A Hard Pill to Swallow

Sleep was beckoning. Tia shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her eyes swept the crowds swarming through the city before her. Staying alert was becoming difficult amongst the calming bustle. Since the security status had been lowered from high red to mid-amber, the inhabitants of London had been emerging from the cracks of the city and into the daylight more and more with every coming day, like ants crawling from an anthill. The thrums of anxiety that had initially radiated through the rushing crowds had quietened; now Tia felt isolated in her tension.

Another trickle of sweat rolled down her spine. The military-grade vest, the heavily laden jacket, and the thick army slacks were not designed for the warmth of a busy Piccadilly Circus at the height of summer. Ignoring her own discomfort, she forced her eyes to continue surveying her surroundings.

The traffic drifted slowly by, each vehicle moving as designated by the Central Automotive Coordination System, intended to maximize efficiency for all travelers across the network. The concept of an entirely driverless system was still strange to Tia, but the days of human drivers were not so far behind; she had not forgotten the chaos that had once reigned on the streets. She did not miss the cacophony of horns and swear-laden shouts.

Her earpiece pinged to life. “How’s it going, boss?”

“How’s your end, Baker?”

“Like a pig in a sauna. But I’m soldiering on. Unlike Adams.”

On the other side of the square, across the road, she could see their associate leaning against the wall of the building behind him. Far above his head, flashing billboards were proclaiming the perks of living in a Smart City, but his gaze was directed straight at the floor. Even as she watched, his head lolled to one side.

With a roll of her eyes, she tapped the interface on her watch. Across the square, she saw her sleepy colleague start at the beep in his ear. “Adams. Wake up. Security might have been lowered, but last time I checked amber is still not the same colour as green. No slacking.”

There was a muffled grunt, followed by a groan. “It’s been three weeks, boss. They’ve withdrawn. If something was going to happen, it would have done already.”

Baker was still on the line. “Are you actually as naïve as you look, Adams? They withdrew for no clear reason; don’t you think that’s a tiny bit suspicious?”

“You’re clinically cynical, Baker.”

“It’s called realism.”

“I-“

Tia killed the line. The heat had made her irritable, and she didn’t have the energy to listen to the inane bickering. Seeking a brief breath of fresh air, she patched herself through to the third and final member of her troop.

“All good with you, Lopez?”

“All quiet. You?”

“Nothing but the squabbling twins.”

“What a delight.”
“Always.” Tia paused. She liked Lopez; whilst the others still retained certain characteristic relics of childhood, Lopez was level-headed and smart. She would ascend through the ranks with ease, Tia had no doubt. Adams and Baker still needed time to grow. Particularly Adams. At least Baker had some sense.

She couldn’t help siding with his conviction that all was not as it seemed. The withdrawal of the P.I.L.L. had been entirely unprecedented. Both the Pro-Intelligent Leadership League and the British Army had suffered heavy losses, but why then? Why, at that moment, had they pulled back their forces?

The civil war had been raging ferociously for nearly two years. A movement promoting AI governance had snowballed, strengthening to a force that would go on to ensure the country reckoned with it. The government had initially dismissed the rising power as a group of crazed extremists. They had claimed the views of the group were too niche to amass a significant following. After all, who would subscribe to the fantastical belief that the highest positions in the government should be replaced with artificial intelligence? Tia of all people knew this was far from the truth.

She had seen her own brother absorbed into fanaticism before her eyes. He began to go to their meetings when the movement was just gaining traction, initially out of curiosity. He would come home thoughtful, digesting a world of new ideas. Sometimes he would tell her about them. Sometimes he just stayed quiet. All the while she had watched him slip further and further. They would debate his newfound knowledge when he deigned to discuss it, but while she could see how her glass-half-full brother could be swayed, she remained staunchly loyal to her country. She often wondered if it would be to her peril, but she liked to believe in humanity.

“Lopez, can I ask you a question?”

“Fire away boss, got nothing else to do.”

“We are both committed to this country.”

“Yes.”

“And I still believe we are fighting for the right side. But - I don’t know, I guess you’ve got to question yourself sometimes. And I’m wondering… are we naive to think that democracy, human liberty, morality - these things are solely possible through human leadership?”

There were a few seconds of silence. “Do you want my honest answer or my motivational one.”

“Honest.”

“The honest answer is that I don’t know. I mean, I think it’s possible that we convince ourselves a machine cannot act and think the way we do, purely because we want to believe in our own humanity. I won’t pretend the idea of a machine able to think like a human doesn’t freak me out.”

“The government claims machines act on cold, hard logic. They say if all decisions were executed on that basis…”

“It could be harmful, because there is no emotion involved. Yeah. Do you believe that?”

Tia’s eyes refocused on the crowds milling through the square. “I suppose it comes down to whether you think that, sometimes, you need to follow the emotional rather than the logical instinct to make a good decision.”
“Do you?”
“Yeah, I think I do. But then maybe a machine could simulate that emotional decision-making, too. And then the argument gets harder.”

The soft sound of Lopez’s chewing gum filled the pause. “Honestly, boss, I don’t know. Maybe it could work in theory. But I’m fighting for this country in part because I don’t trust the P.I.L.L. to be able to follow through. They’re fundamentally disorganized, inexperienced. I think if they gained control, it would be anarchy. And if they did somehow succeed, I don’t trust them to be able to keep control of their AI system.”

Tia nodded to herself. It would be a lie to say she had never questioned her loyalty. The day her brother had vanished had been a crippling blow. But she was still here, still leading her little troop. For better or for worse. “I hope we’re right. Keep me updated, Lopez.”

Her earpiece fell silent once more. She gazed at the flashing sign for a new show at the Criterion Theatre. She watched a group of school girls lounging around a table outside a coffee shop, cackling at a private joke. The ear free from an earpiece basked in the rich tones of a jazz busker by the fountain.

Then her peace was broken once more. Baker’s voice. “Are you seeing this?”
Immediately, Tia’s head snapped around. Baker was stationed at the North-East corner of the square. At first, she was confused. “What’s wrong?”
“The cars. The traffic. It’s stopped.”
It was true. Even as she watched, people were starting to climb out of the autocars in bemusement. She hurried over to the nearest vehicle. A suited man in his mid-forties was looking exceptionally put out as he emerged from the front door. He spotted her swift approach.

“The system’s gone and crashed. Bloody ridiculous. Late as it is.” He glanced at his watch as if to ram the point home.

“What happened? It just stopped?”
“You. Ground to a halt, now the screen is showing an error message.”
“May I?”
He grunted his assent, and she peered inside the vehicle. The main display was entirely black, save for a single line of red text. Technical difficulties. Please exit the vehicle. Re-emerging, she looked about at the throngs beginning to gather in the square.

Baker was in her ear again. “What do we do? This has never happened before.”
Tia connected the line to Adams and Lopez. “Right. Listen up. I’m guessing everyone is equally confused. But we need to maintain authority and keep everyone calm. Get people on to the pavements. And cross your fingers that someone sorts this out soon.”

She reached into her diaphragm for the loudest voice she possessed. “Could everyone please make their way out of the road. The system is experiencing technical difficulties. We hope they will be resolved soon. Everyone, please make your way out of the road.”

She moved towards the fountain in the centre of the square, and as she did so a growing herd of disgruntled commuters followed her. In her ear, she could faintly hear her team following her lead.

“How long?” Someone shouted.
“What’s going on?”
Tia withheld her exasperation, knowing that people had every right to wonder if she had any more information than they. Unfortunately for both her and them, this was not the case. Before she had a chance to begin explaining this, an awful wailing rent the air. Seconds later it was joined by another screeching tone, and another, each howling at its own jarring pitch. Fire alarms.

People began streaming out of the buildings all around, bewildered. The crowd in the square was steadily thickening, and Tia caught flashes of conversations as she pushed through the bodies towards the fountain.

“The wi-fi just went down-”
“-no signal, I’m trying to get through now-”
“-lights went out, the whole place-”
“-the trains have stopped, too.”

She tapped her wrist as she jumped onto the step at the foot of the fountain. “Can you lot hear me? Bring everyone to the fountain. Meet me here.”

She felt a bubble of relief in her chest when she heard three murmurs of assent in her ear, drowned though they were by the perpetual keening of the alarms. She turned to face the sea of people. From her vantage point, she could just about see over the crowd. A shiver of movement at the fringe caught her attention.

A stab of foreboding lanced through her midriff. She desperately tapped at her watch again. This time it remained blank. Refusing to let the rising panic find its hold, she tried again. Nothing.

Already knowing it was fruitless, she said, “Is anyone still on the line?”

Silence answered the plea. Too late. She watched in horror as the traffic on the packed road began to move. The vehicles seemed to turn as one, rolling slowly but surely in towards the square. A wall of engines and metal, several machines deep. Shepherding them into a pen fenced by cars.

It did not take long for the people gathered before her to notice. There were cries of shock to join to the cries of the alarms as they continued to ring, vibrating through Tia’s very chest. She saw one or two people try to leap to freedom, only to be pegged in by the appearance of yet another vehicle.

A hand on her shoulder. Lopez was grim-faced, dark eyes fixed on the advancing tide.

“What do we do?”
Tia felt a thick knot in her chest. “What can we do?”

Screeching alarms. Revving engines. Panicked yells from the imprisoned crowd. And then another sound, a familiar sound, faint now but crescendoing quickly. The dull chopping of heavy blades slicing through the air. Eyes darting about the sky, Tia’s gaze found the small black specks in the distance. Her stomach contracted painfully. She knew better than to hope the cavalry were coming.

She glanced at Lopez. “They have complete control, don’t they? Of everything. The entire city. The entire Smart infrastructure.”

“I think you might be right there, boss.”

Suddenly, the alarms stopped. The silence was deafening. Only the chuntering of the helicopter blades broke the quiet. Then the advertisement screens opposite them went black. Bold
white text appeared. *An intelligent system could have protected you from cyber-attack. Your human government did not.*

The helicopters were above them now. Soldiers clung to ladders trailing from their underbellies. Neither Tia nor Lopez bothered to raise their weapons. They both simply watched as Adams, immersed in the crowd, tried to take aim. They watched as he cried out in frustration. They watched as he fumbled with the weapon in futility. Their guns were designed to communicate with a central server, but this very communication function had left them open to attack.

Tia felt a surge of helplessness sweep through her, threatening to drag her under altogether. All of a sudden, she felt a whole new kind of isolation. There was no one they could radio for back up. No way of contacting anyone outside of that square. No chance of warning those divisions outside the city. This was it.

One of the floating soldiers raised a megaphone to his mouth. “We have complete control of the city. From your power, transport, and communication networks to the banking system, are all under our jurisdiction now. Surrender to the future. Intelligent governance is here. The war is over.”