UTOPIUM

1.

The universe fell away from Gideon like a domino tumbling in slow motion.

"I am God." He thought, as time and space bowed their heads in acknowledgement of his omnipotence, and the perfection of his singularity. A tendril spread from the ball of infinite light that represented his consciousness and made a connection to every sub-atom that had ever bubbled into existence since the bang itself. If he had arms he would have spread them. If he had a head he would have tilted it back and let the energy flow into and out from his chest - but these frail and limited concepts seemed embarrassing and irrelevant so instead he gave himself to the infinity of his ego. Lasers of sunlight cut through a wall of dust, zebra striping two bodies lying face up on a bed in a darkened room. The thought was alien and unexpected, but before he had a chance to perform any kind of analysis, a body wrapped itself around him. It took him several hundred milliseconds to realise it was his, and a few hundred milliseconds more to discover his hands were repeatedly hitting each other. He couldn't reassemble the disturbing image, but his parents' names bubbled to the surface of his perception.

"Isn't that great?"

He craned his neck up towards the top of Utopium, a mountain so high its peak was not visible through the wispy purple clouds that spiralled anti-clockwise around it.

"You're all Gods now." The calm disembodied male voice continued. Much whooping and shouting ensued. Gideon glanced at his profile. Questions were flooding in, coalescing around the same topic - 'what was it like'? He checked how many people were following his stream. It wasn't enough. Nowhere near enough.

"That was incredible." The person floating next to Gideon said. The distraction was welcome relief. He checked her rank - seven thousand three hundred and nine. More than two thousand places higher than him. The fantasy of her violent death pulsed through his cortex. He noticed she was from London so he shot her his toothpaste smile and shared his glossy manifesto as she zoomed up towards the mountain peak. He followed behind her, past thousands of lower rank professionals and public service hobbyists, but soon hit the limit of his own rank, the prestige and reach of Mayor no match for that of a multi-thread talent like hers. The unattainability of the mountain peak mocked Gideon beneath an oily sky erupting in an endless fireworks display that he had long since ignored and only noticed now because it had just stopped.

"Once you go full 'CI', once you throw off the shackles of those puny bodies and truly give yourself to '*The Ether*'."

A pause.

"Then - and only then - will you understand consciousness need not be limited by the laws of physics but has the power to redefine a whole new set of laws. Customizable physics. Just only one of the features I'm going to talk about today."

Gideon clapped in unison with the other million invitees but the crushing pressure to wring as much social currency out of the event was making it impossible to enjoy. His mind crystallized the disembodied voice into the shape of a human who paced back and forth across the flat peak of Utopium. CHADIF had a disarming smile but steel cold eyes, blazing with a determination Gideon envied and admired.

"I want to talk about time travel."

Silence viraled through the profiles of everyone gathered. The barrage of comments from Gideon's fifty thousand followers fell quiet in anticipation.

"With a consciousness the size of the universe connected to every atom, and unbound by the brutal physical laws that govern our organically limited minds, you'll have access to everything that has or will happen."

Chadif resumed his trademark pacing, head bowed, hand to chin, holding the crowd in the gaps between his words.

"You'll be able to re-experience any moment in the history or future of the universe. See long-dead relatives. Re-experience your youth. Zoom forward and watch the stars explode. We call it, 'FreeTime'".

Frenzied applause.

"Have as much time as you want. Have it all. You're God now."

Gideon thought about his parents, retrieving what memories of them he could find with a quick search. They smiled from the archive of his sixth birthday.

"When will the invites be sent out?" Gideon thought, along with seventy four thousand other attendees.

"OK, OK." Chadif said. "I hear you. You want access now. Am I right?"

The crowd cheered.

"We're hoping to have the first wave of invites out in the next few months. Rank order. It's the only fair thing to do."

Globally Gideon was just shy of fifty-millionth; locally he was in the top ten thousand. A wave of panic swept through his mind, interrupted only when an alarm sounded between his ears and the time flashed through his visual cortex.

#

Eyes blinked open and pupils dilated as the sun hit them through the floor to ceiling windows of Gideon's luxury central inner London apartment.

"Waiting for my invite Chadif."

He watermarked the thought with the smile that got him elected mayor almost a year ago to the day and transmitted it via the network to every neuron of every person who was connected to him. He spent several seconds, analysing the share and response rates, comparing it statistically with previous thoughts and calculating its reach and impact. The algorithm revealed the thought to be seven percent more popular than his average thought. He set the algorithms to work on a strategy to extract and utilise the best features of that thought for all future thoughts, in the race for optimisation that Gideon needed to keep up with, in order to maintain and improve his rank, and win the upcoming election. Popularity was everyone's full time job, and having experienced *The Ether*, Gideon felt all the more limited by the fatty electrochemical sloth of a brain that kept his consciousness from realising its true potential.

The walls of the apartment throbbed with a kaleidoscopic dance of soothing lights and the smell of summer flowers flooded Gideon's olfactory bulbs. He had one

of the biggest apartments in the block, almost thirty square metres and a penthouse view over the city.

"Sorry I didn't get to ask all your questions."

He projected a full-length image of himself into the room, scanning two hundred clothing combinations per second.

"Can't wait for my invite. How many of you will upload once you get yours?"

He focused on his chin. Too narrow. He widened it in the projection that would be broadcast to everyone who looked at or thought about him. The constant battle with the femininity his underlying genetics forced on him was an exhausting arms race. If he could settle on an identity he would have had the gene work done, but he was never satisfied with his projection. It wasn't augmentation he was after, it was evolution, beyond flesh. The attraction of the Ether was impossible to resist, he had been waiting for it his entire life and the yearning to upload gripped his chest tight. Responses to his last thought flooded his profile. He left it to his analyser mod to take care of tailoring individual replies, but it was clear that most people just wanted the validation of having an invite to The Ether. Unlike Gideon, most were in no particular hurry to abandon their bodies altogether.

"I'll be with you in thirty seven."

The smile bounced across the city. He selected a stylish skin-tight black jacket and a matching leather textured 'tress', the long train of the dress flowing behind the skin-tight trousers that accentuated his muscular thighs.

"Oh, and don't forget the election is only 166 hours away. Counting on you."

Gideon shared his painstakingly crafted manifesto with his supporters, packaged with a reminder that would pop up five minutes before the vote and

fragranced with an emotional cocktail that elicited a sensation of sincere gratitude, warmth and appreciation.

#

"I can't describe it in words." Gideon said, spooning sparkling chocolate ice cream topped with rainbows into his mouth as the taxi flew over a gleaming ocean of luxury apartment blocks.

"Language just doesn't do it justice. It's amazing what we can achieve when we put our minds to it, you know?"

The thought earned Gideon four hundred dopa shots. The details of his next appointment flashed through his mind.

"Remind me why this was scheduled at the same time as the launch event?"

BORTON didn't respond, his gaze fixed on his own reflection in the glass canopy of the taxi. Gideon daren't let any negative thoughts contaminate his stream so instead he casually scanned Borton's face and profile, careful to ensure it wouldn't register as too invasive or probing. He didn't want Borton to think he was suspicious, and he couldn't let himself actually think that either, so had long since set up a filter to get rid of such thoughts before they had the chance to take root. Gideon read the invite information, tagged the thought with the label, 'next' and 'appointment' and kept it bobbing on the surface of his consciousness.

"Love is 'The Juzz'." He thought. "The neurostar of tomorrow. He'll be in your thoughts from ten."

The smiling, porcelain doll face of 'The Juzz' strobed between Gideon's ears. He tagged the ad. It was important to keep up with who was hot. It gave him credibility as a representative.

"Have you voted yet?" Borton said.

"The election isn't until next week."

"Is Maynard Higgs Boson guilty of murder? You decide on the trial that's gripping the entire planet."

Gideon scanned the case notes that Borton shared. It was the first suspected murder in more than a hundred years, Maynard's rank riding a wave of interest in the hideous crime. It was the kind of publicity Gideon could only dream of. Justice was a social affair, judges replaced by algorithms that collated votes and passed sentences, juries expanded to include anyone who took a passing interest.

The notes were extensive. Gideon scanned the first few lines and a video from Maynard pleading his innocence flashed across his thoughts.

"What did you vote?" Gideon said.

When he did look at him, Borton had the unnerving habit of staring straight into Gideon's eyes as he spoke. Eye contact was a contentious social issue, and Borton was a vehement pro 'eyer'. Gideon found it unnecessarily aggressive so rarely indulged it and would feel embarrassed when a glance was accidentally shared with a stranger.

"Guilty." Borton said. "Everyone's voting guilty."

Gideon voted 'Guilty'.

#

The cab landed in a cloud of dust on a busy high street. Elaborately costumed shoppers browsed long rows of colourful vending machines. There was no real need for people to leave their homes to purchase anything, but the experience of shopping had always been social and the nanotech kept people infection free.

As Gideon stepped out of the car, he retrieved the event information Borton had shared, but before he could fully digest it was confronted with the open arms of the shopkeeper dressed in a Neon cape and wizard hat. They didn't hug or make any physical contact, but the man clasped his hands together and tilted his head to one side.

"It is such an honour to have you here."

"So great to be here."

The shop was nothing more than a sterile featureless room with brightly coloured vending machines lined up against each wall. To mark the opening, the name of the shop was projected onto the ceiling and floor, and a constant stream of reminders to share, comment on, and rate the establishment rushed through the minds of everyone present.

"Thank you for coming". Gideon said. "Absolutely massive pleasure to be here at the opening of '*VenderRoom - where shopping lives.*'"

Gideon glanced past the speech and smiled for exactly two seconds.

"As mayor of this incredible city, it has been one of my primary manifesto pledges to increase the number of vending points by twenty percent. A vote for me in next Tuesday's election will ensure that this vital work can continue so that nobody is ever more than thirty seconds away from these crucial parts of our infrastructure."

The idea of his mother's tear streaked face and his father with his head in his hands drew his attention inward. He shook his head free of the thought. Scanning the profiles in the shop he still had enough of their attention to continue.

"So please."

He scrambled to bring the script back to the front of his mind.

"Browse. Shop, and, most importantly of all, vote. Not only for '*VenderRoom - where shopping lives*', but for Gideon Smith. If you want to be sent a reminder, just ping my campaign manager and he'll set that up for you. Thank you very much."

For a few glorious seconds the room bubbled with social activity as the long-term fate of the shop was sealed and Gideon positioned his manifesto as near to the front of the shopper's minds as he could. He glanced over at Borton, surprised by the lack of activity coming from him. He was talking to the shopkeeper in what Gideon interpreted as hushed tones. He appeared to be briefing the man on a manifesto pledge to decrease the number of vending points around the city. Gideon's heart came to the centre of his thoughts. A health status popped up. He dismissed it and brought his thoughts back to Borton's pledge. He tried to remember what he had been thinking about. The invasive, cobwebbed memories of his parents had the potential to scuttle his campaign and had to be rooted out, but the conversations of the shoppers muddied his retrieval and all he could focus on was banana ice cream. A hatch opened in the vending machine closest to him revealing a bowl of seductively melting vanilla ice cream topped with discs of banana positioned in a geometrically precise ring. He picked up a plastic spoon that had dropped next to the bowl. He stared at it, then at the ice cream. He changed his mind. He wanted strawberry topped ice cream. The banana disks transformed into strawberry halves without Gideon even noticing, any thought of banana never having time to be remembered before being replaced with a new thought that frantically scrambled to form a permanent neural record in Gideon's mind. A few mouthfuls later and a larger hatch opened in the same machine. Gideon tossed the bowl into it and thanked himself for

recycling. The social frenzy had run its course and the shop owner waved as Gideon hurried out. Borton was already in the taxi when Gideon got in.

<p style="text-align:center">#</p>

"Amazing place. Love VenderRoom. Where shopping lives." Gideon thought. He received two dopa-shots from some like-minded attendees of the opening.

"Inspirational" Borton replied – one shot.

"What were you talking about with the shopkeeper?"

"Am I Ether ready?" Gideon thought. "How will my mind cope with being able to access an infinite number of dimensions? I'd better get some training."

He dismissed the ad but tagged it to ensure it was easily found with a quick search.

"Where are we next?" Gideon said.

"You're taking part in a debate with the other candidates in twenty seven minutes. After that you have a publicity stunt."

Gideon checked his watch. It was an antique, the only physical reminder he had that his parents ever existed. He tapped the glass and the second hand continued its endless staccato march. It hadn't been able to keep up with time for decades, maybe centuries. He took a deep breath and mentally prepared himself for the onslaught he was about to face.

<p style="text-align:center">#</p>

The live mayoral debate between the eighty-four candidates had been dragging on for more than fourteen minutes. Gideon was finding it impossible to get his manifesto heard over the raging sea of egos that jostled to have their thoughts indulged. He stared at his reflection, changed his hair from blonde to dark and

expanded the girth of his biceps. One of the candidates, 'Ampersand Gorky Mind Orchid', bellowed his name repeatedly and was thrown out of the debate. Gideon turned his attention to adjusting his square jaw and geometrically trimmed stubble, wide blue eyes and toothpaste smile. His apartment was on the one hundredth floor. It was the kind of apartment only available to those with a very healthy rank. It was a physical manifestation of status, one of the few 'real world' objects not met with disgust at the unnecessary amount of resources their manufacture must have consumed.

Taking his attention away from the window and leaving the debate, which had descended into the predictable tirade of death threats, Gideon projected various entertainment channels onto the walls to give him something to ignore. He let the advertisements for food mods and mood enhancers flow through his mind. He paced the room. A perfectly made bed folded out of the wall. His clothes dissolved around him leaving him wearing a skin-tight grey bodysuit. He lay on the bed, the image of a woman with multiple genitalia making love to themselves flashed through his mind. Gideon grabbed his chest, unconsciously kneading the mounds of his breasts into his ribcage. He hated them, and he hated that hole between his legs, an open wound that gnawed at him, reminding him of every reality he didn't want to exist. It wasn't that he wanted a penis instead, he didn't want any of it and was frustrated at evolution for removing his choice. Gideon diligently subscribed to every neurosis society demanded. The image of his mother's cold dead face strobed to the front of his thoughts. He blinked his eyes and shook his head allowing the flow of advertisements and social chatter do their thing. The hermaphroditic moans dragged his attention back to the pornography but it had lost its appeal and disappeared from his stream.

He searched for Borton. He found him at a party across the other side of the city. He sat bolt upright in bed.

"Hey. What are you up to?" He exclaimed, splashing the thought across Borton's profile.

"Family gathering." Gideon thought out loud, before realising it was Borton's reply to his message. His mind eased. He sat back down on the bed. A reminder popped into his head.

#

Gideon loved the streets. The permanent Mardi Gras atmosphere was intoxicating. Thousands of people in elaborate, brightly coloured costumes thronged every inch of old Trafalgar Square. Singers. Dancers. Acrobatic teams performing gravity defying feats. A disgusting cocktail of smells and tastes assaulted his sensory cortex.

"Physex. It stinks." He thought, "The shocking truth about the people who still do it and the enormous danger they put us all in. Four shares to view."

The smell of fried foods, fresh vegetables, flowers, love, and roasting animal flesh flooded Gideon's olfactory centre. A cacophony of steel drums, electric guitars, harps and choirs swirled around Gideon's auditory cortex. Thousands of profiles crowded Gideon's mind; requests for comms, points, DopaShots, SynoBadges. He followed behind a crocodile juggling a fire-eating midget on its tail. A conga line snaked past that had been going for fourteen days. He requested permission to join, was immediately granted access and a gap opened up next to him. A game of virtual ping-pong being played by thousands around the world tempted Gideon away and he

joined in, batting an invisible ball over an invisible net towards whoever was randomly selected by the algorithm that controlled the game.

He followed a set of coordinates that led him away from the square and into the narrow network of alleys that separated the endless honeycomb of luxury apartment blocks. The coordinates changed and he changed direction with them. Gideon subscribed to myriad news and information channels. Despite having a filter in place to distill out any mentions of vending machines the volume of information returned was beyond the processing capacity of a simple human brain - another reason Gideon longed for his invite to *The Ether*. Flicking through the tidal wave of news days earlier, he had stumbled across an article about a mysterious vandal who, for the last four weeks, had been smashing vending machines across the city. Others had done most of the legwork, crafting algorithms to look for patterns in the attacks and a small but growing group had dedicated themselves to identifying the perpetrator. Their job was made easier when they reported that the vandal had presented herself to them, but she was invisible to their streams, so when they shared these encounters she was not present in the memory. For Gideon, the opportunity laid not in the vandal herself, but the group of investigators and their extended networks that represented a significant enough number of potential votes to make the effort of confronting the vandal about their actions statistically worthwhile. He just hoped they would turn up.

The coordinates had remained stable long enough for Gideon to home in on them. He wanted to get there early to rehearse the emotionally charged, keyword laden, monologue he would direct at the vandal. The sound of shattering glass pierced Gideon's attention. He followed the barrage of noise around a corner into a

thoroughfare. A tall, broad chested man with wild curly hair, wearing only the ubiquitous grey bodysuit that people normally wore to bed was illuminated in the flickering glow of a bank of vend machines. Around his neck was draped a pink lace scarf, on his lips bright purple gloss, and in his hand a steel hammer. The man noticed Gideon and smiled before smashing the hammer through the brightly coloured façade of one of the machines, revealing its inner mechanics and spilling vacuum-sealed packs of grey spongy Supplement onto the floor.

“Elle?” Gideon said. ELLE nodded; the hammer striking further blows to the glass front, splintering the display into an incoherent mess of glowing pixels.

“GAIA are destroying the planet.”

“I’m just waiting for some people to arrive.”

Gideon had to shout over the barrage of noise.

“If you could save some machines for when they get here that would be perfect.”

“We’re running out of time.” Elle shouted even louder over the sound of her violence.

The image of vast open mines shrouded in dust rushed through Gideon’s mind, distracting him from the meme he was crafting.

“Vote Borton.”

The thought stabbed Gideon in the back of the head. He spun around searching for its origin.

“The entire planet is being devoured. Stripped to the core. Fucking raped.”

“Vote Borton.”

Gideon's stomach rumbled uncontrollably as the thought went to work burrowing into his mind. He didn't want to do it, but the only way to trace its origin was to indulge it.

"Torn from under our noses and exported."

Borton's grinning face flooded Gideon's head. All he could think was 'Vote Borton' -- twenty of his supporters picked up on this thought and shared it. Another vending machine felt the hammer blows.

"Are you listening to me?"

Gideon interrupted his thought and looked at Elle. She wiped sweat from her forehead. Her expression was intense and her formidable eyebrows overwhelming.

"Can you just stop that for one second?"

Gideon clasped his head in his hands and circled the area in front of the machines, scanning the history of Borton's campaign.

"I really need to think."

Borton had announced three days earlier. Gideon couldn't understand how he hadn't noticed.

"You need to act." Elle said. "We all need to act."

Gideon scanned his stream. Buried in the noise he found it - message after message from Borton and his supporters. He was running on an anti-vending machine... plastic shrapnel and shards of glass showered Gideon. He recoiled.

"Look, come on. Stop it. OK. Just, stop it."

He surprised himself with the ferocity of his outburst. His mood stabilisers kicked in and the calm made him nauseous.

He ran an algorithm to way up his options. He could abandon the stunt and focus on Borton, but if Borton really were running against him, every thought about him would be a thought *for* him. He needed to do the opposite.

"I see you've finally noticed."

Borton's opening gambit was projected straight into Gideon's mind and delivered with no emotion.

"Working with you has been an amazing experience. I've learnt so much" Borton said. "But now, I feel it's time I found my voice. I can no longer reconcile our ideological differences"

"Ideological differences?"

"You want more vending machines. I want fewer."

And with that parting shot, Borton ended the call leaving Gideon's mind with only his own cancerous thoughts.

A barrage of smashing glass dragged Gideon's attention back to the alley. Elle had destroyed the remaining vending machine and started work on the metal frames.

"Please, put the hammer down." Gideon pleaded. "I don't know what you hope to achieve with all this, but…"

"GAIA needs to be held accountable."

"Whatever it is, destroying these vital parts of the city's infrastructure is not the way to do it. Trust me. " He extended his hand out, beckoning to Elle with his fingers. "Now. Hand me the hammer. Everything's going to be OK. I'll find you some help. I promise."

His politician mods had kicked in. If Borton was going to run on an anti-vend message, now was the perfect opportunity to reinforce his opposing pro-vend view.

He knew he had to find a positive spin, a thought he could use to project a position of power and control to his many supporters and campaigners. He did a quick search. Half a millisecond later it returned a cornucopia of responses.

"To succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence. Mark Twain."

He had no idea what or who 'Mark Twain' was, but he trusted his algorithms. Before he could analyse the deeper meaning of the quote, it had been shared over five hundred times. Gideon still had what marketers had for hundreds of years called 'neural reach', a term that had taken on almost biblical significance in the hallowed halls of the many agencies that had sprung up since the explosion in 'personal neuromarketing'.

And then it hit him.

#

Gideon's mother smiled warmly and his father shook his hand firmly. The familiarity of his parent's faces receded into the darkness and all Gideon wanted was to remember what he was talking about. A blur of colour emerged from the silence of his mind and a wall of sound tornadoed towards him. The shiny metal head of a hammer filled his vision. It took another second for his profile to finish rebooting.

"I hope they invent a disease just for you." He thought, before realising the thought wasn't his. The image of him lying on the ground next to a hammer and surrounded by the smashed remains of a row of vending machines flashed to the front of Gideon's consciousness. The meta data revealed it had been shared more than ten million times and was riding a tidal wave of virality. Gideon grabbed his

temple. It throbbed between his fingers and his profile struggled under the sheer weight of comments.

"Vandal caught red handed."

"Watch angry failing politician's violent rampage in response to his campaign manager's rival bid for mayoral election."

"People like you should die."

"Why?"

Thousands of other, less coherent, thoughts bombarded him making it impossible to piece together a response.

"Very sad to hear about the fall of a great political friend and rival." Borton's face tagged the thought.

"Terrorist." Gideon thought a thousand times.

The barrage of comments presented themselves simultaneously to Gideon's profile. He saw himself being beheaded by a woman wearing a fluffy bear suit. He dismissed the stream but within seconds it emerged as a top ranking meme to describe what should happen to people who break their terms and conditions.

Looking up, he found himself encircled by the group he had invited to bear witness to his confrontation.

"Why'd you do it?"

He got himself to his feet.

"Attention seeker."

The pain from the hammer blow was triggering a barrage of health warnings. He pushed his way through the group and into the crowded streets towards his apartment. All he wanted to do was lie down for a second and gather his thoughts but

the assault on his profile make it impossible to see past the next hate filled message. He did his best to counter some of the comments and put his various mods to work generating automated responses. Then nothing. His vision returned to the street and he was able to see the people staring at him like he was patient zero of some deadly infectious disease, but he was completely blind to their profiles and streams.

"Profile temporarily unavailable." flashed through his mind. He ran some diagnostics through the networks responsible for interpolating his neuro-chemical activity into the common binary tongue that was transmitted between minds. His profile had been overloaded and re-booted in safe mode, blocking all but essential network traffic from his senses. A silence draped itself over his mind. He spun around, deaf to the thoughts of the crowd; only their eyes pierced him, leaving him blind to what they were thinking. He instinctively stared at the ground so as not to accidentally make eye contact. The world was silent and he felt like a ghost, invisibly jostling his way through the crowd. He could sense people were thinking about him, he could feel their laughter, their scorn and hatred towards him. Going against the tide and thinking otherwise would have been damaging to their rank. He checked his profile – the diagnostics were fifty percent complete, the progress bar wrapped itself around his neck and stopped him breathing. He had to look up to get his bearings and realised that without access to his profile he had no idea where he was or how to get back to his apartment. He darted in one direction and then another, no thought able to stick long enough to form a coherent plan. He gripped his head and concentrated on the progress bar, willing it to move. He tried to disable the diagnostics and restart his profile, but he didn't have the privileges. He caught the eye of several people as he weaved through the crowd, their silent smiles eating

through him like a tumour. With no neural chatter to fill the void the sound of thousands of footsteps pushed themselves to the front of Gideon's consciousness. Breathing. The electrical hum of a nearby box that did something or other. It gave Gideon the sense of being in a dream, or being trapped inside a glass box. He expected the world to stutter and disappear in front of him. He expected it to slow and freeze, but the movement continued, a random choreographed dance of strangers walking in every direction around him, perfectly exemplifying the chaotic and pointless nature of the universe. These were exactly the kinds of thoughts Gideon needed to escape.

"We only need a thousand more votes." Gideon thought and with that a wave of noise hit him square in the cortex like emerging from under water into a pool party of millions that Gideon was no longer invited to.

"A sneeze travels at over one hundred miles an hour. Learn the deadly facts."

Gideon dismissed the ad. The coordinates of his apartment presented themselves to him.

"I've been charged with vandalism of GAIA property. Please review the vote log to see the history of the petition. Verdict at ten."

The thought stopped Gideon in his tracks. It was all he could see, partly because it was physically obscuring his view but mostly because of its life shattering implications. He did as instructed and checked the vote log. It came as no surprise to discover Borton was the author of the petition.

"Everyone listen. This is just a massive mistake, almost comical really. I'm completely innocent. You know me. You know I wouldn't do something like this. It was someone else."

The name - 'Elle' stuck in his head, but it had no other supporting information.

He checked his watch – it showed nine thirty. He checked his profile. It was actually nine forty five.

He put his manifesto on auto-share; scatter gunning it across the city, across the globe. Twelve billion opportunities to save him.

"My manifesto. Thought two. It's right there. There's no way I would vandalise those vends. My entire campaign is about increasing the number of banks."

He waited for the manifesto to circulate and be read. He waited for the dopa-shots that would surely follow. They had to. They didn't.

He reached the Thames and followed the wide floodlit promenade towards his apartment block on the north bank. His rank had dropped seven hundred places in seven seconds and his network was shrinking fast as his close friends and supporters abandoned him for fear of his toxic influence. He reached out and messaged his closest supporters. The people he had often called upon for support. The people who always responded, always helped. Half had blocked his profile. His attention was drawn to his stomach. It felt heavy and acidic.

His apartment block was popular with politicians and other public service hobbyists. He had researched the history once and discovered it was built where a centralised national Parliament once stood – a building where nobody lived but men would gather to vote on things and eat. As his building loomed into view amongst the sea of architectural masterpieces that jostled for sunlight during the day and the attention of passers-by at night, Gideon wanted to find out more about where he lived.

"I've been convicted of vandalism of GAIA property. Sentencing in ten, nine, eight…"

He spun around, staring through the blurred mass of faces, paralysed by indecision and an overwhelming sense of complete powerlessness. He scanned for news on Maynard Higgs Boson. The trial had done wonders for his rank.

"…Six, five…"

The results returned a message long since lost in his stream. He'd been found guilty and sentenced to death by neurotransmitter overdose, the punishment already carried out.

"…Three, two, one."

He stopped spinning. He couldn't take another breath until he knew it was worth it.

"I've been sentenced to loss of all rank, mods and upgrades, with immediate effect. Appeals must be submitted within five seconds."

He gasped and lodged an appeal. He looked at his apartment block with longing. He checked his rank. Globally he was still in the top fifty million, locally, the top ten thousand. He tried to remember the exact number but before he had a chance to snapshot it, it disappeared. His profile emptied and his head spun. He dropped to his knees. His new ranking flashed across his profile: Twelve billion, seven hundred and forty five million, two hundred and seventy four thousand and twelve.