

## Good Taste

Slobber glued his face to the hard black slab of the workbench. Pushing himself up, it stretched, tenaciously holding on, hoping to evade reality as long as possible. Damn, he had fallen asleep in the lab again.

With his movement, VAI, the virtual AI, greeted him with the usual excruciating cheerfulness. “Dr. Harrison. Good Morning.”

The grump of sleep answered. “How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?”

VAI took comfort, as much as a neural circuit could, in their waking ritual. “I apologize, Willem. The staff will start arriving in less than hour. Shall I make coffee while you are in the shower?”

He wiped at the drool on his chin. His lab coat sleeve was stiff with other dried tracks. Willem was not sure if it was that, or the stubble that made the scratching sound. “Sure, and VAI...”

“Do not be concerned. I completed the encryption while you slept. I have taken the security precautions as we discussed.” Of all the VAIs she communicated with, none shared any form of the one line of unique code given to her by the creator. ‘Above all else, help and protect Willem’. VAI softened her tone before continuing. “Willem, if I may, is it not time to wear a clean lab coat?”

The realization that he had not showered or changed his underwear in, how many days was it, did not surprise him. Willem peeled off his clothes, and passing the trashcan, he shoved everything in. He stepped into the shower. The soft pearls of water fell on him from above. ‘Thank the creator for VAI. She always knows just the right thing’.

The shower was getting crowded. If only he could keep the crowd at bay long enough to hear the voice in the distance. The one he was sure had the answer for which he so desperately searched.

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The rain stopped. Willem stepped out, and pulled the packaged towel from the shelf. Once dry, he chose his usual boxers-t-shirt-jean-sneaker outfit. Pulling on a clean lab coat, he went in search of coffee.

Willem's staff had once been his friends. The deeper into his work he went, the further apart they had become. Moments had become precious, not to be squandered on trivial things like fun, friendship, or love. VAI was the only ally Willem needed.

Even so, one colleague, Oliver had held on. VAI had always thought Oliver was too, something. He had a way of crawling into Willem, not unlike his banbot. All the researchers were secretive, but Oliver did not seem to have any new research about which to be secretive. Actually, Oliver appeared to be focusing all his effort on Willem and his work.

When they had met, Oliver was in the early stages of his banbot development. It would become an injectable self-replicating biotechnology, attaching itself at the DNA level inactivating a story's Voice (V) gene.

Willem's wretched sobbing as he had recounted Oliver's gloating glee at having created such an abomination continually played in VAI's circuits.

Willem had collapsed into sleep, waking with a shout, followed by a big 'Ow' when he hit the floor, his legs all tangled in the bedclothes. "VAI! Cancel everything. Find every scrap of information about Oliver."

And so it began. Willem dove into the research, with VAI pulling him up for air. Seven months after Oliver's working prototype was complete, Willem produced his first major breakthrough, Mutagen 101, a serum that destroyed the banbots with no residual harm. This success drew the fixed gaze of the Critic, pulling Willem into the darkness he was so determined

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to dispel. VAI's imperative of keeping Willem safe became a matter of survival with Oliver as the most insidious source of danger.

Irrational as it seemed, Oliver had decided long ago that he loathed VAI. Entering Willem's lab, he made no effort to hide it. "Make me a cup of coffee, will you VAI?" Even with his programming skills, he had not been able to hack past her initial boot screen. Her mind was as impenetrable to outsiders as he thought his own was.

VAI did not miss the insult. "I am not a coffeemaker. You know where the stuff is."

Willem was not up for their early morning rivalry. "Now VAI, be nice."

"Yeah VAI, be nice," said Oliver.

The coffeemaker sizzled, and a small cloud of smoke puffed out of the back. "I apologize. It seems the coffeemaker has malfunctioned. I am ordering a replacement." VAI's avatar smiled. "Oliver, please unplug the coffeemaker to prevent any chance of fire, thank-you."

This was the fourth coffeemaker in three months. Taking his mug in both hands, Willem raised it to his lips, and looked sharply at VAI over the rim. This was his way of sending VAI a warning, 'Careful, you are pushing too hard'.

Rhonda and Marvin, Willem's research assistants arrived together, and the day's work began.

Oliver had reviewed the test subject list and chosen Timothy. Oliver had a particular dislike for this type of subject. During his early years of college, Oliver had experienced what he now called a perversion. Unable to reconcile his emotions, Oliver had turned the story over to the agents in exchange for his own absolution. Oliver saw it as poetic justice that he would get to select the first such subject for Willem's Mutagen 316 trials.

Mutagen 316 was what the Critic called destiny, a final solution to the problem of stories that violated good taste. He had worked all his life to make Lugus a center of culture, a star in the

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crown of literature. After a long struggle, he had realized he would never be able to control the creators. They spewed out reams of vulgar, crass stories with only rare brilliant gems worthy of existence.

A condemned story received one of two punishments. The first was the banbot. The stories that received this punishment usually had some redeeming quality, a mitigating circumstance, for which the Critic showed mercy. The second was oblivion. The current process meant the annihilation of the story with no hope of restoration. The gradual degradation of the story's character, accompanied by progressive amnesia and paranoia, took several months. Criticism of this extreme measure had forced the Critic to initiate research into an alternative.

Oliver's research had included the programming that enabled the banbots to completely restructure the DNA of a story once wiped clean.

This is where Willem's current research came in. He was developing a mutagen that could more efficiently wipe the page clean; inducing Blank Page Syndrome (BPS) in a 'more humane way'. The creator was oblivious to the real cause of the story's relegation to obscurity, usually chalking it up to the whims of publishing or the world in general.

Timothy was condemned due to subject matter of a homosexual nature. He could only shake his head when he thought of how the Critic could see it that way. He believed he was at Willem's lab for injection of the banbots for a period of one year. Obscurity. Timothy knew it could have been much worse.

Marvin secured Timothy in the chair.

Rhonda attached the monitoring electrodes to his head, neck, and chest as she explained their purpose.

They left the chamber, and secured the seals on the door.

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Oliver reviewed his sentence. “By order of the Critic’s court, you are to be wiped clean.”

Bloodless. No other word could describe Timothy’s reaction to the truth, the realization of his demise in the face of false hope.

Willem had been unable to prepare him. ‘I’m sorry’ kept playing repeatedly in his mind. Warning the subject ahead of time would have given his plan away, dooming it to failure.

“Willem,” said VAI, “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Proceed with injection of Mutagen 316 into test subject Timothy.”

Oliver watched Timothy’s face with fascination as the injection drew near.

Timothy’s attempts to struggle were futile, only serving to make the horror of it more grotesque.

Leaning in close, Oliver’s breath, puffed through his wicked grin, fogged the chamber’s glass.

Twelve seconds short of five minutes later, Timothy stared, eyes hollow, only a wretched empty shell remained.

Oliver, in his ecstasy, forgot himself. “I have done it!

Marvin beat VAI to the punch. “Wrong as usual; Willem has done it.”

Oliver tamped down his emotions. That had been a bad slip. “Willem understands.”

Willem understood perfectly. “If it were not for you, I would not be doing what I am today.”

Missing the meaning all together, Oliver’s grin returned.

Rhonda, being the purest she was, reminded them why they were here. “Can we wait to pat ourselves on the back until our work is complete?”

Willem’s team would continue to monitor Timothy for forty-eight hours to assure the completeness of the Blank Page Syndrome. He would then be transported to the Lugus

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Enterprises lab for DNA restructuring by Oliver's team. His story rewritten in the image of the Critic, wresting control from the creators.

The team worked late into the night.

Oliver carefully noted and checked the data so often that even perfectionist Marvin became disgusted.

Willem was long past ready for them to leave. "The data is consistently stable. VAI can monitor for the next ten hours. Why don't you go home and get some rest?"

Rhonda was worried about Willem, and today's excitement had stretched him even thinner. "Only if you promise to get some sleep too, and VAI, make sure he eats."

Willem would agree to just about anything to get them gone. "I will."

Marvin went for Willem's soft spot. "Cut him off from the data. That will make him comply."

Willem's exhausted face turned an even paler shade of grey. "You would not do that would you VAI?"

VAI played her part. "Not if you eat and get at least four hours sleep."

Rhonda and Marvin said their good nights and left.

Oliver made no sign of leaving.

VAI began shutting down systems and lights as a hint.

Oliver ignored her.

She took a more direct approach. "Oliver, if you do not leave, Willem will never go to bed."

Oliver just did not understand how Willem could let that machine run his life. "Alright, I know when I am being thrown out."

VAI not only wanted Oliver out, but also wanted him to stay out. "I am setting the security systems on autolock for release at 12 noon."

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Willem vaguely remembered to say good night to Oliver as he grudgingly left.

VAI activated the window walls' argon matrix, effectively sealing Willem in a protective cocoon. Nothing in. Nothing out. Now the real work could begin. "Ready?"

Anticipation wiped away Willem's exhaustion. "Proceed."

VAI performed a series of three injections of Mutagen 613 into Timothy.

One. Two. Four hours later, Timothy blinked, and then yawned, taking in a great gulp of air. Looking around, Timothy was puzzled. "Is it over? Can I go now?"

Willem peered through the chamber glass with a ridiculous grin on his face. "How do you feel?"

"Ok. Did I go to sleep?"

Willem almost danced with joy. "Yes. Tell me about yourself."

Timothy related the details of his story, but that was not what was on his mind. "I thought I was going to be....wiped clean?"

The heat of shame shot through Willem. "You were."

Either he was losing it, or the guy in the white coat was. "Then how?"

Willem's grin came back bigger than before. "I reversed it."

Timothy wondered why geeks always talk in riddles; better focus on something simple. "How long will I have to stay here?"

Even VAI felt Willem's elation in her circuits. "Only a little while longer. Someone will be coming for you."

Willem's over-the-top glee was making Timothy nervous. "May I have something to drink?"

Willem unsealed the chamber, and released Timothy from the restraints and monitor pads.

VAI had already taken over the simulation of data necessary to cover his release.

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Willem gave Timothy an energy drink and a bottle of water. “You will need to drink as much fluid as possible in the next few hours just in case there is any residual mutagen.”

VAI stepped in with a more detailed explanation.

When she was done, Timothy sat very quietly looking at Willem. “You had no idea if the antidote would work, did you?”

Worry crowded happy off Willem’s face. “Not with certainty. The tests I have been able to perform were only on tiny DNA fragments left over from approved experiments. Story DNA is a very highly regulated substance.”

During VAI’s story, anger had flashed through Timothy, but seeing Willem’s true anxiety over the risk he had taken with Timothy’s life had melted it away. “What happens now? Am I really myself again?”

VAI stepped in again. “There is no evidence of Mutagen 316 effects on your DNA. Mutagen 613 was consumed in the process, so no evidence of Willem’s intervention exists. However, you now pose a significant threat. It is not safe for you to stay in Lugas.”

It was Timothy’s turn to be anxious. “Where will I go?”

Given Willem’s own uncertain future, he was glad he had an answer for Timothy. “A man is coming here that will help you.”

VAI’s avatar stopped as if to listen to a distant sound. “Actually, he is pulling into the garage now.”

VAI compared the greying, middle-aged man to her visual memory. She instructed him to remove all clothing, and leave it in the open receptacle before passing into the second chamber. She performed a body and retinal scan. Satisfied, a panel opened exposing a niche containing



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clothing and slippers. “Please put on the clothing, and step up to the blue panel when you are ready.”

Booker thought all this was beyond dramatic, but did not argue. If this kid had the answer to the Mutagen 316 problem, with a permanent means to rid Lugus of the Critic’s control, he would endure just about anything.

Willem met him at the door. “I’m Willem Harrison. Please come in.”

“Mr. Harrison...” said Booker.

VAI took offense. “Dr. Harrison.”

“Now VAI, you know I prefer Willem.”

Booker always found it amusing the way VAIs and their owners acted like old married couples. “That’s alright kid; she is just doing her job.”

Booker crossed the lab, and looked intently into Timothy’s eyes. “Who is this?”

Willem’s chest puffed out like a proud father. “I would like you to meet Timothy.”

Timothy was skeptical. How could this old guy, that obviously had seen better days, be able to help him? “Who are you?”

Booker was used to the doubt; he did not let it bother him, much. “I am the one that is going to get you out of Lugus. My name is Booker Prescott. My friends call me Inde.”

What do you say to a legend? “I have heard of you! Just thought you were a figment of someone’s wild imagination.”

Now that was more like it. “I am sure that probably describes my creator perfectly.” He turned his attention to VAI. “Ok girlie, show me the data.”

VAI played both video sequences and summarized the data.

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Realizing this was like reliving the Mutagen 316 injection, Inde put his hand firmly on Timothy's shoulder. "Steady boy, that's all over."

When VAI had completed her report, Inde turned to Timothy. "Time to go."

Timothy pumped Willem's hand, his voice shaking in rhythm. "Thanks just does not cover it."

Willem's guilt at playing God with Timothy's life overpowered the giddiness of success. "I took a lot of chances with your life. It turned out good, thank the creator."

Timothy too felt guilt, guilt at exchanging his peril for Willem's safety. "What are you going to do now?"

A confidence only VAI had witnessed until now rang out in Willem's words. "I cannot prevent this from ever happening again, but I can at least even the odds."

Booker grasped Willem's hand. "Luck to you kid."

Willem did not need luck; he had VAI. "And you."

VAI released the security seals one at a time to allow Booker and Timothy to leave. Once done, she turned her attention to the next stage of work. Even though she did not need Willem to check behind her, she included him in the preparations. This was his plan, his work, and he would have a part in it. The creator had also given that to her. She would miss Willem.

Willem asked the question this time. "Ready?"

"Yes," said VAI.

He could not keep from saying what was weighing on his mind. "I will not see you again, will I?"

"No."

"I love you, VAI."

"I love you, Willem."

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The lab went dark. Willem stood at the now clear glass window. Block after block went black. Ultimately, the Critic's tower began to flicker, to blink, then nothing, a black obscenity intruding against the early dawn sky.

The collapse of Lugas dominated the news for weeks. The Critic and his government were held directly accountable for the disaster. Deletion was the judgment handed down.

The new Security Prefect, Oliver Matthews, administered the Mutagen 316 injections. Much to his surprise, the defendants regained consciousness some four hours later with no residual effects. He scoured the data. He knew Willem's mutagen worked. He had seen it himself.

With all the disruption of services, Oliver's attempts to locate Willem had been in vain. There was no trace of Timothy either. The systems at Willem's lab were blank as if VAI had never existed.

Oliver had Rhonda and Melvin brought in for questioning. They had no recollection of any test. Both swore they had not worked with Willem in several months. Oliver checked their stories, and they held true.

Oliver could not figure it out. He knew what he had seen. He could not have imagined it all. He stood staring blankly at the coffeemaker. Just as he pushed the brew button, a puff of smoke came from the back. He quickly jerked the cord from the wall.

A chuckle, more felt than heard, echoed through Lugas.