

THE QUARRY

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Vainthrow

The takeover was swift and precise. It only took three days for the Liberstats government to impose their rule over the citizens of Vainthrow. All it took was a firing of flares and the power fetish of one man, the ruthless dictator President Kithgo. October 28th of 2057 marked day one, the beginning of a new period for the city's citizens. Vainthrow – a city marked by its obsession with technology, where street signs are holographic, and goods are distributed through self-service kiosks. Fronted by Kithgo, once a Lieutenant of the tactics division within the military, the Liberstats announced their plans for the city's future. To ensure civility and compliance with the new regime, Kithgo deployed the disciplinarians to patrol the streets. They represented the regime's most faithful adherents and were to occupy their thoughts with one sole aim - guard Kithgo's revolution.

Equipped with a precision rifle, Vainthrow's citizens were coerced into compliance by the disciplinarians.

On the large digital screen attached to the skyscraper of Titan Industries, the pale face of the President appeared. In a repressed compliance, those being held captive in the plaza looked upward at the screen with looks of horror. Drones filmed the central plaza address to ensure that viewers at home would not miss this pivotal moment in Vainthrow's history.

‘People of Vainthrow,

What you just witnessed was my fireworks display to you. A heartfelt welcome to you and the new era of civilisation we are about to embark on. In close alliance with science giant Titan Industries, we have developed a new system of living. It will alter you both physically and psychologically in a way that is, simply – better. Remain calm and follow the instructions. Let the disciplinarians be your guide...’

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Richard is an elderly man. He lives life on his lonesome after his wife fell victim to a deadly brain tumour. Richard longed for an extension of his life, for he felt that his time had been misspent. He devoted his entire life to working as a risk analyst in the finance department of Titan Industries. He would often clock sixty-hour working weeks, spending too much of his time inside the office at the expense of seeing his grandchildren grow up. On the day of the takeover, Richard was at home pruning the weeds of his home's garden bed. The violent explosion startled him and caused him to drop his hedge clippers and turn his attention to the smoke trail rising in the distance. Grabbing his cane, Richard hobbled his way into their modest sized home and switched on the daily news on his television. On the screen, Richard set his eyes on the following address by Kithgow:

‘... A turn of events, my people of Vainthrow. The Liberstats have partnered with Titan Industries, the forerunner in scientific innovation. As we both only want to advance human welfare, we created a dual-system of sorts...’

Richard had a vague idea what this was about. During his employment at Titan, he had overheard conversations about controversial tests being conducted in the Labyrinth. While biological ethicists had expressed their concerns, the financial and political might of the Liberstats was far too strong for the dissenters.

‘...The transfiguration pods - these capsules give you the power to control your physical appearance. They are also designed to add anywhere between sixteen and nineteen years to your life. For your convenience, we have organised courtesy trams to the GRIDS, the sites where these pods are placed. Upon completing this mandatory transfiguration, all citizens will be distributed an iD-Chip, a handheld device that must be possessed at all times. Please proceed to the GRIDS immediately. Failure to do so will result in forced evacuation.’

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Richard stared at the television screen in disbelief. What had his city become? He had several questions, yet the state of limbo he was in delivered him no answers. He knew of the atrocities that Kithgo had committed in the past. Whether it was the Grand Massacre that took place during the War of 2042, or experimentation on the debilitated at the close of the war, stories of Kithgo’s war crimes were common folklore in Vainthrow. Staring on, Richard observed the imagery captured by the flying drones. The plaza was unidentifiable. The fountain which once rhythmically spurted out water at the plaza’s centre had been covered by smog. He vaguely made out faces of desperation as they stood helplessly at the behest of individuals dressed in a khaki green. To Richard, this entire event resembled a military coup. He looked onward at the screen to see the disciplinarians holding necks in headlocks and small children being dragged without care. Bodies were being ushered into semi-trailers and driven to a place unknown to him. The media outlets reported the following:

‘MASSACRE AT VAINTHROW: LIBERSTATS RULE BY FORCE’

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Richard's eyes awoke to see the GRID site. He had been smothered and taken there after a disciplinarian knocked at his home's door. Surrounding him were people seemingly embracing the idea of transfiguration by the pod. The CPU, on the pod's exterior, allowed people to choose their new appearance. Each veiled by a thick white tarp and manned by a Liberstats disciplinarian. Those that waited their turn were not permitted to see their neighbours during the process. They would wait in confinement bays, fed glug and water by the authorities and instructed to wait patiently, sometimes days. Upon leaving the pod, people were given their handheld iD-Chip and sent back to their homes via the trams. From there, citizens had to follow the instructions on the iD-Chip's screen and continue living their days.

Richard was called to one of the pods. 'Richard... Alright, old man, you get one shot. What's it going to be?' Dressed in the khaki colours and proudly displaying the freedom stars of the Liberstats, the disciplinarian talked down at Richard's frail stature. Richard fixed his eyes on the CPU screen and attempted to make sense of the prompts. 'Just press the features you want, old mutt. You telling me you don't know tech?' Ignoring the reproaches, Richard perused through the list of features he could select for himself. A large part of him was curious about the process, reasoning that at last there was some excitement in his otherwise empty life. HAIR: luscious golden locks, or perhaps a simple, slick back? His hair was silver and thinning so he could do with a younger look. TORSO: a broad set of athletic shoulders, that ought to do it. After finalising all the essentials, Richard arrived at the most important consideration – AGE LIKENESS. 'Hurry up old timer! We're on a tight schedule here, and you ain't got any special privileges to be taking longer just because your hair is falling out'.

With caution, Richard typed 3-5 into the CPU and waited for the avatar of him to emerge on the screen. Projected on the CPU screen was a digital Richard, five decades younger and sporting a neat, slicked back hairdo. The squiggly indents on his forehead had disappeared, and his frame appeared reasonably muscled. While Richard felt deeply anguished by the political state of Vainthrow, a tiny fragment of his was thrilled with the prospect of added years. At this point, his curiosity had taken over, for he had not yet seen how people were emerging on the southern side. Standing behind a thick steel slab, Richard stripped himself of his clothes and placed them in a bucket labelled "CLOTHING DEPOSITS".

He lethargically carried his bony frame into the confined space of the pod. Numerous suction pads attached to dangling wires hung from the pod's ceiling. On the pod's back wall were fastened platinum shackles, one at the neckline and two presumably for the wrists. Lastly, there was a heavy leather belt that appeared to belong to the waist line. 'Alright old man, you ready yet?' Called the disciplinarian. Richard responded with a croaky affirmation. Richard was ordered to stand at the back wall. The disciplinarian affixed each suction pad to his body, one at each of his droopy nipples and one at the sternum. The belt was fastened tightly around his waist and, at disciplinarian's press of a button, the neck shackle loosely pulled his throat to the wall. It wasn't far off from a strangle hold. 'We will meet again on the southern side, old man.'

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'Greetings, #471, welcome to your new life, a world of possibility. All you need to rememb --- or - shall I say, do, is to follow the prompts on your viewfinder. Here is your ID-Chip, with compliments from President Kithgo and the Liberstats'. Richard was handed a handheld device with a screen. He noticed that the digits "471" were etched onto the plastic. He ignored a prompt on the screen to follow an introductory video, putting it aside for later. These GRID encampments were on the desolate outskirts of Vainthrow and all that Richard could see was the barren land on the horizon. They were a one-hour tram ride from the city centre which allowed for enough secrecy and continual surveillance. A faint call was heard in the distance to return to the tram station. Richard sluggishly followed the marked signs and returned to the arrival point, an area which he had no recollection of. Confusion immediately overcame him as he tried to make sense of his surroundings in a trance-like state. He felt blank, and it seemed that, at this point, that was all he was capable of feeling. As he entered the tram, he was met by the stares of unfamiliar people. Fellow human beings, but he had no label for them. It was as if he was processing information for the first time.

On the way back to the city centre, an announcement began to play through the loudspeaker inside the tram. Richard perplexed alongside the convoy of bodies left in waiting, listened attentively to the words spoken. 'It is normal to

feel dazed. This is new territory for you. Once you arrive home, get some rest. The turn of tomorrow will come and a new day awaits. Further instructions will appear on your iD-Chip.’ Richard looked down at his iD-Chip with its confusing list of functions and operations. The tram moved at its forty kilometres an hour as Richard sat idly staring out the tram window into nothingness. It seemed that everyone in the tram shared his confusion.

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The tram re-entered the residential district of Vainthrow and began to disembark the Vainthrow citizens. Each seated passenger looked out the glass window as the disciplinarian led each passenger back into their home. The return journey from GRID was made in complete silence. In between curious glances at the unfamiliar outside, passengers fixed their sights on screens of their iD-Chips. Recurring footage of turmoil and suffering met them. There were moving images of yelping mothers crying out for their infants, as well as a frame of an elderly woman trapped in the firm grip of a disciplinarian. It was difficult to bear the images of these people squirming for their survival. The subtext reeled at the bottom of the viewfinder screen:

‘THE EMANCIPATION: LIBERSTATS’ FIGHT TO VICTORY’

Richard mused over the tragedy of it all. He could only hope that he would never have to encounter anything like it in his lifetime.

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The tram pulled up on Richard's Street. He was led back inside his family home by a Liberstats disciplinarian. He opened the front gate and walked down the narrow strip of asphalt that led to the front door. Still rattled by his surroundings, Richard asked the disciplinarian ‘Where are we and what are we doing here?’ The Liberstats guide told him not to worry and commanded him to enter the dwelling. He explained that the only thing that Richard ought to worry about is following the instructions on the iD-Chip’s viewfinder. ‘This is a prosperous time. Consider yourself fortunate, #471.’ Richard could not understand why he should feel this gratitude and, more importantly, what this iD-

Chip even was. He entered the home and scanned the first room. His eyes met an impressive mahogany bookshelf positioned in the far left corner. Richard sluggishly moved over to the bookshelf to examine it. ‘#471, we recommend you rest your body. You ought to lie down and shut your eyes.’ The digits 4-7-1 echoed in Richard’s mind.

Images faced him as he approached the bookshelf. On the upper timber shelf lay a bundle of photos. Richard perused through them, processing the information contained therein. An image of an elegant lady, approximately in her mid-thirties, wearing a silky white gown. The silken fabric left a trail and extended behind her. It was the most beautiful image he had seen in his lifetime. She was clenching a bundle of flowers; a feature he had observed while walking into his home only moments ago. He wondered why she would pluck them from his front lawn. Beneath the image of the elegant figure lay another. He saw a man and a woman standing side by side, one with its arm extended around the shoulder of the other. They stared back at him with a joyful expression. Flipping the image on its back, its reverse side read:

Wilma and Richard – 50 Year Wedding Anniversary at Vainthrow Cottage
21st February 2057

Richard put both photos into his trouser pockets without the disciplinarian noticing him. His eyelids had become heavy and were beginning to close in on themselves. He determined the carpet to be a suitable resting spot and so without hesitation; #471 dozed off.

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Awoken by the sound of the iD-Chip, #471 rose from a deep sleep cycle. An announcement came through the viewfinder and the face of President Kithgo propped up on the screen. ‘As you have hopefully read by now, it is government policy that you maintain a faithful record of the places you visit and the people you interact with. Use the camera inbuilt to the iD-Chip. Data collection makes us *better*.’

An hour later, #471 ventured out of the unknown dwelling. The sun shone brightly, and the streets filled with others walking with their eyes immersed in their viewfinder. #471 remembered Kithgo's instruction and took out the iD-Chip. The two photos he snatched earlier emerged as well. #471 withdrew them and curiously studied them. His eyes gazed at the two figures dressed in their formal attire, a male wearing a suit and tie with his arm around the shoulder of what appeared to be his wife. Something seemed strange in these images. Upon leaving the front walkway, as instructed, he switched on the iD-Chip's camera to record his daily events. #471 pondered the photograph again. Wife...

He aimed the lens at the street and took a snapshot of the holographic street sign. Instantaneously, the iD-Chip assigned a default label to the photo:

No. 471: Memory #1