



THE BLACKOUT

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I – The Mistakes

The mistakes didn't show up right away. Their endemic nature only became apparent when it was far too late. That's the thing isn't it, about mistakes: they're always presumed to be incidents. And yet when they're not – then what?

Consider it linguistically: a mis-take: implies that one can try again, do a retake, that one can recover from it, like a misstep. It implies that it can be fixed, the mis-take.

How untrue that assumption proved to be, in 2026 A.D.

Before we divulge more salient facts and gory details of the enfolding cataclysm, consider the exponential – or logarithmic effects (I'm a writer, not a mathematician) when mistakes start interacting. Clusterfuck does not begin to describe it.

A clusterfuck is a misconception. It's a military term, and they're used to mopping things up. This implies that the mopping up is of something apparent; in your face, or under your boot so to speak.

This clusterfuck was of the sneaky kind. It crept up on you with a long incubation time, like that of a virus. However unfair this might seem to us humans, let's not forget viruses are not encumbered with any sense of morality.

Alright, so what about the clusterfuck, you ask?

It was the machines.

The machines.

The machines.

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Dora took the train that fatal, cataclysmic, cold winter morning because she had the most prosaic hangover. Her breakfast consisted of two paracetamol tablets and a slugged-down quarter-litre of milk that was more or less off, depending on how much notice you'd take of the clamouring of your tastebuds.

Why milk, you ask? Well, she was Dutch, and it was her patriotic duty to save the world from the "milk lake" that would inundate the world, and destroy the economy, or whatever, at least, that was the drill in the eighties. She also just liked the taste. And she placebo'ed her stomach into thinking that the clockwise oscillations of the stuff that came out of a semi-tortured or at the least, gaslighted cow, would counteract the high-strung counterclockwise machinations of her upset gastric system.

Normally she would have taken a ride with her colleague Erwin, who had a Burmese EV that was actually charged every morning. She couldn't remember

to charge her toothbrush; and more often than not, her fridge was out of juice too. Hence the penchant for items that were on the winding road to fermentation – that, or starvation. Well, let's not exaggerate, malnutrition at worst.

"Thank God for PCM," she thought shivering on platform 3, which could more aptly have been named "Blasted Wind-tunnel" with the icy easterly Siberian wind frosting her eyebrows. Huddling between the other commuters like Emperor penguins, she tried aligning to the placement of the 2nd class carriage, aiming to scoot in and leg it through to the 3rd class compartment ahead of the other penguins, the lemmings.

Scuttling more like the roach from Kafka than a noble denizen of the Antarctic, she elbowed her not so ladylike way into the musty and dimly lit corridor: delving right down into its stuffy maw. The puddles on the tired lino in the hallway of the SubT carried the oily reflections of the sallow faces of the commuters; none of whom had important or mysterious work to look forward to. A slog, something to avoid getting a Neg Point for, some warm gruel for midday, grog with it if you were in the higher echelons or someone's relative, or in their Fief, but that was about the max of it.

Dora clenched her visapass in her pocket, picking at the fraying edges. It just had to last until X-Day, it just had to. To replace it before its expiry date would cost her 49 neuro at least: a week's wages. She was already paying her debt of rent with the loan from Erwin. The windfall from the sale of her aunt's illegal books on 20th century German Art and Agyptian archeology had gone to pay the interest on her outstanding juice bill. Lucky her aunt Elsie had a little cornucopia of PCM, diclophenac and some crumbling benzos in her inheritance, bless her good old hoarder soul. So those greased the palms of Philip, her odious roster-chef, towards pipping up the list for extra shifts in her lauded workplace, the dept. of Audits, Double and Crosschecks & Files in the Ministry of Taxes & Records.

The SubT slowed as it clawed its way out of the tunnel under the canal, the aging wiring causing the lighting to flicker. Dora sighed, stuffed her hands deeper into the pockets of her tired grey parka, pushed back into her seat, and muttered, "Geez, put an end to it all, would ya?"

Just as the pallid daylight feebly fingered the grimy safety glass, the decades of cumulative machinery mis-takes, the centennial clusterfuck, culminated into a colossal implosion somewhere unseen in the industrial sector of the Westelijk Havengebied. The lights flared then collapsed, the train shot forward in a final paroxysm, then flew off its rusty undercarriage and plunged off the embankment into the watery ditch just after the Vinkebrug in the no-mans land of Spaarnwouderveen.

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When she came to, it was to screaming agony in her head, blurred vision and a 100 dB high-pitched whine in her ears. Her limbs were tangled in those of other passengers. She could hear moaning, some cries, distorted and far off, as if she was in a fishbowl.

She knew then she had to get out, get out, get the heck out of that cadaver of a train. Pulling herself up out of the soft and warm bodies, covered in a shimmering lake of shards of glass, the leaking battery fuel dripping down wildly, and fizzling wiring dangling dangerously, she pushed into someone's sickly soft stomach, who groaned and then nothing. Extricating her legs, sore and scraped and her canvas pants torn, but her boots thankfully both still on, though covered in red grimy entrails, she retched but clawed her way upwards to the rent in the chassis, to the ashen wintery light.

II – To The Copse

The air outside was cold and remarkably still – if you'd ignore the mediaeval loss of life in the crumpled remains of the train mangled like an accordion on the rutted embankment.

Dora stood bent over, clasping her knees and gasping rasping breaths that burned her lungs with the cold. The wretchedness of the accident and the warm blood on her boots overturned the contents of her already stressed stomach, and a small puddle of yellowish bile lay steaming in the grass. "Yellow, 'cause of the PCM," she thought uselessly.

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The Anthropocene dept. Of the Ministry of Cultural & Natural Affairs had not skimped in it's self-congratulation on the effectivity of the Cooling Programme: thusly formed in order to counteract the more negative aspects of the Anthropocene age such as wild-fires on the western Seaboard, mass extinctions in Southern Aztecia and the cataclysmic flooding of most of the coastal zones of Eurasia wiping out several million Bengali, Myanmari, Thai, Hindi and Tamil. However in all their patting of backs, the dept. had quite overlooked that the populations of Canadian geese had long been decimated by said blistering wildfires, so no down-insulated parkas for Dora or other shivery Europeans.

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So that's why she was so darn freezing, though the cold served to calm her neurotic heart beating a fool rhythm in her throat. She looked around expectantly – no, more than expectantly – like the certainty of extra credits for Xmas or roses blooming digitally. Looking or listening for a sign of life; of a fellow commuter; a co-worker; a human noise; or yet a simple "Hello." Or even just a cry for help. But no, none of that, just a chiffchaff bleating in a copse on the other side of the neon green field.

The lead-coloured clouds were perched low like dark predators and met the fog rising from the peat. Dora knew it wasn't peat, just sludgy clay, but it was an age-old saying and being traditionalist, that alone gave her comfort.

Nary a human sound was to be heard. Although now a slight hissing growing in amplitude, emanated from the crumpled remains of the SubT. Also steam. Steam that quickly blackened into oily smoke, which burst into flames in a space of thirty seconds. "Like the quiz game," she thought irrelevantly.

From the recesses of her mind, original, human, unpredictable, fragile, weak and emotionally unstable she fumbled for the visapass in her parka pocket and flung the battered emblem of servitude into the gaping maw; now belching happy flames about shoulder-height quite unabashedly.

She would always say that that moment was not a moment of temporary insanity, quite the opposite: a coming to.

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Dora turned from the accordionated crematorium and ran towards the copse about a hundred metres on the northern side of the field covered in long wintery sedge grasses. "Why a chiffchaff, they've such a dumb-ass call," she thought, although she for once didn't admonish herself, but felt gleefully disobedient, slogging through the half-frozen nitrogenous grassy bog, icy water seeping though her boots, clearing her head from the aches. "The copse should be on higher ground, and drier," she wheezed. What was she thinking?

III – The Cove

The machines.

Dora had never been a Luddite; quite the contrary. She embraced AI, vlogging 10–20 hours a week (a clunky satire on Tamagochis) the second it became free of charge (never mind the incessant product placement) but something was off. Round about 2026, the happy chappy chirpiness exuded by all those who contacted it, whether their bank accounts were glutted with too many zeroes or just poor punters, the witless adoption bothered her like an itchy rash.

Sure it was mind-bogglingly fast, sure it was convenient, of course the wife bots were a hit with the incels and good riddance to them all, sure it cut through the bloated vapidity the internet had become. Yet...

The hallucinations the AI bots regurgitated were certainly real (pun intended), largely due to the fact that the robots had no inkling, no vestige of reality, no proprioception, no feedback loop into reality. The human could think it could handle a hot pan, yet the pain felt would indicate that he was wrong and had to adjust its assumptions. The automaton would have to glean that feedback from wallows of junk on the internet; fact indistinguishable from myth or Marvel.

Of course, the AI-missionaries would account for every vagary or glitch with an addition to the convoluted rule books and principles to govern the automatons. After seventy-odd years these were entirely indistinguishable from the nimble three rules of Asimov.

Fresh out of her literature M.A. she was assigned a semi-permanent work order in the dept. Of A, D, C & F for her (feigned) assiduousness, where the irony of the kinship the bulking AI rule-books had with the Byzantine law and bylaw-books of the dept: inscrutable and obfuscating, found a receptive customer in her.

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The copse was slightly elevated due to its whilom purpose as an iron-age fortification. Built on the upturned hulls of expended riverine craft, flotsam and jetsam, animal bones and discarded shards of pottery, it was essentially a raft, or, for the optimistic, a house on poles. Yet sheltering an information-age trove.

When Dora was about done in with plodding through the sludge she stubbed her toe on one of these bones – and set off the silent alarm. The copse was overgrown with brambles, hawthorns, and stunted willows. A small opening looked like a path to something dry to her, and she crouched down and crawled in. Then strong hard hands pulled her down, and she tumbled down slippery plastic into a dimly lit cove. Of sorts.

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"Who the hell are you and how did you survive THAT," barked a gruff but young voice attached to a skinny young man with a scraggy beard and blonde wispy hair covering what looked like bright blue eyes. On saying "that," he waved his gangly arm in a broad arc like a crooked windmill. After sliding down, Dora was sat on her butt in a plastic dome that was rather a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell.

"Look dude, I just got here, and got lucky, so give me a break!" She snapped, "and for that matter, what the heck are YOU doing here?!"

Only then she noticed the trio of people crouching a few meters back in the gloom of what looked like a corridor. Scared these might be partisaners or rebels or incels, or the unvaccinated, the unpassed, and most likely hungry and violent, she made an appeasing gesture with her hands.

"Look, it was a mess, I don't know what happened. I knocked my head. But the lights went wild in the SubT and then we got like a power surge and then the whole thing shot out of the Halfwegtunnel and derailed and everyone was dead or dying except me," she explained hurriedly.

"So I know as much as you do, okay. Oh yeah, my visapass I tossed into the fire, so I'm nobody now. By the way, my name's Dora, and you...?" she extended her right hand. The dude looked relieved, smiled a skewed smile and extended his right hand and said,

"My name is Tako, welcome to the Houtrakkers, this partisaner Houtrakkers Hole, Dora."

IV – The Houtrakkers

The Houtrakkers were in fact partisans. As well as anti-clerical, anti-establishment anti- ...well, anti-everything really. And luckily for them, and lucky for Dora, also anti-AI and antisocial. These beliefs, in combination with a healthy dose of paranoia had them vest their privacy and humanity in their own hands, well before preppers started to cache their biometrics; namely rather too late.

The core of the group was led by Tako; named such not after the maize-snack from Mexico, but after the Japanese word for octopus: because he had a long reach, in the Inter-web, on the Dark Web, the crypto singularity, and way beyond.

The group consisted of about 5 – 10 members at any given time. They only had ten names to give out: the Dutch terms for the numbers one to ten. When someone left, to start another Houtrakkers group somewhere, they would vacate their name and choose another Japanese fish or mollusc as a name. Why? Because of the Douglas Adams' book 'So Long, and Thanks For All the Fish,' of course.

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"Come, let me show you our place," Tako said. The trio denizens scattered away into a dark passageway. "Never mind them, introductions will come later," he crouched into the passageway and a dim light flicked on.

"We're re-using the derelict fortifications from the Napoleonic and 20th century. They weren't considered viable defences in this day and age of cyber warfare – all the more useful for our purposes. These tunnels connect to the Liebrug Fort which is only a stone's throw away on the other side of the A4 underpass. Not that anyone comes there anymore." He ran his hand over the mossy glistening brickwork.

"We use the dampest chambers to grow mushrooms, we make all sorts of stuff from them, clothes, food, isolation material, bedding..." He took a righthand corner. "Some parts are always wet, those we cover in seaweed mats, to dry them out, like where you tumbled down."

Dora was adamant to keep her keen sense of direction in the dark underground, but her head was still befuddled from the crash so she gave up pronto. "Great brickwork though," she said, "But how did you know I was coming? And how come the emergency services weren't all over the crash site in a flash?"

"Ah yes, good question, but one thing at a time. We do have an elaborate silent alarm system strung up around the perimeter of our den. I'll show you the Control Room first," and he slung his lanky frame around another corner.

"We also registered the crash on our seismograph. Not that impressive, in this bog." He stopped in his tracks and swung around to face Dora and looked at her piercingly. "Although we must still establish whether we can fully trust you. Can we?"

Dora expelled a breath she didn't realise she was holding, "Yes, yes of course," she blurted, surprised by her sudden need to want to be trusted by this rakish blond pirate and his fuzzy mateys.

"Hmm, well, we'll see soon enough," he lisped, "Anyway, here's the Control Room, or Bridge, if you'd consider this a spaceship," and a thin metal door slid open which made a swooshing sound.

"It sounds just like the doors in Star Trek Enterprise!" exclaimed Dora, much impressed. This was only the beginning of a squall of impressive sights and sounds for Dora, who stood in awe at an impressive array of consoles flickering blue and green lights like an aurora borealis. Above the consoles, which were fronted by three large pilot seats, were 8 huge synced screens which depicted a 360 degree of the surroundings of the Houtrakkers environs; fat XOLED 4320p hyper-gamma views, so sharp that she could almost see her sludgy tracks through the sedge leading from the crippled carriages on the embankment.

"Drie, zoom in on the wreckage," Tako said, no, commanded Tako, though in his customary soft, lilting voice. Only then Dora noticed there was a hunched figure sitting in one of the podlike pilot seats. She couldn't really see him or his face because they stood more or less directly behind the pilot seats. She recalled the naming convention for the dwellers. "Drie" meant "three". She wondered if he was the original Three. Drie grasped a joystick and one of the screens blinked once and then showed the mangled train, still smouldering.

"Look, a govt. drone," said Tako and Drie in unison. Drie zoomed in on the dark insect hovering a few meters in the air over ground zero. It looked bewildered in its movement.

"Total anthropomorphic appropriation," thought Dora, "It's only the drone's pilot that is freaked out and his/her movements are showing in the drone's behaviour."

"You're right about that Dora, and interestingly it's not a standard sweep drone, but has been deliberately sent to the site," replied Tako. Dora was befuddled, she wasn't aware that she had spoken out loud. Tako's voice started taking on an echoey and lurching quality. The dimensions of the Control Room started to ebb and flow. The Control Room started spinning very gently round her head. Or at least it would be if she could see it which she couldn't. Dora felt her eyes roll back into her sockets and everything went pitch black.

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Dora's concussion had finally got the better of her. She smelt something being waved underneath her nose. It was Tako, offering her some peanuts.

"Eat these," he urged, "it will replace some of the protein lost in the matter transference beam." Not quite sure she had understood him, she nodded. Weakly she groped for them and started chewing the salty nuts wearily.

"Yep, you've a concussion alright. You've been out about a day. You should feel better shortly." He handed her a plastic beaker containing what looked like beer.

"Have some mushroom pale ale. It will cushion the shock coming back to your body." Too tired to argue, she took some sips. It was rather good actually, nutty and malty.

"Now about our security, and how we knew, and why it happened here. We've obfuscated this perimeter thoroughly," explained Tako. "Hemmed it off with GSM blockers. Building on old GSM dead zones between Schoten and Spaarnwouderveen. We have props of normal objects or entities like rabbits and fishing herons – but they are just props. You'll find quite a lifelike farmer scarecrow behind the row of willows perched on his tractor – a dummy on rails. We have drones disguised as chiffchaffs. We have green screens which portray nothing going on whilst we work behind them. And we have green suits – "

Dora interrupted Tako, "So you're really the little green men!" she exulted. Tako laughed.

"Yes, in fact we are, But we need an emissary to move between our world and the outside one and we just can't get a visapass because we don't exist. So you have to go and get your replacement."

"Okay... but won't they think I'm dead?" questioned Dora.

"They might, but we're not sure," Tako pondered, playing cleverly with a guitar pick flipping it across his knuckles. "The thing is, we made sure you made it out. You had an 84% fit on the profile of becoming a proper emissary. I know I said I was surprised at you when you first came down here, but that was a bit of a fib, to see if you were bona fide."

Dora puffed with pride, but felt instantly let down, and said indignantly, "What d'you mean, only a 84% fit? What 16% doesn't fit, 'ey? What am I lacking? Not up to proper Houtrakkers' standards? And you lied to me as well?!"

"The fit? Well that's largely a matter of definitions and calibrating our weighing system,"

Dora scoffed at this woolly talk. Tako resumed, and becoming more precise, said, "What the percentage means is that there's 16% that is simply unknowable about you. And that's rather curious. I consider that in itself to be a good thing, so on the basis of that alone, I would give you a 100% fit."

Dora's concussed mind reeled at the possibilities. She didn't understand a darn thing and it was bloody exasperating. She sat bolt upright, and blurted, "I'm through with this mumbo-jumbo guru stuff, sitting in this mouldy old goblin cave with nothing to sit down on or to eat, except for these damn old peanuts. I'm outta here, you can stick that emissary stuff where the sun don't shine!"

Then she faltered. She had no way of getting a new visapass without some funds... and how could she get out of here without help? She couldn't ask Erwin, or connect with him, or... because, well..., what? And of her work? Philip her evil boss from hell, might have already tendered her exit permit for undisclosed absenteeism...

Tako looked at her with his wise and twinkling blue eyes, but seemed saddened she didn't yet feel she belonged enough.

"Look, I get it," he said. "We've prepared a temp bias pass with about 350 neuros on it. That should cover the lapse in your rent and get you a new pass.

"We've also let your work know you've had a slip down the stairs and bumped your head." Well at least that bit wasn't a stone-cold lie and she gingerly felt the scabby matted hair and bump on the back of her head.

"Well Dora, it's like in The Matrix, though in this case, you've already taken the red pill. It's like Alice, but you've already gone through the looking glass. Yet you are fighting that decision with your rational capacities, whilst your limbic system has already figured it out – you're already a Houtrakker."

"Well okay then," she said, slumping her shoulders and releasing the tension. Glad of the generous 350 neuros, impressed by their hacking skills, and accepting this new and uneasy membership.

"Then give me a green suit and some instructions."

Chapter V – The Party/The Hangover

The Damiate clocks struck 21:30, curfew time, and the scent of chicory coffee wafted through the dark room that was Dora Olivetti's chambers in Schoten, municipality in the Hollands. She sat hunched over a few white cards on a table, a pale LED candle flickering reflections in the two coffee mugs on the table. On the other side of the coffee table, sat a cross-legged figure, languishing and blowing smoke rings. Slender and red-haired, all legs, she gazed at the cards on the table, bored.

"What does it mean, Dora? Those dratted Tarot cards?"

"Let's see, the High Priestess... and the Tower, reversed... Not good I think..."

"Oh it's all rot, isn't it? Magic doesn't exist," and Molly puffed another smoke ring.

Dora stretched her back and said, "Sure, Molly, and that joint will also cease to exist for me, so don't Bogart that joint," and she held out her outstretched hand, her index and middle finger apart so Molly could slide the delectable unit between them.

"Ahh, that's better," as Dora took a deep draught, "Look, we'll get into the right Tarot frequency puffing this thing. It's def from her travels in Morocco, my aunt, no doubt about it you see. I read her journal from her travels in the 1980s. *Du vrai skif*, it said." She downed the dregs of chicory coffee and grimaced at the bitter taste. "Too bad I ran out of saccharine last week, sorry about that," and she looked apologetically at Molly.

"Yeah well," said Molly, "All the more time to break out that Avezé booze, it's a far out party waiting to happen and I think we ought to get properly imbibed before the others arrive, since I know all about their insatiable appetites for anything fermented."

Dora reached into the drinks cabinet on the left hand side of the comfy chair she was embedded in, conveniently placed within arms length, and stretched out to pull two thrift store shot glasses which – peering at the glasses in the light of the LED candle – were actually not dirty enough to not warrant consumption out of. Another reach of an arm procured a dusty bottle with a yellowing label, curling at the edges. "Yes, the bottle was under the kitchen sink, between the chlorine and the cleaning vinegar, classic."

"Good job your French studies finally amounted to something useful, knowing what Avezé is," said Molly admiringly, whilst Dora uncorked the bottle with her teeth and sloppily poured the amber liquor into the shot glasses. "Here ya go, bottoms up, or *santé, à la tienne*, as I should say!"

They both grimaced at the bitter gentian taste, but smiled bravely at the windfall the demise of Dora's aunt had proffered. The doorbell chimed, just as the last of the Damiate curfew bells ebbed away.

"Trust Erwin and them to be just in time," Dora said as she clambered out of the creaky wooden fauteuil, mangy with years of cat attention.

Dora peered through the video camera to see if it were indeed Erwin and co. She said, "When's Bloomsday? Also the year!" although asking this pre-arranged password was really just a formality, since she could see Erwin's eye goggling the camera and his two cronies as well.

It had started off as a joke, these passwords, but since there were drones hanging in front of windows, and unscheduled follow-up visits by all too nosy electricians, meterboys, milkmaids and what have you, one needed to flummox the bots. Since time, temporality and the depth of meaning of poetry was not yet ingrained into the singularity, dates and obscure literary or poetic quotes were a staple. This time it was James Joyce providing the inspiration.

"Of course, my dear, that's 16th June 1904. A Thursday," he said. "Who's that with you then, 'Leopold'?" she asked, although he was fairly certain it was Gaelle, the sax player, and Puck, who worked in the hardware store selling bathrooms. They'd met playing the AR-game underground ripped-off version of Pokémon, namely, where you had to evolve insects and viruses.

"All right, come on in, but I hope you know it's BYOB."

"No worries," said Erwin through the tinny microphone, and a cardboard box containing a bottle or something was held up to the camera. Dora unlocked the door, slid back the bolt and undid the latch. All strictly analog. Hacked front door locks were not popular with the authorities, and any mention was greeted with gritted teeth, and polished off and retrowiped by an army of top notch bots scouring the socials.

They tumbled in, and Dora said, "Next time expect a password from The Hobbit," and they hung their damp cold jackets on the wooden pegs passing as a garderobe. Stomping their feet, their glasses condensed with the ample warmth supplied by the bio-methane installation in the buildings.

Dora waved to the kitchen, "Glasses and booze in there for equitable redistribution." The party progressed as a tropical storm might, from one gentle breeze to a firm blustery buffeting wind, with music louder and arms and legs gyrating, and kisses on blushing cheeks, to more whirlwind, palm-tree bending hurricanes, when arms and legs intertwined and glistening tips kissed were pressed on smooth lips and sweaty embraces in small cramped nooks and crannies of couches and loveseats.

Due to the curfew, everyone had to spend the night regardless. Or not go to sleep at all, and clamber into a duff parka at 6 A.M., stealing a liquorice root from the pot to lamely conceal the sickly sweat-cannoning hangover breath that could curdle milk and make babies cry.

"Catch you later, Dora, awesome party," whispered Erwin in Dora's ear, who mumbled something vaguely affirmative and snuggled closer into Molly's arms.

Molly, although quite the party animal, and more into experimental knowledge than the stuff from books, woke up when Erwin and co dragged

their shabby selves out of the apartment.

"Yo Dora, you gotta get up, you don't want another Neg Point at work..." she smoothed a blonde curl from Dora's cheek, and gently shook her.

"Okay, I'm going to make some chicory coffee..." and she extricated her gangly body from the couch and Dora's embrace.

Chapter VI – The Green Suit

Tako held up the green suit like a used latex glove.

“Don’t worry, it just looks small. You can easily wear it over your parka,” he said reassuringly.

“Glad I’m not a fashionista,” thought Dora. Bending down still sent waves of nausea through her and thudding bolts of pain through her head. They obviously didn’t have a hoarder aunt with aches and pains like she did, and mushrooms though useful, hadn’t been GM’ed enough to produce PCM either, she thought as she pulled the stretchy green fabric over her boots and her torn canvas pants.

“I rather look like Shrek now!” she said as she pulled the suit over her parka and the hood over her head.

Tako looked at her with mock disparagement, “Looks like you’re still in some pain from your concussion. Have some more of the mushroom ale,” and filled up her beaker. “Let’s get serious. You know where the Vinkebrug is right, just near the underpass? There’s a bicycle in the hedgerow on the south side. From there you can cycle due west to Schoten. Remember to take off your green suit before you get on the bike, otherwise you’ll look darn strange and attract undo attention. Here’s the bike keys. We’ll project some basic woodland field stuff behind you as you leave.”

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Dora exited the Houtrakkers’ den on the north side, the far side, away from the trainwreck that she’d rather not see, clambering out through the twisted willow branches and the fake bramble door. There were some serious camouflage experts out there in the group, she thought. Worrying that she might rip the shiny synthetic suit, despite Tako’s assurances, she crawled out on hands and knees, waiting for the signal, a triple chiffchaff call.

Rather clumsily she got to her feet. The hood of the green suit also completely covered her head with gauze for the eyes and a slit of the mouth.

She heard the chiffchaff call thrice, and saw the drone flap ungainly to the west, indicating the direction she needed to follow.

The sky was dove grey and the wind blew chill in from the Polar north. Would it swing a bit more to the west, then snow was to be expected.

She looked furtively to the south, towards the embankment. The wreckage and human remains had gone. The power lines were again twinkling in the wind, all repaired and stretched taut. She felt the slight tug of wind indicating a SubT – was it the 16:19 to Rijnsoever? – approaching through the tunnel. She ducked, still unsure about the adequacy of her camouflage. The train whizzed by unconcerned.

She swallowed hard, glad the wreckage and the human tragedy had been obliterated. A bit of concern remained. How had they cleaned it up? Had they taken proper care of the deceased? She changed her gaze to behind her, and she saw the green screen barely discernible; she was part of the landscape now. On a rails in front of her, hidden near the ditch, a projector hummed the pastoral scene.

"Almost like hide and seek," she guffawed to herself, "but let's prepare for quite a slog."

The Vinkebrug was about a kilometer to the west, and the sedge had frozen solid and hampered her progress; slipping and sliding across the lumpy sods, afraid to fall and rip the suit. A fair bit of muffled cursing went on. Once she got to the edge of the field, there was a vague path, probably made by grazers, and the going was easier, which was all the more relief, since the pain-dampening mushroom ale was definitely leaving her system. The projector accompanied her on her righthand side and the green screen on her left, to the east.

She mulled over the possible B.S. scenarios the government could have come up with to explain a missing train and a couple of thousand of innocent civilians, but didn't get far. Undoubtedly she and her colleagues would have to be tasked with rewriting a fair bit of what happened. Leaving out the ugly bits, no doubt about that.

After she got to the underpass, she decided to hide for a few minutes in a ditch by the Vinkebrug to make sure no one was approaching. "Rather unlikely," she thought, "since this is enough to freeze one's metaphorical balls off." Once the coast seemed clear, she stripped off the green suit, shivering since it was unexpectedly insulating, and stuffed it into a coat pocket. The projector and the green screen trundled back to the Houtrakkers' den. She scabbled onto the Vinkebrug, looked furtively right and left and headed for the hedgerow.

Losing her footing on the gravel she slid down on her bum thinking, That's going to be a nice bruise," and she spotted a glimpse of chrome behind the hedge. She pulled the bike keys from her parka pocket and put them in the lock. Only a dry click and nothing else.

"Unbelievable, the wrong key!" She exclaimed exasperatedly. She was hardly keen on walking the 8 clicks to Schoten, the dangers of frostbite and hypothermia were quite real in this temperature. Desperately she twiddled the key in the lock, hoping it might just be frozen stiff. The cowardly winter sun had already gone down, it was getting dusk and colder soon.

She noticed lights glinting on the chrome of the bicycle. She whirled around – a car! Thank god, help. Though what an excuse had she for being out here? A lost sheep herder? A ditch dredger? A sedge clipper?

~ * ~

Was it at all unreasonable to assume that the game was up, the die cast?

As the car approached slowly over the rutted old country road of the Batterijweg from the east, she could make out that it was a Nissan, silver. Its xenon headlights were on, so the license plate wasn't legible to her.

It trundled to a halt next to her. She took a deep breath and straightened her parka. She set her features into the expression of quiet optimism which it was advisable to wear when facing impending doom.

The sun was setting and it was getting noticeably colder. The driver slid down the window, and popped his head out. "Hey, can I help?" he said, and then incredulously, "Dora? What the heck?"

Dora peered at his face and stepped closer to not be blinded by the Nissan's headlights. "Erwin, is that you? No way!"

"Get in, get in, and tell me how on earth you ended up here!" and he reached over to open the passenger seat door. Rubbing her cold hands in her mitts, she got in the cosy little Nissan, the heater humming. "You wouldn't believe it," she said. "But I'll explain everything! For now just drive me back home to Schoten because I'm frozen stiff and I had an accident – rather, I escaped death – I was in the train wreck, and somehow I survived. But what the heck are you doing here?"

"Well, there was unusually thick traffic on the A9, and I had had a really productive day in the Archives, so on a whim, I took off via the Theemsweg and snuck into the Breterweg into Spieringhoorn – yeah it's really a cycle path but this Nissan can pass for a disability car, har har," he put the Nissan into autopilot, set for home. "Kind of strange, but I saw a chiffchaff, totally out of season. I guess it's all confused because of the Chill, and the geomagnetic aberrations due to the Gulf Stream diminishing these last decades. I then saw the traffic wasn't at all bad, I don't really know what got into me to take this abandoned track... the Wethouder-van-something road, it follows the old dykes to the sluices. Then, you need to open the gates, and you're on the old Spaarwouderdijk. Used to play there as a kid, my grandfather showed me where to pluck the best blackberries. A pail full in summer. Anyway, then you end up near Zijkanaal Oost and you cross more canals and scoot over the Houtrakkersweg and it's easy sailing to the Vinkebrug. But I'll stop my incessant chatter, what is up with you?"

"Well, the train crash... I was in it... and I escaped. And got rescued, by some partisans..." Dora glanced over to Erwin, to check whether he thought she was totally bonkers or off her rocker. He looked at her calmly, waiting for the rest of her story. As a sci-fi buff, he was used to suspending his disbelief.

Dora narrated the story, skipping over the coven in the copse, because it probably wasn't wise to be totally trusting. Even good old Erwin, who as someone in the ASS spectrum, couldn't lie or understand deception.

They were passing the Liebrug fort. "So Erwin, any thoughts on why you were not stopped by any patrols? Or why I wasn't followed?"

"I think that we found a glitch in the Matrix. There is one weakness in the Machines, at least an obvious one, and that is that they require electricity to function. The second is that they depend on humans to be predictable. Now our governments have – and the capitalist billionaire cronies, the plutocracy – or kleptocracy if you will – have reduced our language to that of economics only. Also economics is now elevated to a science – therefore beyond scrutiny or reproach. Yet it is neither – it is a political system. Does material value not dictate our every breath? It's just such a bummer Marxism is reduced to the drivel of tottering fools; of dictators also. One of the great scams of the 20th century, framing communism or socialism as the devil incarnate. There simply isn't any other political system that actively defies capitalism or economic wealth as an immoral value system and degrades people to nothing more than Duracell batteries.

The cognitia that is so lauded is just a freakish exception, designed to pull the wool over our eyes. It started with the concept that the one great good we had, was not our soul, but our attention. Because everything comes from, emanates from, attention, is it not? Intelligence, labour, knowledge, leisure, thought..."

"Jeez, Erwin, are you high!" joked Dora, still warming her hands on the heater.

They passed the bridge over the Spaarne and Erwin took over the wheel from the autopilot to navigate the 20th century ghettos that was Schoten. A thick fog was oozing in the tight turns of the old Afrikaner slums from the Spaarne. The Nissan's headlights made out a scavenging dog, wet leaves, old cardboard boxes discarded. "So much for all the wealth," muttered Erwin, "George Orwell would turn in his grave."

"You can drop me off at the next corner, I need to get some jollof," said Dora, putting on her mittens. Erwin nodded and reduced pressure on the electromotor pedal.

"Oh Dora," he said, once the car came to a standstill, "I was invited to your funeral – it's tomorrow, will you also come?"

"Well since I'm dead, I don't have anything better to do," she joked, her hand on the latch to open the car door. "You can't be serious though? What does that mean and how on earth am I to get my stuff back?"

"Actually, there might be a loophole," mused Erwin, "an administrative one, obviously," and Dora got out of the car, riled up at his mumbo-jumbo. Yet at work he knew the entire Lawbook of Taxation, Life & Death & Everything In Between like no other, so she was inclined to follow his train of thought, yet not now.

"I'm too hungry for this, Erwin, let's see each other on the LoRa when you've thought it through and I've had something to eat," and she exited the car and closed the door with an exasperated slam the Nissan didn't appreciate.

Chapter VII – Baako

After the cold hike sustained only by paltry peanuts and a questionable mushroom ale, Dora was ravenous. She dove into the Kloosterstraat, past number 4 which had recently been evicted because of an illegal tobacco plantation in the cellar (it was those immigrant Americans of course), and dog and cat poo and rubbish littered the street. Number 8 was called “Number Ate” and was her favourite Ghanaian eatery.

“One jollof döner, please, and an amasi,” which was a nutritious fermented milk beverage, “and how are you doing, Baako?”

“Everything's airy, girl,” replied Baako, and presented his fist for a box. He turned to make her order and she walked to the fridge to get her carton of amasi. She noticed a small poster, the size of one of those antiquated postcards, stuck to a corner of the fridge door. It was black-and-white, seemingly hand-made or stencilled, and read:

*** WELCOME TO THE MACHINE ***
*** ALL HOUTRACKERS CALLING ***
*** MINITEL 3615-2BR0N2B ***

Dora's previously chill demeanour vanished in thin air and the warm reggae sounds faded to a distant whirl. All she could hear was the beating of her heart in her head. She looked around and ripped off the card. She pulled open the fridge after struggling with the door. Was it a slider, or pull? She put the card in her parka pocket and said to Baako, as she swiped her visapass across the bleeper, “Yo, you see them people hang up cards and posters near your fridge?”

Back's zen exterior remained unflappable, but she saw his eyes narrow into highly focused little slits. “...Meaning?” he said.

“Well, I was wondering if it was some kind of music group...” her eyes wavered as she slid the notice-card over on the lino counter, paled and shiny with age and use. Baako glanced at the card while he packed her food into a seaweed bag as she sipped her Amasi from the carton.

“Well, Dora girl, only because I've known you since we studied English together and went to Bashoe after, so I can tell you that they are indeed a ‘band’, and that yes they're giving a wee little concert tomorrow night, right 'ere upstairs.” Baako put the packaged jollof on the counter. “Just wonderin', how'd you know of them?”

“Well, just because, they kinda sounded familiar, is all...” Dora had no idea how to deal with all this spy lingo. Should you just come out and say it? How did Baako know about them? Was it a coincidence? Should she press him for more info?

"So thanks for the info eh, maybe see you tomorrow night then," Dora said, took the hot package and turned to exit the eatery.

"Sure thing," Baako said, "and don't forget to renew your visapass, it's a temporary one, you don't wanna get any mathata with that."

Appendix – Maps and Illustrations

