

Fallout

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Unplug....

It would be that easy.

Just yank the cable and step away, to watch the struggle.

His breathing tube invitingly stood out, swaying side-to-side as he sat there, his head buried deep into that mechanation. Just place a foot on his back, and pull with both hands. The tube would pop, releasing compressed oxygen at moderately high pressure, filling his helmet with smog and assorted radioactive par- ticulates. If the estimates are correct, the toxicity of the air would cripple the nervous system before he can radio for help. Not that that would be the first thing to come to his mind. No. Hed probably be shocked and confused as to what

“Could you pass the soldering iron please.”

“Good lord! dont startle me like that!”

“Well dont daydream then. We are on extremely hostile ground you know!”

I reached into the toolkit and handed him that damn soldering iron. He must be soldering the wires onto the circuit boards. Which means he is nearly done. Which means I just lost another window of opportunity. I cant do this! Why did they have to pick me?!

“There.”, he quipped, reaching for his communicator. “Relaystation 3 is now active. Proceeding to waypoint 2. Over.”

“Copy that wanderer #2. Over”. I could hear the reply in my headset.

Abhi dragged all the stray parts as we walked back to the buggy. He was one talkative little kid. Morbid and moody. But talkative.

“So, you havent answered my question.”, he announced.

“What?” “What we have been talking about. What are the odds that they wont let us back into the shelter when we return?”

“Come now Abhi. What manner of question is that?”

“A simple and relevant one. How probable is it that the doors wont open for us?”

“I mean WHY would you wonder something like that?”

“Well. For starters, we are a small society ruled by a military dictator who has murdered half of what remained of humanity on this planet.”

We reached the buggy. He hauled the equipment into the back-tray and took the drivers seat. I wanted so badly for him to stop. To tell him that I would rather not talk about the General right now. But then that might give him a reason for suspicion.

He drove.

“Secondly, I might point to the futility of this whole exercise.”

“Futility Abhi?”

“Yes Sir. Where is the sense in stuffing two communications engineers with minimal hazardous-environment training into a couple of hazmat suits and sending them to run errands on the surface.... THE SURFACE mind you.... on a quest to plant dipole antenna at arbitrary locations?” He spoke like a true geeky engineer.

“I mean you dont really expect to make contact with other surviving colonies out there do you? Take the odds that a neighbouring nuclear shelter exists within line-of-sight. Multiply that with the chances of it being occupied and well equipped. Divide that by the chaotic weather of our signal transmission medium, and you end up with zero. Zilch. Nothing!!!”

“We wont know until we have tried it out now, will we?”

“Bull! This is SETI all over again. Only this time, we are looking for intelligent life on Earth.”

“We should have started sooner I guess.”, I crack one.

“Why professor! I had no idea that you had a sense of humour!?” , he replied dryly.

He made a sharp left turn. And for the first time since the apocalypse, I could glimpse the city in the distance. What remained of the skyscrapers leaned on each other like tired tombstones. A mutant jungle was reclaiming the streets. Life finds a way I suppose.

We drove past an anthill. How nice to see at least one civil engineered structure still in use!

I would have him stop just so we could take a closer look. What would we see? Would we hear tiny hairy feet pencil-scratching the surface in rapid gaits? Twin whisker Antenna sweeping the air, as if receiving secret instructions from an omnipotent being, or scanning for one. Their surface-to-volume ratio would be so small, it is fortunate that they werent warm-blooded, lest they lose all their heat before reaching the next food source. Keratin based exoskeletons must have protected them from the worst of the radiation. They could breath through their skins, survive on the plentiful garbage weve left behind. And now, they thrive in our absence, ready to claim the planet as their own.

And we thought WE were the wonder of nature....

“And what possible use is it even if we found someone to talk to? Surely, they, like us, have no way of venturing any respectable distance away from their shelters. Not on this planet. Not anymore.”

He forced me to reply, “It.... can.... be useful?”

“How?”

“Well..For instance, we could ask them if they know what exactly happened to us.”

“Oh, they would know would they?”

“They might know something we dont.”

Ive never stopped thinking about this. Nearly every simulation of a post-nuclear holocaust humanity was indulged in: in literature, Film, Videogames; the survivors would always know who fired first, how bad the damage was, and where other people were. We got so corrupted by the information age that no one accounted for the extinction of all newsreporters and networks. Come to think of it, no extinct civilisation has ever managed to predict, or leave traces about the precise causes of its destruction. As if, all the really important pages of history were blank. We drew closer to waypoint 2.

“It might help on a psychological level too. To know with certainty that others survivors exist!”

“Now why would a man like the General want to eagerly know if others survived? His power comes from our limited size and isolation.”

“It would boost the morale of the whole colony. Kindle hope. It would calm our spirits and make us more manageable for him.”

“False hope you mean. In all probability, these antenna were just for show. He will create and

play recorded messages and make everyone believe in other survivors if that serves his purpose. And this is all the more reason to finish us off.”

The buggy came to a halt. We dragged the antenna to the designated area and began the installation. I brought my hand up to the base of my helmet, to check how soft the suits collar was. Abhi once again sat and stuck his head into the machine while I wondered about concepts of moral relativism and its application to this uniquely post-post-modern scenario. I wondered if I had a moral compass left.

What is it that is supposed to go through the mind of a criminal before the act? Is he to fear retribution in some sort of afterlife? What if he was an atheist? What value would he place on man-made laws? Clearly they failed in their purpose. Laws were made to be relevant in their respective social contexts. So what laws are relevant now? Or would he tap into the innate altruism evolved and bred into him by his ancestors? But isnt altruism another self-preservation attempt by the selfish gene? How much does one really care about people not immediately related to the self? By how much has the value of human life changed? Has it become more precious, or more meaningless? Is there a point to self-sacrifice now? Or should we all revert to our primal instincts? Isnt that noble enough in itself?

Strangulation would be another way to go about it. The hazmat suit is malleable enough around the neck. One tight squeeze, held for maybe two full minutes. Just long enough to deprive his lungs of air and his brain-cells of oxygenated blood. Thankfully, the helmet visors were reflective. I dont think I could go through with it with his eyes staring back at me. Eyes would betray feelings. First shocked. Then strained. Angry. Complaining. And finally,..... cold.

I should strike, as soon as he is finished, and turns around. I have to be swift. No room for error. If I miss, its over. Im gone. But could I do it? Wouldnt he be thrashing about? He is young and strong. What if he frees himself? Can it be done? Can he resist while running out of air? Will his limbs go limp fast enough? Wont they?

No. Strangulation wont do. I need to think of something else. He seems nearly finished. Quick. Think!

Damn. Lost a lot of time. Lost another chance. This next one would be the last. Plan in advance.

He faced me for a bit. Did he suspect?! No. How could he? You cant tell what a person is thinking when he wears an airtight mask.

“Relaystation 2 activated. Proceeding to waypoint 1. Over.”

“Copy that wanderer #2. Over.”

Back to the buggy. Back to his theories.

“What do you think of him?”, he continued.

“Of whom?”

“The General. Would you side with him? Are you okay with the way things have been since the beginning?”

“Well. One kind of tyranny is as good as the other.”

“So you approve of the selection rituals? And of what was done to the others?”

“Well. Those were desperate times. We were all freshly evacuated from our homes to the shelter. World War III had broken loose.”

“And... that justifies the triage?”

“Look, we were overpopulated. The facility was designed to support only so many. Some had to go.”

“So you are defending him? You are defending a murderer?”, he scoffed.

“Humanity was suddenly endangered wasn't it? Tough choices had to be made. Either we all died, or some died. He made the call. We were skilled, and important. And we were selected. I know it's cold, but I see the wisdom in it. Equality and right to destiny were luxuries we could no longer afford.”

He delayed his response by thirty seconds, to calm my stress to the sound of the engine, and to punctuate what he wants to say.

“What gave the military the right to select who lives or dies? What did they select themselves for? Peace- keeping?!..... ” Another long pause.

“And to think we built nuclear bunkers to protect politicians. No one foresaw their irrelevance post- apocalypse. Now they fertilise the crops we grow under artificial lights and feed on. We've become canni- bals.”

I didn't speak for what seemed like an eternity.

What a smart kid. Someone deep. Methodical. Someone who cared enough to be vocal about it. And most importantly, someone who has the courage and the conviction to do something about it. Unlike me. And despite that, or maybe because of it, they wanted him dead. And they wanted me to do him in. He deserves to live more than I do. How could I??.....

We drove alongside a green stream of toxic sewage. I am sure the fumes were corrosive. But from inside protective clothing, I could see the sunlight leaking through turbulent clouds in the metallic-grey sky and scattering off of the slow, winding emissions from the stream, and saw beauty in it. I wanted to lose myself in it. To become one with post-apocalyptic skies. To fall like snow and ashes. To get a birds-eye view of now ancient human settlements littering the landscape like charred diamonds on dirty green velvet. I romanticised about walking amidst the ruins of the city. To enter giant abandoned buildings. To stand in what once had been living spaces, now tranquil. Silent. Sun beams piercing through openings in damaged walls. To step on trash that had once been treasure, products of the global economic machine, symbols of our cultures. To look for poetic souvenirs. To contrast the lost meanings with new found ones imbued into them. Most of all, I wanted to see life return to these barren lands. To see birds perched and swarming, saplings breaking through asphalt, tree roots damaging bridge foundations. I wanted to see Earth heal the scars we inflicted on it.

I wanted to get away from all this madness, this murder. This choice. I wanted to be..... a bit closer to heaven.....

I wanted to be at peace with everyone I have known till the day I died. I wanted to die with no regrets.....

I wanted to break the ice.

I blurted almost unconsciously, “Don't worry. I'm sure the doors will open for us.”

He sniffed hard. “Are you trying to cheer me up?”

“You've lost all hope haven't you? In humanity. In the future. In our survival.”

“You could say that.”, he confessed.

“So what do you suggest we do to fix things?”

“I say forget it. Its all over. Nature is selecting us for extinction. We must give up, lie down, and go gracefully.”

I felt very sorry for him. But what exactly am I holding on to?

“Nonetheless. They cant kill the both of us. Not this way.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is too obvious. Civilians still outnumber the Military. Thered be an uprising. And besides, we are more essential than they are. They cant easily exterminate the people they selected to further their own existence in the first place. Things were different when it all started. But now, the General cant risk revolt. He has to play his cards right. Like a tyrant after the revolution.”

“How does that make it better professor? We are stuck in 1984.”

We reached waypoint 1 and disembarked the vehicle. Waypoint 1 was a cliff edge that overlooked the stream. We stopped very close to the edge and began our routine. He planted the antenna firmly to the ground and crouched to work on the foundation. I looked over the edge, into the stream gushing below.

This was it. This is where it could end. I cannot hold my own against him in a fair fight. The Generals minions were right. I must use the brief pauses at the waypoints to initiate a surprise attack. And finally, an opening. All I had to do was push him off the cliff. Just one little nudge would do it. A push, and hed plunge straight into toxic stew, hazmat suit et al. The goo would start to dissolve his suit, and eat his flesh to the bone. Any evidence that survives would be swept away by the current. This was perfect. I could call it an accident. A slip n fall. People would buy that. Surely, no one would miss a lowly engineering graduate student... not when there are real engineers around. The loss of the hazmat suit would be the greater tragedy. How many do we have left? Wont we need those?

“Professor”, he said, while still knelt and facing the contraption, “You should go back without me. I have decided to call it quits.”

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What do I say?! “What do you mean?”

“I mean ride back to the shelter without me. Tell them I died of something.”

I cant believe this was happening. He hadnt gotten up. As if diligently working on his last accomplishment.

I had to say something. Sound natural.

“Why Abhi?!”

“Look at what awaits us back there? Its not worth it.”

“Why do you say that!”

“There have been too many routine disappearances and accidents lately. What do you think is happening?”

I felt my heart rush.

“He is reiterating a selection round. Weeding out people who have become obsolete. Only this time, he is playing us against each other.”

Did he know?! Should I confess? “No Abhi, youre reading too much into this.”

“He is Big Brother. And whether we like it or not, sooner or later, we will all love him. And kill for him. I don't want to die with blood on my conscience.”

I was out of appropriate words. My forehead wrinkled between my brows. It was beginning to hurt.

“Don't worry professor. This is my choice. You are not responsible.”

He stood up, facing the horizon beyond the cliff. “In time. You will see the wisdom in this as well.”

He turned his head toward me. I saw my own reflection in his visors. Something tells me he was smiling.

Like a monk at peace with himself.

He took a deep breath and sighed. “Goodbye..... Professor.”

They say that when adrenaline gushes into the bloodstream, time slows down, and our basic instincts take over. Instincts never lie.

His body swung forward, pivoted at his feet. Something in me caused my arms to fly forward, as I dove towards him. The cliff-edge poked into my stomach lining, as I held onto an inert and resigned man in a hazmat suit by his shoulder. The pull drained what little youth was left in me. After forever, I was confident enough to release my grip. Exhausted, I lay spread eagled on my back, staring at the sky. Beads of perspiration condensed all over my face and body. I heard footsteps. Abhi stood towering over me, casting a shadow on my eyes. Looking down, he said, “Congratulations Professor. You passed.”

He unfastened the cables that had magically appeared, linking his belt to the base of the antenna.

“You've just been selected to the next round.” He went for his communicator, “Relaystation 1 now active. We are returning to Shelter. Over.”

“Copy that wanderer #2. Over.”

He walked back to the buggy and started the engine.

I didn't get up until I convinced myself that my dive was reactionary to his comment. That I really meant to save his life. That my sleeve caught his shoulder straps just as I had planned.

We were being played against each other after all.

I loved Big Brother.