

The Twelve

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At first glance Howard looked all too common. The organics were off-the-shelf and the tech similar to most Government-issued handouts. Beyond a novel new eye design and improved kinetics, I didn't see much promise in the man.

“What was Brian thinking? No judge will pass him.”

“Give him time,” answered the technician. “It's only been thirteen days.”

Thirteen? Certainly, the man was mistaken. The hitch to Howard's step gave away the ruse, a common wiring enigma between the man's muscles and his primary motor cortex. “Remarkable if true, but it's the patterns we care about, not how quick he can form them.”

Funny I would admit such out loud, when only ten years prior the idea of men like Howard sent us to war.

“Brian's worked hard. Give him some credit.”

“That’s your job. I’m here to make sure this thing’s safe to go out.”

Thanks to an incomplete network patch, Howard’s thoughts broadcast at the normal frequencies. Even for a citizen with standard sentry software, Howard’s intrusion capabilities presented no more a threat than the basic quantum computer and its code-breaking tricks down at the local electronics expo.

No, this gimmick could never work. Brian’s revolution remained a fantasy.

The technician looked up. “He wants you to take him for a walk tomorrow.”

“In public?”

“That’s what he said.”

The memory halts mid-download, noradrenaline surging from the adrenal medulla. Laughter triggers safety mechanisms, and my foglets detach, the mind ripped from its reality. Seconds later, I’m back in my apartment. The memory of that day in Brian’s lab fades.

Multiple VR signals vie for synchronization.

“Hello, Jane.”

It takes a moment for the senses to steady, and another few cycles before all four million foglets can reconfigure to put face to voice. Moonlight cuts a jagged pattern in my apartment’s curtains. Diagnostics confirm the time. 2 a.m. Several women hover about my kitchen counter.

Women I haven’t invited.

“Ladies.”

The head of the Union Square Pumper Association pushes by me into the living room. By the bite to Harriet Patterson’s digitally enhanced smile, I can see she’s already deep into a fight we have yet to start. “You weren’t going to tell us that Mr. Gerwzer made contact? Shame on you.”

“I wasn’t aware it was any of your concern.”

A nosey bunch, these Thrivers. Always checking up on us Pumpers. Prying, more like it. Harriet Patterson reaches up to adjust her hat, as if she’s too big to fit into the room. “Dear, *everything* is my concern. You share my switch, remember?”

“I’m offline tonight. You’re not allowed to be here.”

Digital paragraphs stream across the airwaves, my absence from the Twelve thoroughly documented in typical government ambiguity. Harriet barely gives the official seals a glance. “I know all about this. Frankly, your absence borders on treason. Have you not been watching the news?”

I glance at the television monitors. “What about it?”

“We’ve lost another three million cubic kilometers,” says Betsy Striesle.

That’s hardly news. What do these women think I do half my life? Out-of-control nanotech on a destructive path towards the San Francisco coastline barely warrants conversation these days. We Pumpers are doing everything we can to corrupt the Tide’s source code.

“Not my problem tonight, ladies. We have protocols for this.”

“Protocols you Pumpers must evolve,” Harriet reminds. The twitch to the Thriver’s right eye suggests she’s in the midst of multiple simulations, something even her upgraded circuitry isn’t designed to sustain. Her digital persona flickers.

“I’m well aware the importance of the Twelve. I’ve uploaded three patches in the last week.”

Harriet arches a painted eyebrow. “Highly doubtful, Jane Speller. No Pumper’s that good.”

I haven’t time for this nonsense. “Check your logs. Now if you’ll excuse me.” Love or hate the man, Brian Gerwzer, Father of Strong AI, is probably the last chance this country has to make it another week. I can’t keep him waiting. If my calculations are right (and they always are) the Pumper kill codes will have run through all quantum variants in six days.

“Give him to us,” the Association demands.

“Are you serious?”

“We aren’t asking.”

Ugh. These women go too far. While the Pumper-Thriver relationship remains ethically ambiguous, simple common sense tells me we’re both humans. Basic civil rights haven’t completely disintegrated, have they? “Look, I appreciate the visit. This whole awe and shout routine’s a real treat, but it’s not gonna make a difference. Brian does as he wishes. You can no more force his hand than almighty God might.”

“Snit!”

Outside, across the Embarcadero, sirens warn what these Thrivers forebode. The Tide approaches. Those six days? Maybe I *am* capable of mistakes.

“You’d best leave now.”

Harriet Patterson spins, incredulity thick in her simulated scowl. “What was that?”

So much for hospitalities.

“Your fancy circuits malfunctioning? I said go, or I’ll expunge you from the system.”

At the Association’s continued failure to penetrate my firewall, Harriet broadcasts new schematics, and the room—the virtual representation of it, at least—rises another two feet. “No fourth generation Pumper tells the Association what to do.”

“Third.”

“Excuse me?”

“Third generation Pumper. I’m a little behind on updates.”

The woman laughs, but I have it coming. It’s no secret the Association thinks me some pretentious know-it-all, a Pumper desperate to outshine her social superiors. How that’s possible I’ll never understand. Who can know everything? I just know more than these women.

“Well, second actually,” I clarify. “With a few personal modifications. Upgrades and me don’t really get along too well. Why mess with perfection?”

Okay, maybe the pretentious part I understand. Serves the Association right, though. Thrivers and all their uppity uppitidness need Pumpers like me to remind them that power has its limits. Speed and capacity's great, but it only takes a human so far. It's ingenuity that makes people truly special.

Harriet's laughter broadcasts at uncomfortable frequencies. "Your victory would indeed be an accomplishment then. Just add us to the chain, and..." The woman's voice trails away. Sensors cut out as my backdoor hack infiltrates the Association's source feeds. Suddenly the women disappear, auto-magically transported into a suitable honeypot. Good riddance. If I programmed the system right, the simulation should hold them a couple hours.

Can't say I didn't warn her.

As Brian's authentication request works back to the surface, a smile crosses my face. I can only imagine Harriet mid-argument, her face squished and cheeks red, frustrated by my virtual representative. 'Fake' Jane can argue hours on the Pumper paradigm. We're more than government resources. We don't all play in VR to pass the days. Some of us are just people haunted by the past, needing some time before we contribute to the future. Let our twelve serve the collective good. We've earned this peace.

It might well be morning before the woman realizes what I've done.

October 13th loads, 2028, one year since the world discovered biology's event horizon. Artificial synapses fire along the frontal lobe, and a clock with running digits appears along the lower right peripheral. My brain corrects the memory's generalities. "Three

hundred sixty four days and three hours twenty-six minutes,” the thought completes, “since your walk with Howard.”

For a mind backed by magnetic relays and flash memory, that walk with Howard feels like both yesterday and the distant past. Or rather three hundred sixty-four days and twenty-six minutes past. It’s hard to remember a time when such details didn’t matter.

Breathe, Jane. You’ll be fine. He’s not going to betray you. Brian’s second level protocols start their synch. I give control to his sentries. Our minds lock. October 13th starts eleven hours into the day. We re-encrypt our connection through a series of ROT quantum-entangled photons. A sterile underground lab rises from my apartment’s living area.

Here, we go.

“Authenticate,” the sentry demands.

“How long?”

“Three hours.”

“Must I?”

“Three hours,” the sentry repeats.

Good god. Brian knows how much I hate this walk.

“Fine.”

Though I’ve tried hard to forget (a seemingly stupid goal when one considers today’s abundance of redundancy), I play out that walk in exacting detail, one more time for Brian’s

satisfaction. Foglets connect to the body's various auditory, nervous, and sensory systems. Realities merge.

“He can't be serious, can he?” Bumps rise along the skin from the lab's air conditioning system. Odd smells waft from the petri dishes and their organic transistors. “Who will buy this abomination?”

I remember how my uncle studied Howard before answering, his arrival at the lab the result of a canceled lunch date. As chief security specialist for Brian Gerwzer's BrAIIn program, I had special rights few others could boast. Like bringing a civilian into a highly classified supposedly nonexistent laboratory. The mind file portrays George different than I remember. Much older. Bad breath. A hint of liquor. Wrinkles play across George's face.

“Looks like the real thing, but what do I know? How about you take your walk when we get back? I'm hungry.”

It's funny how nostalgia can wipe away the most glaring blemishes of those you love, but the mind files never lie. George *really* had a cantankerous disposition back then. At least 2029's been good for one thing. When my uncle joined us Pumpers, he finally received the treatment he needed. The alcoholism went first. The sour personality followed. Too bad he took it another step and went beyond his twelve hours. He's a Thriver now, but that's his choice. I'm not the hero type.

Focus, Jane. You must have missed something.

Nearby, Howard hovers over a desk, examining a few thin wireless probes, his loose white lab coat dangled over narrow shoulders. Instrument panels glow in the man's hand.

“We’ll be back,” I announce.

Brian’s creation looks up, features unreadable. This being the fourteenth day, the interneuronal connections responsible for emotional intelligence have yet to mature. Even now, I can’t tell if he cared I had brushed him off.

I fast forward past the lunch date, skip the brief interlude with Brian, and settle on the elevator ride with Howard as we climb the subterranean levels toward the city streets. The walk begins.

Up on the surface I expect the normal reactions: curious glances that immediately turn toward disapproval, whispered statements the bots will decipher. A year ago the most aggressive estimates put formation of the adult mind at thirty days. Fourteen seems absurd, but Howard is holding his own. We walk San Francisco’s crowded sidewalks, the wind an uncomfortable presence to a body unaccustomed to such annoyances. I grab for my coat, forgetting I had not brought one. Memory would remind me I had recycled my coats months ago.

Howard asks a lot of questions, many I decline to answer. I remain focused on the crowds. Don’t these people detect the same glitches? Why isn’t anyone watching us? The man looks all the wear and misery of a forty-year-old banker, but a trained eye knows Howard for the farce he represents. Pale slightly striated cheeks pinch into a frown as legs buckle navigating the sewer grates. Thin hair dances black in the Bay Area’s autumn breeze.

“Don’t overdo it. Your sensors are going crazy. Give yourself time to analyze.”

Howard blinks. I can see he’s struggling to grow beyond his programming. We

approach a park, full of children and play equipment. Parents stare through dark shades, each lost to their artificial ruminations. Few, if any, match the tech inside Howard and I, but nearly all sport the same capabilities in one gadget or another. It makes me laugh...these biologic refugees. Don't they see that refusal to integrate only makes their technological dependencies more obvious?

Chants rise from a nearby Anti-VR rally.

"Ignore them."

Howard watches the longhaired men and women pump their fists. Vulgar curses portray the nanotechnology revolution as an unstoppable plague. Fear mongers wave their flags. Howard and I walk through the crowds, unobserved. A warm finger skims the back of my hand.

"What are they afraid of?"

I shrug. "Change. Obsolescence. God. Who knows?"

It won't be long before those rallies turn toward people like Howard, the next evolution in technology. Strong AI, the real thing. Not intuition but actual reasoning. I almost felt sorry for Brian's creation.

Men in too great a hurry for apology jostle us on the way to the cable cars. Colorful scarves and knit caps mark those in the crowd too proud or defiant for technological comforts. For all the progress in the world, San Francisco holds stubbornly to its glorious past. Brick and steel buildings stretch their ancient fingers into a cloudless sky, and shadows

creep down streets more busy for their foot traffic than modern conveyances.

I notice how Howard's legs eventually stabilize on those sewer grates, and his balance improves. He needs only a few experiences to correct his internal mechanics. Considering the complexity in chaotic kinetics, this walk alone proves how far Brian's AI-generated models have evolved. Obviously, the algorithms are self-organizing. The man's face brightens as we cross into a park near Chinatown, this one heavy in network traffic from the bots and wearable tech. His face reminds me of a child in a toy store. By the man's sudden look everywhere and stumble routine, I consider this might be his first time outside the labs.

"Is it true?" I ask, as if Howard can read my mind. I suspect he can despite what my firewalls report.

The man smiles and squeezes my hand. Servos, tuned at delicate levels, so as to not hurt a female guide, whisper quietly under the buzz created by a flock of pigeons. My own implants react in kind, and for a moment (a brief one I'll admit) we connect.

Although I didn't realize it back then, now I see it. Howard was not so different than you and I. Just more advanced. Had Brian really done it? Had he created humanity in a purely nonbiologic entity? The simulation pauses, replaced by a stark gray hallway, dim in light and weak in warmth.

"That's enough," reports the sentry. Brian's simulation terminates the memory. I'm deep in another VR now. Brian's security protocols feel increasingly...paranoid.

"Where to now?"

Brian's sentry program doesn't bother answering. Along the lower right peripheral a HUD brings up the BrAIIn facility—one of many subterranean laboratories owned and operated in secret by a corporation of corporations we call the United States Government. My bots analyze the layout.

Straight forward, I guess. Then down. Could he make it more complicated?

Waves of artificially generated serotonin flow down the neck, into palms too sweaty to grasp the door's virtual rails. I know it sounds like crackpot theory coming from a girl like me, but with everything that has happened this past week, I'm starting to think the politicians want the Tide to succeed. Our population demolished? Western culture eradicated? It's the ultimate start over switch. What do they care? Consciousness downloads are all the rage in Elite class society. Dual citizenships, new identities, synthetic bodies. At what point do our leaders simply throw up their hands and admit to their mistakes? "You win! Take it! Let us join you."

Only they don't realize, the Tide's not going to stop with the United States. What do nanobots care about artificial borders and treaties? Brian warned this would happen, but his solutions were deemed too dangerous. "A bio-immune system?" "Self-replicating nanobots responsible for destroying other rogue self-replicating nanobots?" "You are a ridiculous optimist, Brian Gerwzer, if you think this can work." Before the patents could even be submitted, the bureaucrats stepped in. Regulators and powerful administrations killed any chance to prepare for this plague.

A door swings open. Quick scans indicate several options, but nothing immediately obvious. I keep walking. Why did I not listen to Brian from the beginning? Was I really that

stubborn?

Who are you talking to, Jane?

Admittedly, Howard proved amazing far beyond his promise, and even during that walk I knew the future for the change he held. Could I have done more to push Brian's agenda through Congress? Should I have led the charge against those Luddites and Biologics? Maybe, yet it's unfair to hold me totally responsible for what's happened. We Pumpers put in our twelve hours every day. Anything beyond that is somebody else's problem. That's the deal, isn't it?

Else why did we kill Howard?

I step carefully into the elevator, recalling the famous words that brokered this country's freedoms. "Put in your twelve then reach out your hands," the Democrats declared victoriously in 2020. "Is tech not freely available? Have our people not toiled long enough in poverty and disease? We have the means to cure you. You are free to rejoice." Yet even in this foglet-induced Virtual Reality haze, the speech fails to inspire. Technology, the pundits soon learned, could not solve that most indelible human quality...suffering. Our problems have simply morphed into new ones, and these have no 'cure' we Pumpers can discover.

"Twenty more meters then take the door on your right," instructs the sentry.

I record the maze's schematics, tweak the firewall, and create a mind partition for verbose logging, already scanning the entries to assure security's tight. The elevator hums in the artificial light patterns cast by a sense of falling. I steady on the handrail, uncertain if the dizziness comes from an improperly attached foglet, or the fact I'm anxious for the first time

in months. Brian might be the man I've come to see, but he's certainly not the eyes meant for this ridiculous suit, or the reason I put my hair up in a bun, donned these smart-looking glasses, or bronzed the freckles on my nose. He's definitely not the reason my clothes fit a bit tight, or the foglets tone the calf muscles. Some part of me wonders if anybody will buy this image. The larger part questions why I'm so desperate for *his* approval.

The elevator lurches, and inevitably I tip forward, implants grinding against ankles, tendons at play against the metallic joints. Angered by the program's physics, I stare up at the camera. Why couldn't Brian have created a Day Spa or something? A few software-enhanced servants with warm towels and fresh smelling hand creams would go far to ease my tension.

Another lonely walk down an endless hallway leads to the final (I hope) sentry. A wall with heavy slanted eyes peels from the poorly lit walkway. We're running short on time. All these authentication routines—Brian must really be paranoid the wrong people will find him. Don't blame him. He might be the only person alive that knows how to defeat the Tide.

“Interior view, first aisle. Thirty degrees from center. Proceed.”

The ominous command precedes an even more foreboding environment. Flags from all the nations rise from the ground. Stark gray clouds stream across The Hague. Promptly, I send for the appropriate mind file. It's been a long time since I thought about Howard's United Nations trial, and for good reason. You too would want to forget the spark that lit this fire. Especially when you were the holding the match.

The memory starts to play. From two viewpoints, Howard's UN hearing unfolds. I must step carefully here. If even one detail finds fault, I'm in real trouble. With this level of

access, Brian can order his sentry to do pretty much anything he wants. Even reboot the brain.

Routines within subroutines examine my footage.

“You understand why you’re here today?” the court asks, its line of judges like tiny dominoes in a sea of browns and reds.

“Yes, sirs,” Howard replies.

“Then let’s begin.”

Though no more than a month since his naming ceremony, Howard’s trial comes as no surprise. Human Ontologic With A Robotic Dichotomy—that is what Brian’s created—an intelligence far more advanced than anything humanity’s witnessed. Or approved. The world cries for his immediate Turing.

“A marvel!” Scientists declare.

“Atrocity,” the world’s dioceses shout. “He is the end.”

“Let us watch,” the many demand. “We deserve to know the truth.”

A line of judges in black and white sit in unison, arms folded under a long table draped in green. The Peace Palace’s international court rises like a goliath before its David, proud in bright mosaics and woodwork.

Seated left of center, a man with dark skin fires the first cannon. Sporting few wearable tech necessities, his harsh accusation echoes across the courtroom. “So you are

human, I hear. Such a bold claim for one created piece by part in petri dishes and fancy printers.” Cameras pan to Brian Gerwzer, his strange brown suit with red striped tie brightened by the array of lights and flashes. “And that makes Mr. Gerwzer your God, no?”

Howard’s Turing Test was scheduled to last three days. A quick check of the memory’s timestamps indicates it would take only two. A short two at that.

Following the Peace Palace judge’s gaze, Howard’s response would ring in our ears for months. “I understand your reasoning...and fear...good judge, but I challenge you not to see me as an abomination. Rather, I hope, we can think of me as an evolution, spawned by humanity’s desire to better its condition. Mr. Gerwzer gave me life, yes, but that neither makes him a God nor me a human. It only sets us apart from the animals.”

Like all skilled orators, the world’s most famous ‘machine’ waits to gage the crowd’s reaction. In truth this court will not be Howard’s judge. Humanity has wired itself to this conversation. Technology monitors our heart rates and pupil dilation. Sensors read our brain waves. A world connected watches as Howard addresses the judges.

In the end, it does not matter what those judges decide. Who are these men to settle a deeply personal debate like consciousness? Instead, those who wield power behind the shadow of authority seek only to understand if the world will accept a change like Howard.

“Authentication complete,” announces Brian’s sentry. Promptly, the UN simulation ends. Vast doors open to admit entrance into a bright sterile laboratory. “Power down non-vital communications. Mr. Gerwzer will see you now.”

I step into the lab, at odds with the emotions my foglets produce. Like all good VR

simulations, the program assaults the senses, and default stimulants accompany the visuals. Brian's created a scene too similar to our time together. There's seriousness to the program, like he's calculated the weight of responsibility and given it breath and temperature.

Whispers alter the foglets' emotional triggers. Seriousness melts into regret. The empty lab reminds me what we built here, or more accurately what Brian's genius designed and my morality destroyed. That UN trial changed everything. Yes, the world saw Howard for the human we had perfected, but it was not enough. I've learned it's never enough.

I first became aware of our enemies' intentions through sources that choose to remain hidden. Fresh from the UN victory, I laughed when they told me what would happen should Howard survive. Wounded by a club to the head, our group attacked outside the Peace Palace, I replied, "It will take much more than that to stop this tidal wave." The irony in such a statement continues to haunt my dreams. Those attacks grew ever more sophisticated. The enemy's resources seemed limitless. An entity with access to its own source code would divide our species, they claimed, or kill it off completely. You get to choose what happens next.

"Nonsense," was all Brian replied. "They just don't understand his promise yet."

True, but that hardly mattered. Civil war brewed amongst those willing to adopt Howard's technology and those who saw him as an abomination. Politicians soon realized their predicament, and sides drew permanent lines.

Revelations, many claimed, was finally upon us. The Antichrist had a face.

I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I had saved us from war. I realize now

I only delayed the inevitable.

Tiny diodes along the floor light the path to my old work desk. I skim the smooth metal corners with digital fingers, the metal cold and lifeless. A jolt stands me straight. Brian's network just penetrated my most personal firewall.

"You shouldn't be in here."

"A necessity, I'm afraid," says Brian. The man rounds a cabinet storing old biological specimens—dead frogs and such in formaldehyde, their organs splayed against glass canisters.

I can't tell if the thin-jawed slightly angular man across from me is pulled from memory or a visualization of the real thing. The man looks more Howard than Howard could ever pull off. Robotic and pale, emotionless to the point of disturbing.

"I'd have shared the connection for the asking. Would you please get out of here?"
No need to tap my temple.

"Your system has its companions. I had to break my way in. Regardless, we have but an hour until hackers replicate this technology."

"Wait, are you saying we're not in VR anymore?"

"Not the one you're used to." Thin dark hair dances across the man's brow. He was handsome once, I suppose. "I recreated one of the older systems. We might as well be recording this on floppy drives."

"I should come in person then."

“Too dangerous. You’d need the coordinates, and I can’t risk transmission.”

“More dangerous than this?” Already electrodes signal that scanners hover outside my apartment. A slight dizziness assails the cerebral cortex, and as foglets lift their tiny microscopic antennae, I broadcast the kill command. VR turns dark, gray, and void of windows. Even for an underground facility there’s usually windows.

“They’re here. So much for that hour.”

Brian interrupts the kill command. The foglets reattach. “Another minute, please. I need to show you—“

I can’t wait for him to explain. With no safety switch in sight, I imagine my apartment, VR’s internal defenses at work, and the foglets disperse, my neurons freed from the tiny devices’ grasp. Just in time, too. Scanners sweep the networks, on the hunt for Brian’s elusive IP. Harriet must have realized what I’ve done, but they won’t find anything. I’m too clever.

Partition first. That’s something Brian taught me. Then forget about it. Come back only if you have the time (and inclination) to make the data important again. While the government’s bots actively broadcast the latest logs from my main Pumper memory banks, it’s not where I keep the good stuff. And that comment about floppy drives? That’s not far from the truth. Immortality’s great and all—it’s just not for me. Transfer your mind files to the latest storage systems. Re-encrypt with the latest security algorithms. Compress and decompress, synchronize...patch and do it all over. It’s exhausting. Expensive too. Let the Elites toil in their narcissism. My self-important memories fell behind the technology curve

long ago.

My uncle enters the apartment, panic a thin line on ageless brows. “What’s happened, Jane? You okay? The sensors are going crazy in this building.” Light blonde hair falls across his shoulders, the professor look very much in vogue these days. For San Francisco, it’s appropriately rebellious. A gray tweed vest and checkered coat complement his genuine leather loafers (grown from real cows, I hear), while silly open-lens glasses complete the vintage ensemble.

A myriad of sensations assault the cerebral cortex. “They’re in here. Looking for him.”

“Who?”

“Everyone, I think. It’s a circus.”

Immediately, George makes for the door, freckles a patchwork of emotion. “We gotta get you out of here. You’re not safe anymore. I knew Brian would come back sooner or later.” The man stops halfway through the door. His excited gesture makes me smile. “Jane!”

“Relax, uncle.” Slowly, the voices fade, and the sensors rummage through rabbit holes with no end. Quiet returns. “I know where he is. Can you believe it? Man’s hiding the one place nobody will dare look. I don’t think the others have any clue.”

George’s curiosity, tempered with reserved panic, restores those wrinkles I once adored. “Where is he? Is he safe?” Though it requires the archived images to picture the forty year-old uncle that ran me through the sprinklers when I was seven, I can’t help but yearn for

those days, back when ‘Responsibility’ was simply a word I conquered to win my second grade spelling bee.

“He knew they’d come for him. I half expect he wants them to. Maybe the world falling apart has finally inspired Brian to let go his grudge.”

“Doubt it.”

“I think he rebooted Howard.”

George stands tall, his eyes lifted in surprise. A long second passes. “He...wait...no. Wait! Are you sure?”

“I think so.” Behind, several monitors report on the latest wave of gray goo approaching in the Pacific. At the news desk a woman in a revealing silk blouse (with way too much makeup, for my taste), warns quite poetically that San Francisco’s outer buoys have been overtaken. Not to worry though, she says. Us Pumpers have everything under control. Corporate and Government logos flash across the screen. The monitors cut to commercials.

“We don’t have much time. These are Elite sensors in here. They’ll replicate whatever I’ve learned soon enough. You’ve got to run some interference.”

Composure settles my uncle’s expression. It’s one of the benefits of Thriver circuits. Emotional reprogramming. “Of course, dear. Anything.”

“I love you, you know?”

The man lifts his hand to my cheek. “I know.”

“Anything you’d like me to tell him?”

“Just that he took long enough.”

“I’m sure he realizes that. Now.”

As the newscasts return, I head into the bedroom and remove my clothes. It’s more a thought than physical activity. Polymers woven into the fabric dissemble and slide my top to the floor.

My uncle shouts from the other room. “At least you two have found each other again. God bless that little miracle.”

I pause in my polymer selection. “God had nothing to do with this!”

Twenty minutes later, I’m street-side, approximately one block north of San Francisco’s famed Chinatown. A quick left on Grant takes me up and down hilly concrete paths towards the ocean. Coit Tower rises from the early morning gloom.

Once on Telegraph Hill I melt into the masses, amazed by those biologic refugees that run the hills daily to keep their hearts and muscles strong. Servos in my ankles and knees push me steadily past the walkers. I overtake most the runners too. Needless glances remind me that technological hybrids remain unwelcome additions to these preserved parks. A quick scan of the rocky retaining walls locates the lab’s hidden entrance.

After I climb up into the foliage, circle around the huge seventy-foot Italian stone pine, and reach up on tippy-toes for the tiny latch nestled inside a false knot, a graceful

pirouette spins me from the trap door. Metal rungs peel from the overgrown ivy. Several curious gases belch from the dark hole by my feet.

“God, this place reeks.”

For a secret lab, the location’s not ideal. Besides the poor ventilation, I can hear the hordes making their way up to the tower. Many comment on the Tide, how they can see it from the viewers or how us Pumpers aren’t doing enough to push it back. A number of the walkers talk about music and art. Some even sing the curiously absent fog’s praises, wistful that nature would come to their aid, or at least hide what seeks to consume us.

Lights flicker along rows of incandescent tracks.

“Welcome, Ms. Jane. It has been one year twenty-seven days since your last visit. Are you here for the test results?”

Speakers crackle from hidden ports in the walls, the system disturbed from sleep.

“Later. Bring up biomass immune system exoskeleton, fourth phase.” No point in hospitalities. Art’s not one for small talk.

Monitors blink. I approach the podium and slip on the BCI. Detailed schematics appear on the wall.

“Do you wish data on the previous experiments?”

“If you don’t mind.”

Images follow, along with detailed analysis and mortality rates. Generation 1,

Generation 2, Generation 3. Once humanoid bodies bubble and burst on the screen. A dozen gruesome poses remind me what we've created here. Or tried to, at least. Generation 3 efforts remain somewhat discernible. A monkey, maybe? Perhaps a chimpanzee. Several disturbing time-lapsed images highlight the rapid expansion of self-replicating nanobots into the body. The images stop at BISE-4. Hair and bone fragments poke through tears in the suit.

“What is the timestamp on this image?” Though I don't have to speak the commands, I prefer the interactive element of hearing my words, especially here. My BCI interprets the thought for Art. Artificial Intuition, early 2020 technology. Not real AI but something close. Art understands context. Language most specifically.

The speakers pop. “Three hours.”

“And total blue goo?”

“Two percent.”

Three hours. Ninety-eight percent destruction. Those aren't the odds I was looking for. Still...it's better than nothing. Via the hardwired BCI I power up the printers. This time I think the instruction set. ‘Construct two suits, minimum interior movement, maximum police force, female, one hundred sixteen pounds.’

“Not enough storage to power plasma conduit.”

“Alternatives?”

“One suit, fifty percent power.”

“Unacceptable. What else you got?”

The machine recalculates.

“Two suits. Carbon nanotube conduits. High-speed replication. No communication package.”

Risky.

“Time to exposure?”

“Thirty minutes.”

Bloody hell.

“What about three suits? Broadcast communication. Redundant police force. Sixty minute deployment.”

“Impossible.”

“I didn’t mean sixty minutes in the water. I mean I want you to come get me in sixty minutes.”

The system thinks on the request. “Possible.”

“Then do it.”

As generators kick in, several rooms flicker to my right. Inside the main lab, printers dance about a wide construction surface. In a few minutes I have the gear to make a crossing. Next door, machines spew out the first batch of blue goo, the police force meant to come rescue Brian and me when I take him from the island. Thin cylindrical canisters load into the ejection tanks. I input instructions on trajectory and timing.

Which reminds me. I still have no idea if he brought Howard to the island.

“I’ll need another suit.”

“Risk of contamination too great.”

“Explain.”

“Cannot etch microplasma transistor gates. Tanks at thirty percent.”

“Are you saying we don’t have enough stupid gas to make a stupid circuit board?”

“Three suits, yes. Four—”

“For crying out loud, Art! What have you been doing here all year?”

“Instructions were vague during Mr. Gerwzer’s last visit. He never—”

“Forget it. I’ll take my chances with the Tide. Where is it now?”

I sense Art disable the firewalls, long enough to gather the requisite feeds, and when he reports back, the news remains grim.

“Approximately eight hundred meters offshore. Defenses at 36.2 percent. According to your trajectory settings, you will not survive unprotected. Even with assistance.”

“Have the Hands meet me down at the Pier in twenty minutes.”

“Are you sure, Jane?”

“Oh...and keep the firewall down. I’m going to need you to help me.”

“As you wish.”

Ten minutes later, servos still warm from the accelerated walk, I circle Pier 33 and head down to the water. It’s chilly here, even with the fire radiating from my shins. It’d be great to pull something warm to my face, but alas, I brought no scarf or hoodie. Going to be even worse in the water. Why I threw away all my jackets, I’ll never know? San Francisco, for all its traditional charms, holds no welcome for people like me.

Not that it matters. I’ll be dead soon anyways.

It takes a few minutes to find a skiff worthy of the voyage but only a few seconds online to locate the requisite operating manuals. A few forceful kicks break the lock on the ship’s wheel, but nobody’s around to stop me. Sightseers don’t exactly line up for tours these days.

“You coming, Art?”

‘Almost there,’ relays the voice message.

High up on the docks, I see Art’s robotic assistants struggling to descend the ramps. With a little help from a confused maintenance worker they make it to the ship, remove the ropes and swing me north, pointed at the far-off island. From here I can see it, that strange gurgle of gray beyond the blues and greens, boiling the ocean in its hungry advance.

The Tide awaits me.

“Looks like we are really going to do this.” I’m not sure for whom the comment’s meant, but at the least the voices in my head don’t answer back. A groan from the engines

starts my seaward journey.

A little less than half-mile from Alcatraz, defensive buoys announce I've arrived. Here a thin cloud stirs above the ferry's chimney. A few hundred meters off, that cloud rises more than a mile into the atmosphere, weak this far from land but still ambitious in its hunt. Powered by sunlight, the carbon-hungry nanobots attack the dust and smoke churned out by the antique engines. Below, the Tide swirls around the boat's hull. Microscopic mechanical arms manipulate the methane and carbon dioxide trapped in the seawater. The Tide advances past the ship.

'Are the codes still broadcasting?'

Art does not respond.

They must be, otherwise I'd already have my suit on. This close to the buoys, our Pumper kill codes push back the front lines. That's about all that's slowed the Tide so far. Not destroyed, mind you—we haven't figured that part out yet—but at least us Pumpers have kept digital antibiotics relevant.

The ferry pushes on.

Topside ejection cannons fire two suits towards Alcatraz. Engines whine as the ocean thickens. Bugger. Another three hundred meters and the jets fail. Hurriedly, I slip on my suit. A twang and sudden moan sees half the ferry slip into the water. I'm past the buoys' effective range.

'Do it, Art. Send them!' I hope he hears me.

Around the suit's facemask, a thin diamondoid visor powers several monitors. I order the exoskeleton sealed.

'Art?'

Highly static polymers fold snug along my arms and legs as the suit charges its defensive perimeter. Sealed in, the visor's viewports help me navigate the upper decks. I feel for the railing. Everything's shaking. Gotta get as high as possible before—

Eyes bulge as the sudden vacuum sucks away oxygen and carbon dioxide. Internal systems adjust for the pressure. My nanofactories reemploy. Signals broadcast their replication instructions. I'm on full nano-driven blood cells now.

God, this can't be the way it ends, can it?

Carbon nanotubes along the suit's stitches burn my skin, but the heat's necessary to fuel the static charges. I've got about thirty minutes before that picture of skin and hair from the lab feels all too familiar. I leap into the teeming waters.

Kick, Jane. You gotta move. Diagnostics bring up a handful of screens, each a tiny window in the visor. Microscopic breaks in the polymers allow the Tide's bots entrance. A steady flow of immunity bots cleanses what the suit cannot keep out. Behind me, the ferry slips into the murky gray. Several systems fail but nothing critical. Not yet. My sudden immersion triggers servos in the knee, hip, and ankles.

Sockets grind against titanium cams, producing just enough torque to push through the thick seawater. Ugh. It's gotta be a quarter mile to shore. Webbed flippers manage a

steady pace, but after two minutes the first warning chimes.

“Exterior at eighty percent.”

Already?

“Seventy-nine percent,” the system quickly updates. “Compromised lateral cruciate valve. Integrity at fifty-three percent.”

Were this normal water I’d be about five hundred meters already. As it is, I’ve barely made one hundred. There’s no way I’m going to reach Alcatraz before all hell breaks loose.

‘Deploy countermeasures.’

Promptly, inner layers create more immunity bots, while the outer layers charge the water, desperate to repel the Tide’s hungry legions. Made of the same diamondoid material as my visor, nanobot arm tips scratch and claw against my face shield. Could I see them, I’d have realized my mistake. Molecular assemblers might struggle to manipulate the dense material, but the exposed carbon drives this group crazy. With this visor, I’ve literally chummed the water.

‘More power to the visor!’

A static charge pulses through my attackers. Water swirls in angry revolt, but no matter the numbers I destroy, a trillion more machines arrive to take their place.

This isn’t going to work.

“Forty-one percent valve integrity. Power at sixty-five percent.”

Great. Nothing like an up to the second countdown to your own gruesome ‘Game Over’ montage. With no idea where I’m pointed, I route more power to the flippers. It’s only a minor improvement. I feel like I swimming in a pool of pudding.

Ten strokes times ten. One hundred strokes straight ahead. Eight strokes to the surface. A quick adjustment. Eighty-nine strokes until the next warning. Power reroute. The skin burns. Don’t lose hope. Ten strokes times ten. Surface again. Adjustment. A few degrees east. Ten strokes...

I push on long as I can, the mind distracted with its many calculations. Focusing on the math keeps me calm, but who knows how long it will last. Air’s not the problem, but when the walls start pressing in, the mind tends to panic. My visor’s black now, charred by the angry assemblers. Most the monitors have shorted out. I keep kicking, resigned to my predicament. Ten strokes times ten. Another twenty meters. I ignore the sirens ringing in my head. Sixty-two percent. Valve’s disintegrating. Kick, Jane.

Three times now something massive squeezes the legs. Hardly a nerve remains that hasn’t warned of catastrophe. A dull rumble emanates from my face shield—the combination of molecular assemblers and over aggressive nanobots driven to reproduce. The vibrations stress the encephalo-mechanics. Internal monitors warn that systems are literally shaking apart.

Don’t give up, Jane. That’s not your style.

Surface-side the news isn’t much better. Trapped in the artificial smoke generated by their airborne counterparts, the battle continues, sun-powered dust-fed nanobots in

competition with their methane-fueled counterparts. Arms reach for the next patch of freedom, but at this point there's not really anywhere I can go to escape. I keep swimming in hopes I'm on the right path. Murky waters promise it doesn't really matter.

This suit's not going to be on me much longer.

Just kick for crying out loud! To Hell with the pain. Water slips past in slow waves. I reach out. Ten strokes times ten.

Deep inside, a dozen sirens compete for attention. They're more a melody now, something the mind can no longer make sense of...not that it would help. My visor's useless at this point. All but a few displays have burnt out. The water, even if clear and blue, would be no more than a black smear across the horizon. I'm blind and kicking, deaf to the world's woes.

“Lateral cruciate val—”

In the chaos, I don't hear the valve pop, more feel it my leg. An intense burning announces everything's gone wrong. Then the clamps dig in, and nerves carry me to a whole new level of pain.

“Valve compromised. Quarantine protocols in motion.”

‘No. Wait!’

Brian and I programmed this to happen, but to realize it's happening... No, there must be another way. ‘Reroute—’ It's too late.

Clamps slice through bone and tendon, through metal and wire, into the deepest

regions of the dark abyss. I spiral down into the gray, through the slush and rage, panicked by the loss. Tiny probes grind against my face shield. It won't be long before they make their way inside, and this time it won't be just a leg they destroy. Sensors try to pick up the missing limb, but it's gone, likely consumed and replicated, host to a thousand million microscopic vampires.

“Power fifty-eight percent. Sensors unable to contact surface.”

New alarms accompany my slow descent into the nanobots' universe, and their statistics remain a vague and pointless spiral into oblivion. Foremost, the suit's brief leak has drained a large amount of argon, and without the gas to form the plasma channels in the high temperature circuits, I'm losing control faster than I can reroute non-vital operations. One-by-one systems shut down. First, by design, go the exterior defenses. Next come the motors responsible for movement. At this depth neither can really help me. The Tide's density both blocks my attempt to charge the water and keeps forward momentum to a minimum. My suit's barely able to keep me alive.

What reserves remain route to the encephalo-mechanics. Soon as the power's sufficient failover routines kick-in, and quantum drives start the arduous task of memory and emotion backup. Ejection pods encapsulate every five hundred petabytes. When I can no longer feel the body in free-fall, the mission's irony slaps me in the face. It's only a matter of time before the molecules in my body join the Tide, and nothing will stop our advance. Collectively, we'll wash over the world.

Those hackers can't possibly appreciate what they've created. This plague's not something us humans can control. The air-borne swarms remain proof of that. Those are

new. Not integrated information, no not consciousness, not yet, but these creatures have shown the capacity for self-driven evolution.

Kick, Jane.

With what? A thought disconnects the suit's alarms, but the silence only heightens my fear. With one leg and no motors to power my joints, I rest on a bed of microscopic aliens, my organics a veritable garden of delights. A steady vibration runs head to toe.

Fitting it should come to this. God has an odd sense of humor.

Really, Jane? Now you find religion?

Isn't that what us humans are supposed to do?

I don't know. Is it?

As the plague eats through my suit, the tingling in my left foot spreads into fingers and elbows. They're close. One more layer, maybe two. A final visual, cloudy through the visor, signals power at fifteen percent. The screens flicker. I hope the end's swift. We never designed these things to take their time. I shouldn't feel anything.

Now, now, Jane. You know that isn't true.

What, the feeling or the design?

Both.

I know.

Truth told, that's why I became a Pumper. Somewhere deep inside, I knew the mistakes I had made. Not to say this plagues my fault. Or anybody's really. When the world heard the words cheap, abundant, and life extending, funding came from everywhere. Crafty politicians and corporations changed a lot of minds when it came to nanotech's immense promise. To blame someone now for this misstep, it can't be done.

That's all well and good, Jane, but how's your free conscience going to save us?

Maybe it shouldn't.

You giving up?

Not at all. You misunderstand.

Suddenly, the alarms return. A million voices shout my name.

Jane! We have you!

What starts as a pinprick in the right elbow soon flares into both arms. Pain radiates through my joints and tendons. As clamps dig in, fingers instinctively curl into fists, and the suit seals off both appendages. Another pinprick alerts the leg. The Tide's inside my suit, and there's nothing I can do. Mind pods eject. Breath hastens, and the body begins to convulse. Hell, there's nothing instant about this, is there? A clamp digs into my neck. No, not yet. I'm not ready!

The microscopic machines make their way into the bloodstream. Artificial blood cells give way to the plague's advance. I can sense the Tide's hunger. Already, atomic forces work on tissue and cartilage, manipulating the organics. Cellulose feeds the nanobots' operations,

and like cancer, the machines spread. Clamps press ever so gently into my spinal chord. One snip, and I can end this. But I need more time. The mind files have not completely replicated. Come on! Hurry. Ten more seconds. The Tide...it's in the brain stem. I need more—

Too late.

Darkness.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Booting up...

“Jane?”

For a short time, I let the processes run. Certain things happen too fast to question. Others require guidance, a master system to organize. Charge the drives. Scan the escape pods. Neural networks branch out, a million, no trillion, no...never mind. New connections bring awareness to the dark. Ten exaflops encompass a lot of memories. I work through the years, childhood, teen, young adult. Systems demand new keys. I entangle the photons.

“Jane.”

Data corruption reports back at 6.8 percent. I've lost a few years. Eighteen remains a blur. Probably for the best. Twenty-six, well, that's a rough one. Communication channels

open. I ask the obvious questions. Diagnostics report all systems back online.

Eyes open.

What happened?

A man sits with his back turned. We're in a boat, no a rowboat, all wood, approximately six meters long. Broad shoulders work a set of oars. Ocean water, clean and clear, drips from the paddles' blades.

"You okay?" The man doesn't bother to look back. Oars dip into the water. "Quite an alarm that suit sent out." The boat enters a dense fog. I lose the man but not his voice. Spectral frequency analysis confirms what instincts already know. I run a second diagnostic. Yep. There's no mistaking that tone—that slow irritating everything is nothing emotionless tone.

"Brian?"

We exit the fog bank. Curiously, there's no sign of the airborne Tide. Sunlight peeks through breaks in the clouds. Come to think of it, there's not much sign of the Tide anywhere. It's gone!

With one muddy hand, I lean over the rail and dip into the water. Buoys broadcast their kill codes, but my nanofactories don't seem to care. I'm spitting out bots by the millions. Sensors indicate a significant upgrade, eighth generation, in fact.

Which begs the question—

A wave seizes the rowboat. Thrown to the deck, arms and legs flail as saltwater

sprays my face. Soon I'm back on my seat, curiously stabilized and staring at Brian's back. He's yet to acknowledge my predicament. Hairy arms (yes, there's hair on my arms now) flick away the wet.

"No, no, I got it. I'm fine." Seems nothing's changed between us. Always on my own with this man. With ocean water dripping from my cheeks, muddy sleeves drag across pasty white knees. The skin's texture—fibrous and bristling with sensitive electrodes—confirms my worst fears.

"Jesus, Brian. You've got to be kidding me. You put me in Howard?"

Finally my father turns. In that ridiculous brown tweed suit the man's the spitting image of every miserable memory we've shared. Misty droplets plaster a bushy brown beard.

"The Savior becomes the Saved, no? It's good to see you again, Ms. Speller."

"No, I'm done with that. You've gone too far this time." If the man dare taps his temple to remind me who might be watching, I'm going to leap over this deck and strangle something.

"Please, Jane. Humor me. It's still not safe out here."

Strangely, the anger won't come to let me scream. "Look at me, Father." The name tastes strange on my lips. He's been Brian, or Mr. Gerwzer, so long I hardly recognize the sound. Despite Howard's influence, my hands are shaking. "This can't wait."

Set deep in the folds of heavy thoughts and even heavier responsibilities, my father's gaze peeks out from a shaggy veil of curly bangs. "You're right. I suppose."

My father reaches for the oars and pushes hard for the closest buoy. ‘I suppose?’ Are you serious? Years together in the same labs, colleagues separated by father’s fears of espionage and outdated HR policies, don’t disappear overnight, especially with quantum-backed memory drives, but after all these months apart, weeks in seclusion, no message to indicate his whereabouts, that’s the answer I get? ‘I suppose!’ That Jane Speller reference was bad enough (one third grade spelling bee and I’m branded for life). Howard’s sudden appearance only pushes me closer to the edge.

There is no shame in your actions, Jane. My death was predetermined. Our father allowed this to happen.

You get out of here!

I don’t blame you.

I said get out of here.

It is you inside me. Howard reminds.

Settling in next to a rusty transmitter, my father reaches into his coat pocket. Electrodes in the skin indicate significant wireless interference.

“Where would you like to start?” he asks.

I jab an artificial finger into my spongy skull. “This Howard upload would be a good place. I’m freaking out here!”

Brian nods. I mean, my father. Suddenly, neurons fire and memory banks retrieve several files, the first which takes me back to a scene in his lab, barely a week before we

decide to power Howard on. I'm staring down at a half assembled cortex, its artificial corpus callosum exposed between the two spheres. Brian's hand...my father's...is guiding me towards an antique PCB with two old fashioned soldered transistors. He tells me it's an FM radio. "In case the world takes him from us," he states. "This will bring him back. Howard must never be lost."

The memory fades.

"I knew somebody would get to him eventually. No matter how convincing a case we made."

Evolution, Howard interrupts, almost as if reading from some script the two share, *remains an unequivocal quality of our people, Jane. Unfortunately, so too does its counterpart.*

Stop this. "Both of you!"

It is the truth.

My father nods. "To fear change is no less human than to accept its futility."

Slowly, my arms lift (or should I say Howard's arms), and the rear oars slide into my palms. Though it's the last thing I want to do, I start rowing, towards the distant piers.

I said stop that!

When we get back to shore, things will make more sense. Howard's neural net entangles my synapses, and for a terrifying minute we share the same memory. From two viewpoints, my laser slices the man's carotid. Then my knife twists into his fleshy skull.

Howard crumples. I run away sobbing. My father rushes in. Howard's eyes remain open. "It is surprisingly cold," Howard says. "Come find me when it is time." Father covers the man in his lab coat and walks away.

It is not a simple feat to pretend the love of a father no longer matters. We share many struggles, don't we?

Shock veils my disgrace. How dare he compare—Howard moves a finger to wipe the seawater from my eye.

It is okay to be angry.

Please stop this.

It is okay to cry.

The rowboat pushes forward, over waves that threaten to capsize the tiny vessel. While Howard and I slide across the bench, unsteady in our effort to share one body, the man across us sits confidently, unbothered by the turbulent sea.

Suddenly, Father's head rears back, and he tumbles from his seat. My fist comes away bloody at the knuckles.

"What was that for?" he cries.

I laugh. Father pushes back to his seat, but the man's suit is soaked and pants torn. Removing his jacket, he throws the old relic into the water. A second later, his expression flattens. Beyond the chaos, a man apart from what the world holds most troublesome, my father studies the problem before him—calm and agonizingly collected. It was a look I

always thought worthy of a good punch to the nose, if only to get a response.

You're welcome. Howard whispers.

My smile widens. "I *suppose* you deserved that," I say.

"If you say so."

Far off, the airborne Tide peeks above several thick fog banks. Its watery counterpart remains mysteriously absent.

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Which one?"

"Any of them really."

Sensors indicate the man activates several programs. I can't get Howard to block transmission. He's reading my vitals. "Interesting. You're still afraid of the Tide. Why?"

"Are you serious? Civilization...I mean, everything...it's about to be wiped out. The Pumpers failed, Father. Our twelve wasn't enough. We can't stop—"

"I never liked that Pumper approach," he says. "Too wasteful, if you ask me. You have so much more potential, Jane. When were you going to wake up and realize it? I'm tired of watching you play in those VR worlds of yours. What's the point?"

"Father," I growl. "Where'd the Tide go?"

"Who's to say it went anywhere?"

Several swells rock the boat as Howard turns my head towards the rails. Down deep in the water, beyond the depth that eyes should see, darkness waits, clever in its quiet. Father and Howard continue to row. Deep brown eyes squint against the bright sunlight. “Let’s just consider everything that’s happened to this point an unfortunate lesson.”

Despite Howard’s resistance, I force the nanobots to stimulate our amygdala, and raw anger floods the senses. Is he really suggesting? Several waves pound the rowboat.

“What are you up to, Brian?”

“You played a part in this too, dear. Remember? These things needed to happen.”

“Millions have died.”

“As they will again.” His matter-of-fact tone stirs frustration’s cauldron. I want to clench fists, but Howard won’t let me. “Progress does not preclude tragedy. You’d be foolish to assume perfection in anything we humans do. This Tide is no different. We deny Howard when the world most needs him.”

“You’re a madman.”

My father seeks my hand. “No, dear. A realist. The Tide, you ask? It’s below us, ensuring that mankind will welcome Howard into their world. We’ve come too far to stop now.”

My father’s self-confidence, once nurtured by science, now bolstered by something else, sits heavy in my heart. I hardly know the man (not that I ever claimed insight). Squinting, the sun bright and disruptive, I watch him row. Calm. Collected. Triumphant. The

thought cannot be repressed before it forms.

No, he didn't create the Tide. I won't believe that. He's only using it to his advantage.

"Timing's everything," my father says as the pier makes contact. Howard grabs a rope and ties us off. Art's assistants help us from the boat. A long row of observers waves from the streets. Police have the pier sectioned off.

"Did you do this?" I'm forced to ask.

"In the past," he reminds. "Let's enjoy our moment."

"But—"

"Jane, it's going to get loud again. Real soon. Enjoy the quiet."

From its rocky shores, San Francisco blows a chilly kiss. The wind cools the sun's incessant imprint. Had I a jacket I'd pull it close. Howard stretches his legs as I sit back, determined to let him take the lead. Maybe, Father's right. Quiet can be good. I think better when it's quiet. Reporters assail the pair. Brian says little in his push towards my uncle, who waits like the others beyond the police line. Anxious fans mob Howard. Protestors, a good number sporting wearable tech, shout their curses from the street.

Yes, Jane. It's in the past. Time to move forward again. Internal clocks remind that the twelve approaches, but Howard silences the alarm. *You've got real work to do.*

Yes, I do, don't I? And you two aren't going to make it any easier. I guess it's time for that upgrade. *You'll put me in something, won't you?*

In something we can keep an eye on. Although the mechanics feel unfamiliar,
Howard swallows. *I mean to keep you safe, of course.*

Naturally. Bots work blood into wind-chilled fingertips. A trillion little circuits
monitor our every movement. In here, there's nothing Howard can do I won't be ready for.
"God bless these little miracles," I whisper. Howard cocks his head, curious at the reference.

But the Devil hopes we keep them under control. He replies.

Indeed. A clever hack sees the man suddenly separated from my side of the wall.
Immediately, I start re-encrypting mind files. Howard struggles to get through, but I've
learned a few tricks as a Pumper. I'm not going anywhere, you two. Somewhere deep in the
water, The Tide awaits the world's decision on Howard. Deeper still, Jane Gerwzer does the
same.