Morgan’s eyes blinked open and rested upon the grimy ceiling above his bed. For a moment he remained tangled in the webbing of his multifaceted dreams, puzzled by sleep’s tranquil haze and not completely familiar with his surroundings. But soon a realisation so punitive and so unwelcome reached his understanding; it was as though a cold, cruel hand had suddenly seized his heart and wrenched it, pulling his entrails out in one swift action. It was his thirty-first birthday today.

He tossed in his bed and pondered the horror a person feels when they come face to face with a moment they have anticipated for years. A life like that made time your enemy, he mused. It made time a train, steaming towards a broken bridge, and he was powerless to stop the impending fall.

He thought about his daughter Megan and choked on a frustrated sob. Today he would have to leave her, in the hands of his irresponsible younger brother no less. It would be twenty four years until he would see her again, and thirteen she would spend alone without a parent of any kind. He cried softly and stared down at her cherub face, fast asleep in the cot next to his bed. Today he left the physical world and his graceless body behind. Today was his thirty-first birthday.

Today was his upgrade.

He’d dreaded this day for as long as he could remember. Many years ago he would pester his mother and ask, as only a child could, why the upgrade was necessary. He would follow his question up with a fumbled testimonial to stay human forever. After his little speech she would laugh at him in that tinkling way of hers that resembled wind-chimes and ruffle his curly hair. He remembered her upgrade with despair. Only now he recognised she didn’t want to go; like him, she had been forced.

‘The upgrade’ is the uploading of a human consciousness into the Software. This was the definition provided by the Dominion’s textbook, studied in every school and recited by every child on the planet. It was discovered by an important scientist somewhere, somehow, during humanity’s desperate search for a cure. What disease had plagued the earth, no one remembered; but it had plagued every continent, spreading devastation and death. The upgrade provided salvation. Another quote.

It happened on a person’s thirty-first birthday, once they reach “full maturation”. A local politician would knock on your door, accompanied by two or three medicals, and they’d put you to sleep. Only it was a never ending, toneless sleep. Your body would die and you’d never see the world again – well, not the real thing anyway. A cheap copy, designed by fools in lab coats playing God. This was Morgan’s estimation, but he could never speak it out loud. He refused to endanger his daughter in that way, because to fight the upgrade was to fight the Dominion, and he was no rebel.

Morgan was a dishevelled, bristly, bland sort of man, with tired creases etched into his face from worrying over his infant daughter. He was bristly because his face was always shadowed with untidy stubble, and dishevelled due to the flannel shirt that was never completely tucked into his jeans. A general weariness dimmed his appearance, and the doubts he had hoarded over many years...
weighed upon his frail shoulders. He was only thirty-one but he looked much older. In fact, when Morgan walked out in public to buy milk, he would often receive odd looks here and there. The upgrade was usually performed early by the populace, so a gentleman older than twenty-four was a peculiar sight. Anyone who reached the maximum age was assumed to have children they were reluctant to leave behind.

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Morgan rolled out of bed, hurried into his clothes and crept out of his claustrophobic flat. It was four-thirty in the morning. Ghost-like, he hastened out of the village. He stopped at a vacant park, a stretch of green against the grey sky, and without a second thought he threw himself on the turf.

He lay with his back against the cool grass, gazing at the bleak sky above him. It wasn’t a particularly pretty sky. When his neck began to ache, he rolled onto his side and focused his attention on a daisy that brushed the tip of his nose. His eyes followed the curve of every petal, studied every yellow pocket of pollen, every blot, blur and blemish discolouring the floret. He lightly touched the tiny hairs on the dainty stem with his finger tips and marvelled at the intricate detail.

"Why did people want to leave a world full of such precision?"

He’d never admit it to another soul, but Morgan felt a strong dislike for the Dominion and the upgrade. Over the years it had captured relatives and kidnapped friends. It left children abandoned once their parents reached maturation. There were nurseries, of course, but he had grown up in one and he despised it. He didn’t want that for Megan.

He reached forward and plucked the daisy from its roots. He listened without emotion to the snap of its appendage and began rolling it between his fingers. Soon the petals will lose their colour and wilt, he mused, and the fragile body will fall limp and useless. A corpse. It would lie where he left it, to be trampled by the humans and ants that walked through this field. His rumination was interrupted as the first few drops of rain hit the hand that clutched the crumpled daisy. He looked down at it. In his big paw it looked as delicate as it was.

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When Morgan reached home, Megan was impatiently waiting for him.

"Daddy," she cried. "Don’t leave me."

They spent the day together, playing Go Fish. The knock at the door was punctual and the procedure was underway before either father or daughter had time to feel anxious. On his knee, Morgan stared up at his daughter’s distraught face and squeezed her fingers.

"I’ll be fine, baby," he lied. "You’ll see me real soon."

"All right Mr Gregory, you can close your eyes now," chirped the teenage medical.

He looked towards Megan and tried to hide his fear, whilst a tear slid down her cheek. He smiled weakly and closed his eyes. The needle pierced his skull.

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His first memory of consciousness was of being squeezed through a narrow tube. It was quickly followed with the sensation of being scattered into atoms, and every element fusing with another foreign component. It wasn’t pain he felt, but a feeling resembling it, like he was acutely aware he should be hurt, but none of the neurons transmitting their messages could pinpoint the location of damage. He looked down at his body for the source of discomfort, but was alarmed when he could no longer see it. Instead, all he could make out were numbers, letters and curious symbols, sprinkled across his vision in a disorderly tangle of code.

After a while he heard the words “Welcome to the System” form out of the chaos. *Manual to the Understanding of Your Upgrade: Chapter 1.*

It took him three weeks to form a basic understanding of the System and decode the induction file. It took a further seven before he could interact with other people and access sensoration (the ability to form an awareness using sensors). With this consciousness, he stored his memories into a file titled *Megan*, and began his pursuit for communication with the world he’d left behind.

* * *

Another two years passed before he saw Megan again. He was mastering the ability to download himself into web cameras from an ancient file he’d discovered in the hard drive of an old computer. In a tumult of emotion he watched her on her way to school from an old CTV camera in the abandoned library opposite. Through the cracked windows caked with dust he could just make out her face as she stepped in line with the other children.

And this is how he lived in the System, dancing from camera to camera, watching his daughter grow up without him. When he wasn’t doing this he was downloading file after file, desperately seeking a way to access a microphone or keyboard in the hope of communicating with her. It was in vain he pursued these archives, for the Dominion had decided long ago that interaction between the two worlds was problematic, and cut off all links. It was only through sheer luck he had chanced upon cameras. Hope was ever-present, and although it withered with each new disappointment, Morgan had immortality on his side.

On one of his regular visits to Megan’s apartment, he was witness to her upgrade. She was eighteen years old that day, the minimum age for transmission. She sat quietly as the medicals bustled around her.

“All right Miss, if you agree to the terms, just sign here if you please,” one of them instructed, as he handed her a tablet.

She swiped the screen and turned back to face him, completely oblivious to Morgan’s protests.

“BABY NO!” he yelled. “Live a little longer!”

But she could not hear him. She lay down and closed her eyes.

“See you soon, Dad,” she whispered.