The kid was waiting for a train. Alfie paused as the previous one roared without stopping through the station. Deathly silence for a second, then a thought, a naked flash.

He had heard that the Emperor had asked for a new suit of clothes. The fabricators had told him they would use the latest technology. It was all over the networks. They would use a quantum-potential fabric which would appear thicker depending on the intelligence of the perceiver.

Those with mental disorders, perverts, or those unfit for their current life situations would perceive the clothes as thinner, to the point where they would not be perceived at all and the Emperor would appear to be naked. This was of course a reflection of their own mental weakness and vulnerability. Stronger viewers would perceive the clothes as extremely thick, to the point where He would appear to be wearing a bulletproof suit of armour. Most people assumed that this is how the clothes would appear to them. Some said they had already seen the clothes and they were extremely opaque. The fabricators’ company stock was soaring.

The Emperor talked of ‘confidence’ a great deal, the need to always ‘think positive’. Lacking the ability to do this had become progressively more frowned upon, to the point where the crime of ‘negative rebellion’ had entered the statute books. Recently a weather forecaster had been fined and threatened with gaol for predicting a drought. Everyone knew fresh water was plentiful in general; the specific lack of it where they happened to live was a mere irrelevance, not worth mentioning.

Confidence must be maintained at all times, this was how to ‘serve the markets’. Even children understood that the markets must be served above all else. The Emperor Himself had been chosen on the basis of his understanding of the market. He had been the most successful investor before ‘The Correction’ and was now charged with preventing another one by a grateful, and positive, society.

Alfie was not feeling as positive as he would like to be, however. His teachers had sent him to the school doctor, complaining that he showed signs of ‘unwellness’. He had been late for class, over two minutes late on one occasion. He had maintained the appearance of motivation, and undertook his schoolwork with the necessary vigour, but some of them suspected that something was amiss. The doctor had upped his dose of Concentrate, and it had helped for a while, but there continued to be a nagging doubt around him.

The careers teacher was shocked at his initial lack of enthusiasm when it was suggested to him that he might be a good enough student to be considered able to join The Force. Although Alfie had recovered quickly and avowed that, as with any sane citizen, to risk his life for the Emperor would be his deepest wish, there had been a microsecond of visible doubt which the careers teacher found unsettling. He decided he was unable to give the student the customary five stars, and he was not the only one. There were now several instances of four star reviews on Alfie’s profile, and even one three star score, in the vitally important subject of National Morale, no less.

Alfie knew he was by now probably being watched for signs of Dissatisfaction. This was not necessarily a bad thing; perceived Dissatisfaction could even be a fast track to The Force. Why allow aggression to be turned against random targets in yet another banal lone-wolf shooting incident when it could be, if caught early enough, properly directed against genuine Insurgents? But Alfie knew that his recorded network activity would immediately show that he was not heading in that direction.

A failure to react with enthusiasm when suddenly and unexpectedly presented with an image of the Emperor on the networks - the so-called ‘Real Citizen Test’, in which the lack of dilation of the pupils, the slowness of positive response in the skin and heart rate, and the overall failure to show genuine and instant enthusiasm when presented with The Leader, might soon betray him. So far he had managed by training himself to react ecstatically, punching the air and uttering curses about Insurgents whenever the test showed up on his feed, but he was aware that it was becoming more sensitive, more difficult to fool.

Alfie wondered how he could cultivate a more genuine love of the Emperor. He knew that this was the key to everything working out in his life. He had tried affirmations, repeating ‘I love the Emperor’ like a mantra, while gazing at the Leader’s image. It had worked to some extent, at first. His school results had marginally improved, he had started getting up a little earlier in the morning, spending less time playing games and more reading news about the Emperor (there was very little of any other kind of news, in truth). But something was clearly missing.

A few nights ago he had had a disquieting dream. He had been in a garden, a secret walled garden, with Zoë, the girl who lived nearby. Roses climbed up the brick walls of the garden, a fountain splashed water endlessly, the grass was soft and welcoming. Zoë was sitting on a blanket, reading a book. She looked up and caught his eye. Her smile melted his heart. Just then he caught sight of something just below a hedge at the end of the garden. It was a white shape, partially obscured by the plants which made up the hedge.

Alfie felt compelled to investigate. He moved closer and bit by bit the shape became clearer. It was a human body. Suddenly he jolted into the realisation that it was his father, motionless in death and totally naked. He could hear a hissing noise from behind the wall, which gradually got louder. It was a multitude of voices repeating the phrase ‘you are for it now’. He ran to the door of the garden but it had disappeared. Zoë was carrying a human heart in her bloodstained hands, still beating. The voices raised themselves into a scream which seemed to overcome the entire scene. At this moment he woke up.

The screens on the train were showing mockups of the Emperor’s predicted new ‘quantum suit’ as they were calling it. His wife was being interviewed at length, enthusing about the reaction on the networks, as always, overwhelmingly positive. Since the new algorithms had come into force, there was no other possibility, in fact. Some people had been imprisoned for ironic comments, and the presenters explained why this was a serious threat to the national confidence. Some of the commenters’ parents had been discovered to be from outside the Safe Zone and had of course been sent back instantly. There had been some sort of misunderstanding with the Force whereby several had been killed in transit and the regional Chief of the Force briefly expressed regret.

Alfie watched without really taking anything in. He was, overall, glad that he was being protected. National Morale must be uppermost in the minds of all citizens of course. A loss of confidence could have economic consequences. He was not allowed to learn about the intricacies of how the markets worked, but he knew that a certain amount of belief was required for them to function. A loss of faith might have catastrophic effects, as his parents had found out during The Correction.

Alfie’s father, Guillermo, had worked for Zebra, most adults did in those days. He had started off as a content moderator, doctoring films and removing some inappropriate content, passing other content on to the Force if Insurgency, or thoughts which might lead to Insurgency, were suspected. Later on he had become ill, at one stage hallucinating that there were strange chemicals in the tap water. This was not too unusual for moderators, a job where the suicide rate was almost 20% and the working hours were exceedingly long. It was normal for Guillermo to do eighteen hours straight in front of a screen, often witnessing horrifying murders or abuse. He managed to keep going in to work despite this, knowing that if the company’s stock fell beyond a certain amount, those people who had taken days off for illness would be the first to be automatically, and immediately, laid off by the management algorithm.

However when The Correction happened, the stock price fell so low that almost 60% of the work force was laid off in one fell stroke. Ironically Guillermo had spent most of the past month removing from the Z network all traces of warnings about the possible fall in the markets. It had been deemed necessary to preserve confidence; however the fall still came.

Guillermo was immediately out of a job, and at the end of the month, he and his family were made homeless as they were unable to pay the following month’s rent into the house account. The doors were automatically locked with all their possessions inside. Many of their electronic devices automatically revoked their licences for use once the non-payment was discovered and would have had to be thrown away anyway.

The family managed to stay in hiding with Guillermo’s brother, risking being in an unregistered state briefly, while he searched for cheaper accommodation, but with so many families in the same situation it proved impossible. Being homeless was of course a serious crime in the Safe Zone, so there seemed to be nothing for it but to look for housing outside the Zone.

Alfie had never been outside the Zone in his life. All he had heard was that it was full of Insurgents, murderers, rapists, and the like. The thought of leaving his school and all his friends and moving out into this dangerous wilderness was horrifying.

However the family’s luck took a turn for the better - one of the Emperor’s courtiers saw Alfie’s mother Fiona in the street one day and recognised her from the networks. She used to have her own show on ZTV where she would visit the homes of powerful men and they would show her - and the cameras - around their fabulous homes - cool clean air, unlimited water, all manner of luxury.

This man got talking to Fiona and revealed that he had always found her attractive from afar - maybe there was a way to save her family from having to move outside the Zone after all. All she had to do was call ’round to his house once a week while his wife was out at the hairdresser’s. Fiona naturally jumped at the chance to save her family. She remained fiercely positive about the task in hand and never let it get her down. New accommodation was swiftly found for them, and Guillermo even got re-hired by Zebra once their stock recovered somewhat from The Correction. He had to start again at the bottom, mostly moderating sickening child abuse videos, but he was grateful that his family had not fallen through the cracks like so many others. They remained in the Safe Zone and that was all that mattered, at the end of the day.

On Saturday Alfie awoke with a strange feeling. He had the sensation that something important was going to happen, that he had somehow been chosen to do something significant. He had dreamed of standing up in front of a crowd and holding up a sign. He was unable to see what the sign said, however, all he could see was the faces of the people who were looking at it - they were horrified at first, but shortly they relaxed into laughter, and then started cheering. They carried him on their shoulders as a hero. All around, tall office buildings crumbled and forests grew up in seconds to take their place, flowers bloomed, and fresh water flowed all over the land.

He turned on the screen, hoping to distract himself from the unusual feeling. The Emperor was going to make His first public appearance in the quantum clothes that afternoon. Several of those suspected of planning Insurgency had been detained in preparation for the appearance, and the Ministers responsible assured everyone that things would go smoothly as a result.

A long way away in another land, the Empire’s bombs fell on suspected Insurgents in the desert outside the SZ, making sure market confidence remained strong, and clearing the way for Freedom to reign.

There were many conspiracy theories on the dark networks, those which SZ dwellers were not supposed to see, but which a few in fact did, at great risk to themselves, thus giving rise to odd rumours and whispers - a small selection being: that the story of the quantum clothes was a hoax, that the Emperor would be naked, that quantum theory itself was a hoax, that the Emperor would be fully clothed but a projection of nakedness would be used to trick people that he was not wearing anything, even that the Emperor Himself was a projection and didn’t really exist.

Alfie had decided not to go to the parade that afternoon, he would watch it on the networks. He settled down to do his homework. It was boring, for sure, but he was determined he was not going to be a failure. He was going to toughen himself up, work hard, and eventually, he hoped, be accepted into the Force. His parents would be so proud that he was defending the Empire. The Insurgency never seemed to end, they just couldn’t stamp it out, no matter how hard they tried. Why wouldn’t the Insurgents just admit defeat? Wasn’t it better to work together than try to spoil things, and surely the Emperor knew best…? Alfie knew he was still very young but he could see that this was the logical solution. He hoped he would one day be in the vanguard of putting a stop to it once and for all, and they would all be Free. He had been promised this so many times, it had to happen sooner or later.

Half an hour later he had made no progress with the homework. He realised he had just been daydreaming. He couldn’t find it within himself to enjoy the history of how the Empire came to conquer so many other lands. He knew it was his duty to know all this by heart, but he had almost resigned himself to the fact that he would never measure up. The teachers were right to be worried, he thought.

He decided to take a break and go to the parade after all. His parents were both at work, but they allowed him to go out alone. It was not called the Safe Zone for nothing.

When he got to the parade he was surprised at the turn out, the streets were thronged with people. There was a buzz of excitement: it had been rumoured on the networks that this was going to be the day when the quantum clothes were going to be unveiled. Everyone wanted to be present to reassure themselves that they at least were going to have their intelligence and fitness for their job reaffirmed by experiencing the clothes as very much opaque.

Alfie himself hadn’t thought too much about the clothes; he had no job, being a schoolboy, and secretly suspected he was not that intelligent. If he were, surely it would be easier to concentrate on his school work.

The parade started, the tanks and soldiers and all the flags produced the expected run of patriotic adrenaline within the watching masses. Some caged Insurgents came next, soon to be executed in public by robots. Some of them cried out in the national language, uttering terrible curses against the Empire, and confirming in the watching public the necessity of getting rid of them.

Finally the Emperor’s troops could be seen marching in Alfie’s direction. The Emperor was standing on a moving platform surrounded by his courtiers and senior members of the Force. The crowds cheered and saluted the Emperor, who waved back regally. From this distance, Alfie could not make out the clothes. They seemed to be, well… flesh-coloured…

As the Emperor’s vehicle drew nearer, Alfie became increasingly confused.

The platform was now alongside. Suddenly a reporter was in Alfie’s face and a camera was pointed at him: “So young man, we are doing interviews for ZTV, would you mind saying a few words about the Emperor’s amazing new clothes?”, she said, adding: “this is going out live to the whole nation.”

Alfie took a deep breath and tried to remove the expression of confusion and fear from his face. He thought of his parents, and how hard they had worked to keep the family in the Safe Zone. He looked at the faces of the reporter - who he now recognised was a friend of his mother, and the people around him - without exception smiling and clearly appreciating the innovation which the quantum clothes represented, and indeed the beauty of the clothes themselves.

His head swam and he suddenly blurted out the first thing which came into his head:

“They are the most beautiful clothes I have ever seen. I love the Emperor.”

Photo by Sebastian Voortman from Pexels