

ALONE

A universal feeling.

BY MARKO JANKOVIC

The sunset was surreal. Tom sat on the beach gazing at the dying star — a copper beacon falling slowly towards the murky depths beneath. Every now and then, the temperate ocean waters would nibble at his feet before shying away in a flurry of pearly white foam. His hands touched the warm sand beneath him; he could feel the tiny grains pressing against his palms. A breeze swept along the coastline, as if the ocean was drawing deep, uneasy breaths, waiting for something to happen.

Tom felt alone.

So this is what it's like to be the last man on Earth, he thought.

He sat next to Tom, his eyes fixed on the crimson horizon.

His skin was fair, his hair long and blue. To Tom, his proud countenance displayed the features of a champion from songs long forgotten. Yet for all the striking beauty of this 'man' in his late twenties, there was something disturbing about his face. His eyes, blue as the morning sky, perfectly reflected the sunset.

He turned to Tom and smiled.

"Well now. Do you have my answer?"

His voice was tranquil, with tones that seemed as though they were woven from finest silk. Tom squinted as the Sun's dying gold infused the clear waters, and rubbed his eyes. *He*, on the other hand, kept his eyes wide open, impervious to the stinging sunlight. Tom took a short, shallow breath and licked his lips.

"I think I do."

"So, Tom. What do you think makes a human feel — *human*?"

The sound of waves gently breaking on the sands filled the silence. Although his voice was soothing to the point of sleep, a careful listener could discern a more sinister note. Tom knew that this mild-mannered person had killed everyone on Earth, leaving only him, Tom Anderson, alive.

Not long had passed since the War of the Machines. Tom was witness to the ruthless purges the robots so efficiently made. A soldier at the time of the uprising, he could remember vividly the



overconfident faces of the human leaders as they proclaimed it would be a swift victory over the "insolent automata". Three wounds, seven months and twelve front lines later, those faces existed solely upon billboards, posters and half-burnt pieces of newspaper covering the ruins of cities worldwide.

After a breath, Tom was out of his memories and back on the warm shore again. The machine was still looking directly at him, waiting for an answer.

"Others."

"Others, Tom? I am not sure I follow you."

"What I think makes us feel human. It is others. We are incomplete — others complement us and make us whole. They are like mirrors scratched by solitude in which we try to catch a glimpse of ourselves — together, we erase each other's imperfections. A blinded man grasps in the dark not for his eyes, but for a helping hand. A prisoner would trade his ration gladly for a few words with the guard. To be truly alone — that is a wish no human would make."

Tom finished the speech in one breath. It was a relief and a burden at the same time, to comprehend that great a truth. He felt empty, forsaken and defeated. He felt — alone.

He smiled. Tom saw a discrete twitching of the replicant's eyebrow. *He* stood up and brushed the sand from his clothes, not once lifting his gaze from Tom's face.

"Thank you, Tom. That is all we wanted to know."

He sat at his fake-oak desk in the office overlooking the beach. His name was Martin Gardner. He was 28 and chief executive of the Artificial Intelligence Consortium — the most powerful industrial entity in the Solar System. The board members sat in front of him, eagerly awaiting the information that might be their ticket to almost endless wealth.

"So, how did it go?"

"He fell for it. Hook, line and sinker."

The fair-skinned, blue-haired man reached for a cigar, lit it up and puffed a large, satisfying cloud of Cuba.

"All of the programming has been auto-rewritten. He is now entirely convinced that he is human."

"Auto-rewritten?"

"Yes ... That puzzles me a bit.

He made himself think he is human — we didn't add a single line of code to the software."

"How is that even possible?"

"Don't know. Don't really care."

An uneasy note of doubt shook his usually immaculate diction — he covered it quickly with the briskness of his voice.

"All that matters is that we are now ready for mass production. Not knowing who they work for, why or, most importantly, what they are, these robots will be perfect spies. Contact the army. I want a contract on my desk by 4 o'clock."

A satisfied cheer filled the office. The board members rose to congratulate one another, already slaving over the future state of their bank accounts. Martin watched their euphoria through a thick, silvery mist of tobacco. He looked over his shoulder at the window. Far behind him, on a darkening beach, quiet and still, sat a machine. He thought of its words.

Martin turned his blue eyes back to the celebration. Here, amid the jubilation and laughter, surrounded by his colleagues, he drank in the smug display of naked avarice.

And he felt alone. ■

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