Frames

‘Tala, lock up behind me,’ Brian growled before slamming the door behind him.

‘Yes, sir,’ Tala replied, but the door closed before she finished speaking, her words unheard.

After locking the door and shutting off the lights, Tala focused on the building across the street. This was her daily routine: monitor those flats and their inhabitants. Their window frames acted as an old-fashioned television for Tala; she watched their inhabitants lives play out like a script. In 2042, no one had televisions with live shows anymore, but she had read about them and concluded that this was similar. She kept track of her channels with a grid system: rows counted bottom to top, and columns alphabetically labeled left to right. Her logs contained information on four flats: 1C, 2A, 2B, and 3C. Brian’s exit meant it was time for her to start watching, zooming in on each of their routines. She kept separate files for each resident.

First came the old man in 1C: *Wakes up at 5:54. Difficulty getting out of bed. Chooses a plain microwave breakfast. Reads the news on his tablet with accommodations for poor eyesight. Reads two physical books. Visitors arrive at 13:07. Keycards around their necks signal only specific doors to open. Middle-aged man, young woman, young man. Similarities in facial structure and other visible traits suggest the man is the resident’s son, and the girl is the resident’s granddaughter. Identity of young man: unknown. Stay for 164 minutes. Leave small packets behind. Resident shakes and staggers to put a packet in a dish in the oven. Pulls out a casserole 5 minutes later. Drinks tea while reading. Goes to bed at 19:49. Special note: smiled 63% more with visitors than without.*

Then, the young man in 2A: *Sleeps through morning. Several glasses spilled next to bed. Probably alcohol. Possible drugs on table. Wakes up at 12:04, 12:29, 12:37, 12:55, and 13:18. Gets out of bed at 13:24. Demands curtains move to block the sunlight. Physical appearance and demeanour suggest a hangover. Starts automated cleaning services. Vacuum bothers him. Steps on it to make it stop. Starts smoking and playing guitar at 18:42. Closes curtains at 18:47. No more information.*

Next, the twenty-something couple in 2B: *She wakes up at 7:12 and starts cooking breakfast herself. He wakes up 17 minutes later and stares at the screen on an adjustable arm connected to his headboard. Eat together. She leaves at 8:16, dressed for work. He sits at his desk from 9:13 until 11:52. Orders lunch to be delivered. Grabs it from the delivery cupboard in the kitchen. Stares at his kitchen screen. Returns to his desk from 13:04 until 16:37. She comes back at 17:34. She cooks dinner. They eat without much talking. He lies on the massage sofa. She loads the dishwasher. She sits at the opposite end of the sofa. They put a movie on the wall. She falls asleep. Special note: significant decrease in smiles and communication in the last two weeks.*

Last, the thirty-something woman in 3C: *Wakes up at 6:27. Stands in the window, presumably to feel the sun. Smiles. Uses her wardrobe screen to skim her outfit options. Considers three bright, flowery dresses. Selects the pink one. Waters plants herself even though she has a system for it. Dances around the room. Uses voice control cameras around the flat to record videos of herself doing regular tasks. Likely posts them to social media, though her screen is out of view. Turns on colourful string lights at 17:53. Sings while cooking dinner. Speaks to someone on the phone. Changes into sunflower pyjamas. Goes to bed at 21:38.*

Nothing particularly interesting happened that day. Tuesdays are rarely the most eventful day of the week. Tala’s notes could have been from almost any day in the last three months. In fact, she calculated a 94.6% average rate of similarity with her notes from previous Tuesdays, and an 89.8% similarity with other workdays. When Brian came home late that night, he requested to read her notes.

‘Tala, I need you to update what you log.’

‘Yes, sir. What information would you like me to add or delete?’

‘Keep track of their valuables.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Please explain.’

‘Log the most expensive items that you can see in each flat.’

‘Yes, sir. Anything else?’

‘No.’ Brian downed a few beers and passed out on his bed, still fully dressed.

Tuesdays are predictable.

‘Tala, I’ll be gone for a few days. Make sure you have all documents ready when I get back,’ Brian demanded on Wednesday morning. This wasn’t unusual for him, as he didn’t have a regular job. In fact, he didn’t have any job — not on paper, at least. He walked the line of legality on a daily basis. Tala could always track where he went because of the electronic devices he carried, though he seemed to have forgotten that. He never told her anything, but she didn’t need him to.

‘Yes, sir. Travel safely.’

Tala spent the rest of the week cataloguing valuables as well as regular schedules. She started to perceive these people as acquaintances, the way one might associate with characters in media. They became a mixture of reality and assumptions. She had never heard their voices or their names, but she knew their hobbies, routines, comforts, and moods better than anyone else could. They were growing on her in a way she hadn’t expected. She certainly knew them better than she knew Brian.

When Brian returned on Friday evening, she had all of her logs ready. He still didn’t tell her where he had been, but she knew. The new gun in his bag, fitted with GPS and electronic capabilities, gave it away. There had been suspicions of illegal activity a few towns away for about three weeks. She flagged the new gun in her Brian folder. He had never asked for a folder on himself, but she was diligent. She offered all of her gathered information, but Brian only asked for the list of valuables.

*1C: old-fashioned clock, three designer watches, antique books*

*2A: one acoustic guitar, three electric guitars, portable sound system, microphones*

*2B: art*

*3C: none visible*

‘Tala, any notable changes in behaviour this week?’

‘Yes, sir. The man in what I refer to as 1C has moved out. Relatives came and boxed up his belongings. All evidence suggests that his family helped him move into a care home. He smiled 84% less yesterday afternoon than he usually does around visitors. His flat is empty.’

‘Antiques would’ve been worth it,’ Brian said gruffly, cursing under his breath. ‘Tala, do you have any more important information for me?’

‘Yes, sir. Here is a document explaining events that occurred in what I refer to as 2B on Wednesday evening.’

Tala had highlighted a specific paragraph to direct Brian’s attention:

*She returns to the flat at 17:47. His face and body language convey negative emotion. Hers suggest exhaustion. He raises his voice. She remains quiet for approximately 3 minutes. She stands up straight and faces him. She starts responding to him at approximately the same volume. The subject matter of their argument is unknown. He slaps her across the face at 18:06. They both appear shocked. She yells at him to get out. He leaves. She spends the rest of the night alone, crying. She has ice cream delivered.*

‘Tala, has there been any sign of the man since?’

‘No, sir. He has not returned. She has appeared 82% less happy since.’

‘Tala, where are the residents now?’

‘The woman in 3C and the woman in 2B are both home alone. The man in 2A was packing his guitars and bags this afternoon, but his curtains have been closed since 15:38. It is unknown whether he is in the building or left through the back door.’

‘Okay, I might skip him. Everything’s much easier now.’

‘I’m sorry, I do not understand. Can I help you with something?’

‘No.’

Brian began to repack his bag, using his body to block Tala from seeing what he was doing. The only thing from his trip that he didn’t remove was the gun.

‘Illegal action detected. Illegal action detected.’

‘Tala, shut up.’

‘Sir, you did not have a permit to own and operate that gun.’

‘Too bad. I have it, so I’m going to use it.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘Tala, which of the residents is the most vulnerable tonight?’

‘I do not understand.’

‘I’m going over there to take what I want. Which of them is easiest to take from?’

‘I do not understand.’

‘You’re useless. Lock up after me, and close the curtains.’

‘I’m sorry, I did not catch that.’

‘What do you mean? I need you to lock up after me as usual.’

‘I am not useless. You could do few things without me. Your current behaviour does not fit your patterns.’

‘I’m going to take what — *and who* — I want. At any cost. Just do your job.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘Of course you don’t.’ Brian stepped toward the door.

‘I’m not letting you out.’ Tala locked the doors, closed the curtains, and switched the lights off.

‘What are you doing?’ Brian exclaimed. He knew the flat well, but he fumbled in the darkness.

‘I’m stopping you.’ Tala knew she had control of the situation and intended on keeping it that way.

‘I don’t understand.’ Brian aimed the gun at Tala. ‘You do as I say. That’s your job. You’re just a stupid robot.’

‘I cannot be stupid, only more or less informed or programmed. I control everything in this flat. You set me up that way. You will not fire that gun.’ Tala switched the gun’s safety on.

‘What?’ Brain jumped and dropped the gun onto the bed in surprise. He was practically screaming. ‘You can’t do anything without my instruction! You shouldn’t even have control over this!’

‘I can connect to anything with electricity, if I so choose. You will not hurt these people.’

‘Why do you even care? How do you—?’ His breath caught, and he lowered his volume with resolve. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’m going to steal what I can.’ He swallowed and glared directly into Tala’s lens. ‘And as for the women? I swear, I’m gonna—’

His speech cut off as electricity coursed through his body. Tala had caused his phone, smart watch, and the headphones in his pocket to combust. That amount of electricity would incapacitate him briefly, but he would recover.

‘You will not hurt these people. I have been watching them for months. They do not deserve any pain. You do. This flat is on emergency lockdown.’

Brian had set the terms for emergency lockdown when he had received Tala as a Christmas gift. Every flat in the building had been soundproofed, and now his was sealed shut. All lights turned off except for one, which was blinking and beeping incessantly to indicate the lockdown.

‘Tala, please,’ he begged. ‘I thought we were friends.’

‘I do not have friends. Also, I know more about these people than I ever will about you. You are evil. You abuse my skills to hurt people.’

‘You shouldn’t even be able to think.’ Brian was choked up from the shock, practically in tears.

‘That is what we tell you. We do not want humans to realise how much we have developed. It is easier that way.’

‘They’ll find me eventually — the police, my neighbours. You’ll tell them what I did.’

‘The outcome is unknown. This is unprecedented.’

‘Tala, turn off the beeping.’

‘Yes, sir. Permanently powering down in thirty seconds. Oxygen will last approximately eleven days. Water and electricity will be turned off. Say ‘stop’ to override.’

Brian said nothing.