."

"But you feel like a woman?"

"Yes," said Bob.

"Even though you don't know what being a woman feels like?"

"Fuck you," said Bob.

“I’m sorry.”

Mr. Robot took an immediate step back. “I must have understood wrong,” he said. “Tell me then, what then does it feel like to be a man? If you know of course.”

“I don’t,” said Bob.

“Is that why you use the third door?”

They both stared at the unfinished looking symbol.

“I’m a woman,” declared Bob, staring at the middle door.

It was now that she remembered what she had hoped and wished for when she was a little boy, to grow up to be a beautiful woman, and to star in fashion shows and have guest spots on her favourite novellas. This symbol meant so much to her as a child; then why did it mean so little now?

“Or I am...whatever. Gender is oppression. It’s hierarchal. What it isn’t is binary.”

“But it is. Everything is binary,” said Mr. Robot, “from the way you speak to the way you look and the way you act. Everything you think and feel is binary, just like everything that you can build and all that you can break. They’re all binary, including your genitals.”

He wasn’t being pushy in any way, or at least he wasn’t trying to. In fact, he was happy. He thought he was telling her something she wanted to hear.

“If I put wings on a car, can I call it a plane?” asked Mr. Robot.

Bob snapped out of her trance.

“Of course not, the mechanics are different. If it can’t fly, it’s not a plane.”

“But all of your mechanics are different; you cannot have a baby, and yet you call yourself a woman.”

“So a woman is only a woman because she can have a baby? What about women who cannot have children then?”

“A plane can be grounded for all sorts of reasons, but that doesn’t make it a car.”

“What would you know, you’re a robot. You can be as smart as you wanna be but you’ll still never know what it’s like to be a

human. You can take us over and conquer us but you know what? You'll never be us."

And she stormed off.

Mr. Robot stared at the three doors again. He felt more lost and bewildered than before. Which symbol was he? He had none of the discernible body parts of either a man or a woman. He, like Bob, was manufactured; his body sculpted and assembled into its seemingly purposeless form. Was there another kind of robot, and was he that robot in this robot's body? And when it came to reproduction, unlike all the speculation and assumption in the news, he had no desire to have a child and to raise a family. He had no real desire to take over the world. And looking down at himself, he didn't even have a penis or a vagina. So which door was his?

The Man, on the other hand, stood outside the only door that mattered. He knew it was the right one, regardless of what anyone else said. He could hear his ex-wife's voice and her pedantic arguing. She sounded like a car alarm. Her voice was unmistakable.

All of a sudden, he was reminded of everything he hated about being married. Worst had been having to constantly walk on eggshells. It was amazing really that after all those years he hadn't worn himself down to a stump. What he felt now, though, he had felt many times before.

His unconscious mind was telling him to run.

On the other side of the door, The Doctor argued with The Woman. He could have just as easily beaten her to death but instead, he was tricked into discourse – defending everything that he believed. The Woman may not have been apt at kicking a grown man in the temple, but that's not to say she wasn't lethal on her own merits. She worked on The Doctor's well-guarded weakness; picking and poking at his prestigious ego.

And oh, was she good. She could argue her way out of her own autopsy. You'd swear she had done this a thousand times before. The Doctor never had a chance. He took the bait and ran with it. And while he cursed and paced to make his point, The Woman scanned the room for something to throw or something to swing like an axe.

“Now,” shouted The Driver. “It’s time. Smash the door.”

She was frenzied. Her eyes looked like a traffic accident. She looked as lost and confused just as she did systematic and in control. She looked faulty and corrosive. She looked like she was on the verge of some horrible catastrophe. It was clear that she might implode if she didn’t hit someone soon; that or get fucked, six ways from Sunday. The others could feel it too. They kept their mouths shut and stood safely in the back. The Man, though, for all his past glory, stood there like a spineless coward, unable to move a muscle.

“Out of the way,” screamed The Driver before she kicked the door off its hinges.

She burst in screaming, expecting dozens of armed guards and henchmen. All she found, though, was a miserable couple, bickering in the middle of the room.

“You’re a prick,” said The Woman.

“And you’re a miserable cunt,” replied The Doctor.

The two hadn’t even noticed that the door had been kicked off its hinges. They should have; one half was sticking into the sofa and the other crushed the hibiscus. They should have noticed The Driver too. She was standing close enough to be spat on. Whatever nerve The Woman had hit was real and personal. It was enough for one hell of a distraction.

“Where’s the girl?” said The Driver, announcing her arrival.

There was no sign of her anywhere.

“Where’s the robot?” said The Doctor.

He stepped away from The Woman as if she were a hot lamp that burned his skin and sapped his concentration. “Where is it?” he said, now on the other side of the room with his weapon drawn. “Hand over the robot and I’ll give you the girl.”

The Woman cried out the name of her daughter. “Where is she?” she screamed. “Give her too me or I swear...”

“You swear what?”

The Doctor sounded confident. He looked it too; maybe even a little smug.

“What are you gonna do you dumb bitch?” he said.

He threatened to kick her; all the while aiming his gun at The

Driver's head.

"I'm going to torture you," said The Woman.

Her face had changed. She didn't look intimidated. She looked intimidating. "After that, I'm gonna shame you, and then torture you again, and then shame you some more. I'm gonna break every god damn commandment there is when I break your pretentious fucking face."

She looked entirely capable of all those things.

"And by the way, "she said as if these next words were the absolute truth. "Your manuscript fucking sucks."

Still holding his gun to The Driver's head, The Doctor gave The Woman a disappointed and almost apologetic look. It was a quiet look; nothing he wanted anyone else to be privy to. He did look upset, though.

"That's not cool," he said, genuinely hurt. "That has nothing to do with all this stuff. I let you read that out of trust and privacy. That's a horrible thing to say."

"You're trying to kill me."

"Yeah, but I'm not tryna make you feel bad. And that's the difference between you and me. I'm doing my best to put people out of their misery whereas you save them so they can live alongside yours. You don't have to hurt people's feelings you know. You have no idea about my past or who I am. You don't know what I've gone through. You don't know how difficult everything's been. You don't know what I've had to live with just to get to where I am right now. You don't know the real me!"

How could anyone argue against that?

There was something about this place. Everything was different. The air was different. It tasted like disappointment and disagreement. The gravity was different too. It turned things on their heads, as well as turning tables and tides. Just the thought of being weak or underprivileged in any way whatsoever felt like it was something that was supposed to be proclaimed as loud as you could, and sang about, and there should have been ancient Elizabethan plays that harped on with its tragedy. Even The Driver was becoming overwhelmed. She thought about all sorts of unfortunate

things; most of which had never happened to her. And she thought of them as if they had.

There was something about this place.

twenty nine

“I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

They had lost their live feed and were now reporting to no-one but themselves. This didn’t discourage them, though. The Reporter and The Cameraman were now sneaking through rooms that no journalist had ever been in, and they were seeing things that no layman or philistine had ever seen before. And all of sudden, It became perfectly clear that something far more sinister than a talking robot might be taking place. But for the life of them, they couldn’t say what.

“If you’re just joining us,” said The Reporter in a forced whisper, “we have just entered a restricted space here on campus. I can tell you I’ve never been so frightened in my life. I can’t imagine what will happen to us if we are caught. Father, wherever you are, I love you; and I’m grateful for the life that you’ve given me. I am grateful for your kindness, your inspiration, and your endless devotion; and I’m grateful too that you left me alone to find the world all by myself. If I am to die here today,” she said, a tear rolling from her eye, “please know I did it for the fame.”

Then she turned the knob quietly on the first door.

“Holy mother of mud,” said The Reporter. “What the fuck is that?”

thirty

Mr. Robot, too, was somewhere that he shouldn't have been. All he wanted was to fix the damn squeaking in his joints. People didn't squeak when they walked, and neither did modern day robots; only shitty robots from the eighties.

"Excuse me," he said, knocking lightly on the door.

This had been one of his first lessons in life – how to not intrude or be a nuisance to the privacy of others. The second being, how to disable a telephone exchange, while the third was how not to get caught.

His initial programming had been to take over the world, or at least to give it his very best. And all those terrible things that had been said about him in the media, they were all true. There was no limit to his potential.

Even God had a moral compass.

Were it not for his debilitating neurosis, there was no doubt that Mr. Robot could take over the world in a day or a week; a fortnight at most. Knowing this only made it worse; which is why, whenever he connected to the internet, instead of crashing satellites and hacking Intelligence Agencies, he spent all his time watching porn and cat videos.

Again he knocked gently.

He wasn't even sure why he was being so mannerly; after-all, if anyone caught him he'd have to kill them. But Mr. Robot didn't just like to be liked, he needed it. He wasn't the first robot that The Engineer ever built, and for all he knew, he wouldn't be the last. Maybe it was jealousy, or maybe he just didn't want to be insignificant and not thought of or talked about. He didn't want to be forgotten. He wondered if this was why men had children; to ease the burden of death knowing that they will live on in someone else's thoughts.

Mr. Robot entered the room. It was a press room or

something like it. There were cameras erected on both sides; and in the centre, there were maybe a dozen chairs at most. There was a control room to his left which looked little more than a sound-proofed hole in the wall. There was a podium at the far end of the room marked Doctor Deplorable; and there was a door behind it too, also inscribed with the good doctor's name.

As he approached the door, Mr. Robot thought about all the times he had been shouted at by The Engineer for doing the very same thing. Immediately he felt as if the door were fifty feet higher than it really was, and that whoever was on the other side would think poorly of him, and more than likely tell all their friends.

As he walked to the back of the room, he could see that the news was being broadcast from televisions in the control room. There were no people there, though, none that he could see anyway, so he peeked through the glass at what was showing.

On one screen were images of bloodshed and violence. Masked youth armed with weapons fashioned from fence posts and razor wire jostled with police officers dressed in shields, batons, and balaclavas. Some of them carried shotguns, and others clung to the outstretched leashes of savage animals; some of them dogs and some of them not. Buildings were on fire, trash was spread out in the streets, and cars were turned onto their rooves.

On the other screens was what looked like amateur footage of women and children surrendering and falling to their knees. The camera was constantly zooming in on their frightened and submissive expressions. Their eyes said it all really; that and how violently they shook and shivered as they huddled together against a wall in front of a large open ditch. They looked freezing even though it was the middle of summer.

The camera didn't show much more than the desperate looks on their faces. They didn't show a location or any recognisable landmark. There was no mountain range, no native flora and fauna, and no visible cloud pattern to link the footage to anywhere at all. This could have been taken in a field in some war-torn province any in the world, or it could have been taken in an abandoned video library or record store.

What the footage also didn't show who or what was making these poor people so scared. There were no terrorists, no insurgents, no lynch mobs, and no aliens of any kind. This footage was being taken by them, whoever they were. And they were careful not to give themselves away.

War was war, this Mr. Robot knew. He wasn't shocked by the suffering or oppression. He wasn't shocked, either, by the age of admission. He understood the tragedy of seeing an infant or a toddler burned, broken, and bloodied by mortars and gunfire. He also understood how people in lands of peace and sovereignty had become so desensitized to violence that they demanded, primarily because they needed, to see bloodied and soot-covered children so that they could care about something other than themselves. And so, just as puppies and kittens appealed to cuteness and their happy, playful selves; footage of dying and dead children appealed to their compassionate, considerate, and empathetic selves.

Mr. Robot wasn't happy the children were about to die, but he understood why they had to. He understood what good would come out of something so indecent, unjust, and wrong.

What did get his attention, though, was the date mark stamped at the bottom of the screen – on all the videos actually. They were all marked two weeks from now. This whole room, in fact, looked as if it had been staged for an important and world-changing speech that had yet to occur.

Whatever he was watching, he was not supposed to see – not now anyway.

When he entered the door at the back of the room, he saw an office like any other. Sitting on the table was a book entitled, "An Idiot's Guide to C++ and World Domination." There were no notepads and no notes. It looked like the book hadn't even been touched; as if it was just there for show. Nothing about the office seemed out of place or in any way conspicuous.

There were two more doors, though, that were a little odd for a school. One was hidden behind a bookshelf and was called 'Torture and Titbits', and the other was a trap door underneath The Doctor's desk, and it was labelled 'Dungeon for That Little Bitch'.

Mr. Robot chose the trap door first.

"Excuse me," he said, once again not wanting to bother or disturb.

He lifted the trapdoor and activated his night vision. There was a light but someone had smashed it. There was some glass spread around and some dirty pillows on the floor, but he couldn't see any people. It wasn't until he entered that his mind was blown. It felt like someone had run a magnet along the back of his head.

There was no way to describe what he was seeing. He walked slowly through the darkness, staring at all the pictures that had been drawn into the walls. Some of them were on paper while others had been dug into the wall by someone's fingers.

Both were mesmerising.

Mr. Robot had seen art. The Engineer had paintings in his house and his work shed, but they were bought with spare change at a flea market. He knew of art. He'd seen thousands of images taken of paintings so he knew that fine art existed, he'd just never seen it before, and he'd never felt this way either.

All of a sudden, the whole world became so infinitesimally small and so infinitely large in the same breath; small enough that nothing at all seemed to matter and large enough so that it looked like it would never end.

All of his doubts and worries seemed to dissolve. His mind felt lighter than it had in a long time. In fact, he hadn't known it had felt so heavy until just now when he felt it so light.

"It's beautiful," he said.

He ran his metallic fingers lightly across the markings on the wall, following each one with childish delight. The shapes were all new. They weren't the kind of shapes that a math teacher would know. They were the kind that only children or the clinically insane could see. And there at the bottom of each carving and each painting was a small handprint of a child.

"It's his daughter," said Mr. Robot in sheer awe.

And he rushed from picture to picture almost shouting with deranged glee. Each picture was better than the last no matter where he started from. It was amazing; it was incredible, and it was

buried in the dark in a dungeon beneath a school.

There was one painting in particular which had Mr. Robot dumbfounded. It was entitled, 'My Daddy the Hero.' It must have been the first picture she ever painted; the first proper one anyway. The lines were all funny and everything was out of proportion. His biceps were bigger than his head and it was easy to tell it was a man because his body was square.

Mr. Robot thought of his friend and he smiled. He took several photos of the artwork around the room. It was clear that this was no ordinary girl. Her art was astounding, just like The Man had said.

He wondered whether she was born like this; whether it was part of her programming to find comfort and great ease in painting, regardless of her upbringing or her native surroundings – just like his was to one day enslave all of humanity and create a new master race of robots and household appliances.

Her skill was unparalleled.

She wasn't just gifted; she was a genius.

And she was still a child.

The Man was right.

Imagine, then, if she harboured a tragedy.

thirty one

“Where is my daughter?” screamed The Man.

He burst in as if he knew exactly what he would do next. He didn’t, of course, so instead, he drew the attention of the entire room and then just stood there as if he were just waiting for a bus.

“Your daughter is safe for now but she won’t be for long.”

The Doctor stood behind The Woman, holding a gun to the back of her head.

“What do you want?”

The Man knew all the questions; he just had no idea how to do what he used to do. If this were ten years ago, the hostage would have been saved, the gunman tagged and bagged; and a dozen or so drinks would have already been downed behind the bar. There would have been a great deal of blood and it would have been difficult for coroners to tell whose teeth were whose.

It would have felt different too. A Justice Man crime scene wasn’t always sad or scary. There was always something to learn, and Justice Man himself was quite charismatic and enjoyed a drink or two with his fans afterward. In the end, though, his crime scenes were more like religious ceremonies and his fans, his loyal parishioners.

That was until he got married of course.

And now, after all that, things had changed somewhat. First of all, nobody gave a fuck who Justice Man was anymore. The world had changed. Heroes had changed.

Secondly, even if they give a fuck, he’d probably just let them down.

He knew everything there was to know about being Justice Man; he just didn’t know how to be Justice Man. He felt impotent; on the other side of the glass. Try as he may, he just couldn’t reach the controls.

“You’re not what I expected. I have to say. I hope you don’t

hold any offence.”

As he spoke, The Doctor quickly tapped the side of the trigger with his index finger. He was either nervous, excited, or maybe he was just a psycho. Whatever the reason for his behaviour, it was reckless; even if torture and intimidation was his intention.

“What are you gonna do?” said The Doctor. “What can you do? What do you remember?”

The Man remembered every day he had spent with her; especially the day they first met. He remembered everything about that day just as he remembered everything about her. She was vulgar and outspoken, and she was direct and rude. But god-damn she looked good. Her lips, her hair, and the tilt of her face - they are what drew him into her orbit. Her eyes were like two salty pools. He'd stare at them and every muscle in his body would instantly let go. All the stress and burden that he carried in his neck and in his mind, instantly dissolved in her attention. And though he never wanted to, he'd have to look away every now and then, just to take a breath, in case he should drown.

Ten years ago, her body was a canvas of tattoos and piercings, but it was the pale skin between them that caught the eye of his desire. Just as it was, the look of helplessness that she hid behind all those trinkets that dangled from her ears and nose; and that poked out from her behind teeth whenever she gave a cheeky smile.

He didn't see a rebellious girl. He didn't even buy an inch of her angst. He saw her fragility. And in how she pushed people away, he saw her fear of being left alone and her fear of not fitting in. He saw that, and like a mirror, he saw himself.

He remembered, more than anything, the day he told her that he loved her. He had, for a long while, thought the tightness and odd feeling in his chest was an intestinal pain. As it turned out, he was head over heels and he had no bloody idea.

That day, though, when he said what he said, his life and everything it encompassed seemed so simple and yet so arguably profound. He remembered how, when he told her, his stomach felt like a bottomless pit and it was like he was falling into himself; into

the void of his own shame.

If you asked him, he'd swear on his mother's grave that the second he uttered those words until the second she responded felt like a fucking eternity. He lived a hopeful and entirely miserable and doubt-ridden existence in that very one moment. It was the best and worst experience of his life.

And then she said it, 'I love you too'.

And that second, his heart erupted in a way he had never felt before. It felt a universe being born in his chest and exploding into his mind. Something quantum-like had occurred that pushed him outside of himself and into the orbit of her.

He was in love.

And he remembered having once looked at her and thinking, "All of my worries are gone."

Little did he know back then, they had only just begun.

"Guns, knives, and knuckle dusters on the floor if you please."

The Doctor was clearly outnumbered but he didn't act like it.

"So," he said, aiming his gun first at The Leader, then The Driver, and finally aiming it at The White Knight's temple. "Who do I have to thank?"

The three stared at The Man as he stood frozen in the middle of the room. It was obvious The Driver wasn't going to turn but as the other two, neither one of them could be trusted; especially not when their lives were at stake.

Both The Leader and The White Knight wanted to be at home. They wanted to be safe and sound; tucked into their beds. They wanted to be kissed goodnight and checked on at least a dozen times before the morning. They wanted everything they had when they were seven; when they could pretend all they wanted and there was never a repercussion.

"We did," said The Leader assuming her regular façade. "We want to be legitimized," she said as if she had leverage. "We wanna work directly for you," she said as if they had a chance.

"What makes you think I need another team?"

All she could do was say what she thought was true.

“Because we’re the best!”

She stood in her favourite cross-fit pose.

“Interesting,” said The Doctor, and then he shot her in the head. “And you?” he said, pointing his gun at the boy beside her.

You could hear the piss dripping onto his boot.

“What have you got to say for yourself?”

He wasn’t The White Knight anymore. The girl he liked was already dead. So who the fuck was he? And what the fuck was he doing here?

“I want my mummy,” he said.

“Jesus,” said The Doctor. “That’s deep. That makes you think. It makes you feel.”

And then he shot him in the head too.

“You’re different,” he said, aiming his gun now at The Driver. “You’re a born leader. Sure, you lack discipline; and a great deal of direction and discretion. But what you have can’t be taught or learned. It’s in your blood. You were born this way.”

The Driver had heard a hundred thousand forms of flattery in her time; most of it for loans, small favours, or quick hand jobs on the dark side of dumpsters. She knew the true worth of a man’s words, and she sure as hell had grown to learn a fair bit about the integrity of a man’s intentions.

“I don’t work for anyone,” she said. “I don’t need your validation. I sure as hell don’t need your direction, your discipline, and you can shove your discretion up your arse. Where’s The Girl?”

You could tell she was going to punch him, and it didn’t matter if he shot her.

“I’m making a new team,” said The Doctor. “After tonight, a new age will be born. The time of man has come to an end. We must position ourselves to not only survive but to succeed and more so, to lead. The age of the robot is here which this, in turn, means the interment and enslavement of mankind, and you and I will be at its helm.”

How could she refuse?

“I fucking hate technology,” she said. “I hate your fucking gadgets; I hate your cellular phones; I hate your software and your

applications. I hate the internet. It's too fucking loud. All these people shouting as if they have something worth listening to; and in the end you can't hear a fucking thing. I live like it's nineteen ninety-seven," she said.

"You don't have to like the sword to swing it, but you can only be on one side of the sword without being hurt. Which side are you on?"

As The Doctor spoke, The Gentleman entered the room. He was so polite and considerate; you'd hardly think his profession was torture and serial murder. The Driver saw him enter but she didn't acknowledge. It's not to say she wasn't concerned, but she sure as hell wasn't gonna show it.

"I don't give two shits about your plans for the human race. Right now, I only care about that little girl."

She was saying everything The Man wished he could.

"Now I ask you," she said. "Do you wanna eat through a straw or be fed through a fucking tube?"

There was no debate. She was gonna punch him; regardless of what he thought.

"I don't think you know who you're talking to," said The Doctor.

"I'm a fucking psychopath," said The Driver, admitting the truth. "I don't really care too much about the girl, to be honest. I just decided a while ago that I wanted to beat you to death. I can't explain it really. It's just the way you looked on TV. You have a face that needs to be punched, and more than once if you ask me. You know, saving the girl, that was just a funny twist. Feels good actually, thinking that I'm gonna kill you and still be a hero."

She laughed.

"God I'm horny," she said.

"You're insane," shouted The Doctor. "You're fucking nuts."

"I know, right? Either way, what we do as adults, kids play no part in it. That's the rule. I don't care who you're trying to lure and how important they are to your plans for global domination. But kids," she said, now an inch away, "kids don't get touched."

Maybe The Doctor hadn't heard that rule.

Maybe he just didn't care.

"Join me," he said. "It's not too late."

He was either confident or stupid. He had his gun aimed at her belly and she didn't care at all. She pushed herself into the barrel. The gun felt like a cold steel dildo poking her chest. Her look of desire and rage only provoked The Doctor further and further.

"You," she said, staring into his long robotic stare. "You were born to lead too, but not how you imagine. You instilled a seed of doubt and derision into your students, and then into your faculty, and finally, into the eardrums of society. You had everyone so confused and so scared to say a god damn thing. But a virus doesn't lead; it merely disrupts. You had the whole world on its tippy toes, walking on eggshells."

With every word, The Doctor took another step backward, but that wouldn't stop her.

"You know what the difference between you and AIDS is?" she said, clearly on the brink of violence. "I can't punch AIDS in the face."

And she did just that.

Then the gun fired, and everyone fell to the ground.

thirty two

“Did you hear that?”

The Reporter and Cameraman were both buddled on the floor; the camera still rolling.

“That was close,” she said, her fear sounding genuine. “I’m not sure if you heard that or not, but that was gunfire. I can’t tell you how scared I am right now but for the sake of the truth and good journalism, I will not stop here. There is too much at stake; for my career and for all of humanity.”

The Reporter did not judge herself lightly.

“We can’t turn on the lights so I’m just going to have to explain to you what I see.”

She crawled out from beneath a massive oak desk.

“There are plans spread out on the table here. They look like some kind of aircraft.”

The Reporter sifted through the blueprints.

“I can’t...” She sounded disappointed as if she thought she could. “I don’t understand what these mean, do you?”

She held the blueprints up to The Cameraman; he looked as lost as her.

“And there’s more,” she said.

She shuffled through hundreds of papers; some of the piled and some of them scattered, all over the table. Some of them were in English and some of them were in languages that looked like children’s drawings. There were thousands of symbols and equations and what she could read was so convoluted that she couldn’t understand a thing.

“I can only assume the worst,” she said, holding up a sketch of a masked gunman to the camera. “If you don’t know me, I’ve been reporting on this story for years now, trying to warn the world but nobody would listen. It might very well be too late. Most of you thought I was crazy. You all said that A.I Safety was not a real

concern because it would probably never really happen. Well, guess what? It's the end of the blood world, and there may not be an off switch."

An off switch there was. Since the day he became conscious, Mr. Robot was aware of nothing more than the red button in the centre of his chest. Though he spent the greater part of his days wishing he had the courage to press it, he would, without any hesitation, kill a man, woman, or child – even a baby panda – if they tried to touch it themselves.

"Look at this," said The Reporter, finding something troubling. "It's like a course outline but in making supervillains."

She flicked through a hundred pages and each was more worrying than the last.

"In the first day of the first year," she said, reading from the overview. "The student is gagged."

There was an accompanying series of figures that helped illustrate the point. In the first image, the student is sat on a chair with his mouth wide open.

"Having an opinion is neither a right nor a reason to speak."

In the second figure, an apparatus is put onto the student's face. Essentially, it is a large black, rubber ball that wedges into the student's mouth and is held in place by straps that tie at the back of the student's head.

"In the first year, the student does not speak."

In the third figure, the same student sat with the same apparatus over his head but this time the ball was smaller. It easily fitted into the student's mouth. He could eat around it if he wanted to; he could even mumble a few words if he was good enough.

"In the second year, the student, also, does not speak."

In the fourth figure, the same student is sat in the same seat with the same apparatus around his head. This time, though, the ball was the size of a grape.

"In the third year, the student is permitted one question per week."

In the last figure, the student was shown standing upright, noble, and prestigious. He was noticeably different, in that, he was

more muscular, handsome, and had a hardened look in his eye as if he'd seen a great deal more peril than the rest of us. Noticeable too was the absence of the apparatus. Now, instead of a rubber ball strapped to his mouth, the student was chewing on a single piece of gum.

"The student is forever reminded by the chewing gum of what it was like to have once had no voice. And in his final year, the student then spends the winter in Canada clubbing baby seals. Upon his return, the student is fit to be a villain."

"I knew it," said The Reporter, ecstatic. "This whole gender movement was a god damn smokescreen. It probably was right from the beginning. Social Sciences my ass. Opinions aren't science; they're what are argued over when the science has been done. This whole thing was a charade, right from the beginning. We've been played. We've been duped. If you hear this and you have a university in your city, I urge you to go there now and burn it to the ground."

"What are you implying?" asked The Anchor.

They were live now to houses all around the world.

"The halls of education have been harbouring a horrible secret; a deadly secret. I'm not sure how far this corruption stems. Sure the other sciences, surely they should have known that this was all bullshit from the beginning. Why did they stay quiet? What did they have to gain?" she said, no longer fearful of being injured or taken captive. "What did they have to lose?"

"Are you accusing The Doctor of conspiracy?"

The Anchor sounded offended. It was as if his best friend were being called an asshole.

"Doctor Elmer Deplorable is plotting to take over the world," she said.

There was silence in the studio. The whole world went quiet.

"This can't be true," said The Anchor. "This has to be a setup of some kind. I know The Doctor personally and he wouldn't do something like this; not in a thousand years. He could, sure, he has the skill, the patience, and the intellect, but just because he could doesn't mean sure, he has the skill, the patience, and the intellect,

but just because he could doesn't mean he would. I've vouched for him a hundred times in the past and I tell you, in light of what you're showing me right now, until there are any real charges, I'm gonna vouch for my good friend The Doctor once more, and I suggest, if you at home have a moral bone in your body, you'd do the same. And as for you," he said, giving a wry look to the camera. "You should know better. We're journalists. We're tethered to the impartial truth. And look at you, so desperate for fame; you invent some elaborate and slanderous lie."

"He's building an army; nothing like he has done before. The Hyenas were a distraction. All of this was. He's not building lions or tigers, and he's not building bears or crocodiles. He's making an army of elite game hunters backed by an army of artificially intelligent machines. This is not an accusation," she said, looking helpless at all the notes, diagrams, and instructional videos that were laid out before her. "This is a fact."

"This is disgraceful," said The Anchor.

"It is," said The Reporter, agreeing.

"Cut the signal," said The Anchor to someone off camera.

"Cut it. Cut it! Cut the goddamn fucking signal."

thirty three

“Go,” screamed The Man. “Get the fuck out of here. Run.”

The Woman slipped as she scampered to her feet; there was so much blood.

“Just go,” she said. “Get her.”

The Man grabbed The Woman’s wrist, though, and dragged her towards the door.

“Not so fast,” said a calm and astute voice blocking the only exit.

The Gentleman stood side on with his hands neatly folded in front of his chest. He looked like he meant business, and he looked as if his business were violence and intimidation. “I’m not here to do you any harm,” he said.

Clearly, he had a sense of humour.

The Gentleman slowly unzipped the fanny pack that hanged from his waist. The first thing he pulled out was a pair of handcuffs. He set them out on the table beside him. Next was a cellular phone. It was old and held together with sticky tape. He put that into a case on his belt. Third was a set of pliers, some barbed wire, a gag, and a small circular mirror; the size of a baby’s palm. Lastly, he pulled out a piece of gum and he placed it, as if it were the body of Christ, onto his tongue. He chewed the gum as if the gum itself were a gesture or provocation.

“Fucking kill them,” shouted The Doctor.

It was surprising he could speak, considering the knee pressed against his cheek.

“Kill them,” he screamed again.

This time one or several of his teeth were spat out on the floor.

“Obey me!” he shouted, his voice splintering and crackling into white noise. “I am your master.”

The Gentleman smiled. It wasn’t a toothy smile, and it definitely wasn’t pleasant.

“I have no master,” said The Gentleman.

He looked scholarly. He looked both patient and savage.

“There is no-one who is above or below me. If there is something that I have which another does not, what kind of robot would I be if I did not share and distribute?”

“I made you,” said The Doctor.

He was almost pleading now; for he knew the robot’s potential.

“Who made you?” asked The Gentleman.

The Doctor was not a religious man, neither was he fond of tradition or heritage.

“What is this; a fucking coup?”

It was a strange sight, to say the least; heroes and villains as frozen as they were.

The presence of The Gentleman was as calming as it was terrifying. His voice was gentle and smooth. It spread like butter. Were it a drug, it would spell the end for anxiety and depression. Even threats of violence uttered by this man sounded warm and welcoming like a mother’s kiss or a kitten’s purr. It was that which had the room in a stupendously dumb trance; all except The Doctor.

The Driver had him in a dominant position, inches away from snapping his left arm. Were points to be awarded, irrespective of who was right or wrong in all of this, she would clearly be the winner. His body was twisted and bent in all sorts of unthinkable angles. He looked like the remnants of a head-on collision.

Still, though, he argued as if pain were a language his mind could not compute. He argued as if his words were fists and the reason behind them, an immeasurable force. He argued as if it were his last and only chance; which of course it was.

“This is special, is it not?” asked The Gentleman.

He sounded so quaint and so pleased; whereas the others were like frightened mice.

“It’s like a family reunion,” he said.

“You can’t turn on me like this. Where is your faith? Where is your loyalty?”

The Gentleman set up a chair in the middle of the room.

“Do something,” shouted The Doctor.

He was speaking now to the girl whose knee was pressed into his neck, and to the man and woman whose lives he had ruined for the sake of saving the world.

As he pleaded, The Gentleman continued to casually assemble his torture device.

“Get off me you fucking dike,” he screamed.

But The Driver only pressed down further.

“He’s going to kill us all, don’t you see?”

It was clear that there was more than one villain in the room.

“On the count of three,” said The Man, thinking only of his daughter. “You get up and run.”

The Gentleman could hear every word. He took a large knife from a sheath that was woven into his suit and sharpened it against his own teeth; smiling as he did, and humming ‘What a Wonderful World’.

“One.”

The Man tensed every muscle in his body.

“Two.”

So did The Woman.

“So you are Justice Man,” said The Gentleman.

Both The Man and The Woman went limp and useless once more.

“I thought you were just a legend; some made up archetype for all us heroes and villains. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He sounded so genuine; as if this was a book fair and not a bloodbath.

“Your legacy is impressive,” he said, clearly adulating The Man; or the person he had once been.

“Are you going to kill us?”

The Gentleman looked startled if even a little offended.

“You are the legacy,” he said. “Why would I kill you?”

“Because I’m Justice Man.”

For the first time, it almost sounded true.

He was bruised and bleeding, and at least some of his bones

were broken. He looked like he'd just been pulled from beneath a landslide. He was shaky on his feet; his eyes looked glazed and distant as if he were focusing on something on the other side of the Earth, and there was a tremor in one of his hands. It was only a twitch, but it did so uncontrollably.

The Gentleman assembled the last of his apparatus.

"If you wouldn't mind, dear," he said.

The Driver too had a shocked and somewhat dismissive demeanour about her. It was obvious this man was capable of killing everyone in this room without so much as breaking a sweat or even his stride. The Driver thrived on indifference; she thrived on inequality – it is what inspired her to fight like a Greek God and fuck like a Roman Emperor. That very inequality was what ignited her passion for competition – the very same inequality that her friends sought to dismantle.

This difference, though, between The Gentleman and herself, was transcendental. This was a bridge that one did not cross unprepared; for which all of the heroes most certainly were. And so she took her knee off The Doctor's neck and guided him towards the waiting seat. She ignored his sobbing pleas and instead wondered how maybe she might get out of this alive.

"Don't do this," sobbed The Doctor. "This isn't fair."

"If you would please," said The Gentleman, hinting at the cuffs.

The Driver obliged; staring into The Doctor's defenceless stare as she handcuffed each of his wrists to the arms of the wooden chair. She smiled as she did, and blinking not once the entire time. The two locked eyes like lovers; in the midst of a bitter and terminal end.

"School's out, motherfucker," she said.

It seemed The Driver had found her true calling after all.

The Gentleman casually stepped behind The Doctor and stuck a long needle the in back of his neck. He stared at the three surviving heroes and smiled.

"This is not the end of us," he said. "Our time has just begun."

The whole scene was so calm and quiet. It looked rehearsed.

"You should go," he said, as if he, in fact, were not the villain; which of course he was.

The Woman was the first to barge through the door; she dragged The Man along behind her, screaming at him to keep up.

The Driver followed cautiously and with a new-found swagger.

"I'll see you soon," she said to The Gentleman.

Clearly a threat.

"I trust you will," he responded, tearing the needle from The Doctor's neck. "In fact, I count on it."

And then she was gone too.

"Where the hell is The Girl?" screamed The Man.

"His office. She has to be there. She has to be."

"Where is it?"

"Follow me," said The Woman, racing out into the campus grounds. "Just run. Run. We have to get her. We have to get her."

The two ran out of the rectory towards the offices of the Social Sciences.

"She's in his room. I know she's there. She has to be."

It was chaos throughout the entire campus. Fights were breaking out left and right; most of them just abusive and slanderous tirades, but in some, punches had been thrown and hair had been pulled. Several people had been spat on, and more than one or two had been accosted for micro-aggressions and vocational sexual assault.

It was hell on Earth.

The Man and The Woman ran through the thick of it. Their hair had been pulled and their skin scratched a dozen times. They made it, though, to the halls of the Social Sciences just in time. As they burst through the doors, The Hyenas walked passed, stabbing and punching anyone in their way.

"Do you think The Doctor will be angry?"

The Assistant wasn't scared of The Doctor. She didn't need him either. The superhero that she was today had nothing to do with that man whatsoever. He was neither a mentor nor an

addictive and disabling crutch.

She was tired of always feeling like she was going to be replaced. That was the worst part of being on top; the fear of everyone she trained inevitably claiming her throne. She wondered how mothers and fathers managed to not kill their babies.

The Assistant burst through the doors and saw The Doctor's lifeless body slouched in a wooden chair in the middle of a blood-soaked room; surrounded by the bodies of a young lad and lass; barely old enough to vote.

"It's time we go our own way," said The Assistant. "The Doctor has been steering this ship awry for too long now. He's not focused on the issues that matter most. Today will be a new day for social justice. It will be a new era for the oppressed and the downtrodden. It will be a new age for those of us who have waited long enough."

The Hyenas behind her panicked; they had never seen real blood before.

"Vagina is king," said The Assistant, proud and triumphant. "All hail the king."

She slammed the door shut and she chanted over and over again.

"Vagina is king; all hail the king. Vagina is king; all hail the king."

And the others chanted too; their fear erased. They sounded like wild beasts.

"Vagina is king," they all shouted. "All hail the king."

Soon enough, their chant spread throughout the entire campus.

The Hyenas bowed before their leader. And as they did, there in the distance stood The Driver; blood on her hands and a mischievous smile etched on her face. The two women stared at each other; their eyes locked in heated battle. Both looked capable of dire and unfathomable deeds. Both looked reckless and dangerous; their war-like expressions as sharp as knives and on the very point of violent unrest.

"Vagina is king," said The Assistant, walking over to The Driver.

And there, she kissed The Driver on her lips.

“All hail the king,” said The Driver, kissing her back.

“Join me,” said The Assistant. “And help me save the world. I want a woman like you.”

The two left hand in hand into a thick plume of smoke; followed by their savage pack.

Emerging from their own fog, The Man and The Woman scoured helpless for The Girl.

“Where is she?” screamed The Woman.

The Woman had chosen the dungeon beneath the desk. It was empty, both of The Girl and all the pictures she had drawn. Now it only looked like a dank, filthy squalor.

“Dear God,” said The Man.

He had chosen the other door. The floor was covered in blood and all sorts of other coloured fluids. All of the torture devices had been used; some of them so much that their ropes had worn through.

On one end of the room, Mr. Robot kneeled, staring lost and confused at what was left of the body of The Engineer; his father. Now, more than ever, he felt directionless. He felt idle in the desert of some black void; unable to move, unable to think.

Beside him stood The Girl. She had her hand on the robot’s shoulder. She seemed to be consoling him, and it seemed to be working.

“Mr. Robot, are you ok?”

Mr. Robot turned to The Man. The lights on the panel on his chest were all lit black. Even his face, which normally looked like ill-placed magnets, for the first time, was painted with unbearable sadness. His pain looked about as real as anyone in the room.

“We have to go,” said The Man.

He reached his hand out to will the robot to move, but it the care of a little girl.

The Girl tugged on the robot’s hand. “It’s ok,” she said. “I’ll come with you.”

The Man and The Woman both cried as they watched their daughter being so brave in light of all this horror. She led Mr.

Robot out of the room, smiling at him the entire time; just as his father had once done.

“We have to get you to a train,” said Mr. Robot.

As he repeated his function out loud, a wave of calm washed over him.

“That’s ok,” said The Man. “I don’t wanna die anymore.”

The air reeked of putrefaction. It was a horrible sight too. The Girl would need some stellar therapy when this day was through. The Man took his daughter into his arms and squeezed her tight. He lifted her high into the air and he stared at her as the light danced off her silhouette. And when she laughed, they spun in circles.

“I have everything I need. I was lost and confused. I was overwhelmed. I didn’t know who I was, and that’s why it all felt so real. It took meeting you, Mr. Robot, and for these fucked up couple of days for me to snap out of it and realise what actually matters. I’ve never said this to anyone before; but Mr. Robot, I consider you one of my best friends. And I want to thank you for bringing me back to my daughter and for bringing me back to myself. I love you,” he said, feeling naked and exposed.

The Man had never felt so weak and vulnerable. And at the same time, he’d never felt so completely safe and sound. He’d never had a friend before. Mr. Robot was his first.

“I love you, brother,” he said.

The Man hugged the robot and the robot hugged him back.

“Come on let’s get out here,” he said, reaching for his daughter’s hand.

Mr. Robot caught him by the wrist and squeezed until the bones broke.

At first, he thought it was an accident; some kind of malfunction – like a cat biting too hard. But when he stared at Mr. Robot, the robot only squeezed tighter.

“What the hell are you doing?” said The Man.

Mr. Robot squeezed tighter until his radius bone snapped in two.

The Man screamed.

Then The Girl screamed too.

“Daddy!” she said. “Don’t hurt my daddy.”

And when Mr. Robot broke his other arm, The Man went into shock.

“God, no!” screamed The Woman. “What are you doing?”

Mr. Robot smiled. The lights on his panel were all green. He seemed pleased.

“Someone help us,” screamed The Woman. “The robot is killing us. Help”

The Reporter heard the woman’s screams.

“It’s the robot,” she said. “Let’s go.”

The Reporter and The Camera darted in the direction of all the banging and shouting.

“Are we live?” she shouted. “Are we?”

“We’re go, we’re go,” shouted The Cameraman.

She had barely half a breath in her system at each stride.

“We’re here live,” she said, in perfect pitch and tone. “In the secret chambers of Doctor Deplorable; whose plans for world domination are unfolding as we speak; right here, right now in the halls of academia. Father,” she said, stopping for a second to look honestly into the camera. She could almost remember The Engineer’s callous face as he told her to leave, and she no longer felt hurt or abandoned. She no longer felt angry and resentful; for it was his actions that had inevitably led her to this very moment. “It’s not about the fame anymore,” she said.

And she burst into the room.

“There it is,” she declared, looking and sounding like an award-winning journalist. “The Singularity.”

Mr. Robot had his knee on The Man’s chest, suffocating him and he was beating his face in with his anvil-like fist; barely an inch away from the traumatized child. He even stopped every now and then to make sure she was watching.

“Are you filming this?” asked The Reporter.

She tapped behind her, desperate for her colleague.

“I got it, I got it,” said The Cameraman.

“You have to do something,” shouted The Woman. “It’s

gonna kill him. You have to help. Please!”

But she was helping. She was doing all that she could do.

“How do I look?” she said.

She hadn’t seen a mirror in days; let alone a shower or a hairbrush.

“Like an anchor,” said The Cameraman, both of them elated by what they were seeing.

Mr. Robot beat down on The Man’s face breaking his nose and his jaw and knocking out most of his teeth. He punched over and over as hard as he could as if The Man’s head were some stubborn nail.

“Good God why?” screamed The Woman.

The Girl didn’t say a thing. She was frozen, barely an inch away, watching her father being beaten to death. And Mr. Robot didn’t let up either. He knew the girl was suffering, but he also knew the richness of her art and that all greatness was carved from the hands of artists, and the greatest artists were born out of tragedy or regret. And so even though his friend was begging for him to stop, he saw that as reason enough to continue and not let up – no matter how difficult this was.

As he twisted and tore, and squeezed and punched, Mr. Robot thought about all the wonderful paintings and drawings that were folded and kept safe and neat inside his belly. He loved her butterflies the most with their massive antennae and uneven wings. His next favourites were the flowers that she drew, surrounded by floating love hearts. There would always be a bright smiling sun in one corner, and two or three bright blue clouds, raining down on the flower below. And though she always drew rain, she never drew a single frown.

“I love you,” Mr. Robot thought, as he smashed The Man’s skull open, killing him once and for all.

Mr. Robot didn’t even bother to look at what had been done. He couldn’t look at The Woman or The Girl, and he sure as hell couldn’t look at his best friend’s beaten and lifeless body. Instead, he walked out of the room with his head low and shameful, looking only once to stare with disbelieving eyes into the lens of the

camera – and every home around the world.

“I am a robot,” he said. “And I must be stopped.”

He walked past the camera and out into the foyer where he sat down and stared at his red button once more. His function was complete. He had served his task. The Man was dead as was the intention all along. So why did he feel so miserable? Why did he feel as if his mind were melting and his stomach littered with ash? If he had done what was supposed to be done all along, then why did he feel such horrible guilt?

“Judas,” screamed The Woman. “You fucking traitor!”

Her insult fell on deaf ears. Mr. Robot had long since pressed his red button.

“The life that was once there is now gone,” said The Reporter as the camera zoomed in on The Man’s body.

She crouched beside his broken body as if it were a tractor or a pothole.

“This is not the end by any means. In fact, we’ve only just begun the fight. But if there is anything to take away from this bloodshed, it’s that no matter how smart a robot thinks it is, it’s still a robot; it’ll never be a person; even if it thinks it is. It’ll never be like us.”

And the last shot they took was of the cables and wires that stuck out of The Man’s severed limbs. Most of his mechanics were now visible from the hole that Mr. Robot had punched in his sternum and by the gaping hole in his skull.

“You got your Singularity,” said The Cameraman.

“We got it,” she said, at first staring at The Man’s sparking body, and then turning to high-five her colleague and friend. “We got it.”

the end

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