

Yet Another

The day passed in a slow and monotonous manner, like all those that had come before it. Roger, seated at his desk with his eyes focused on the screen, watched as a seemingly endless list of tasks passed through it. And, one by one, he attended to them, only to watch each be banished afterwards in some remote corner of the Ministry's central servers, fallen into oblivion.

Work never ceased. Name after name, the files paraded before him, a number so utterly excessive as to be ludicrous. He did not know the criteria that were followed to select the "expendables", since he was not part in that process. Without a doubt, another employee —or a group of them— as anonymous and efficient as he was took charge of that task, or perhaps it was a machine. It made no difference. The jobs accumulated, they needed to get them off the ground, and so he fulfilled his duties just like his co-workers did.

He raised his head and looked around. The room might as well have extended to infinity, as he could not see the back of it. Inside, there were many rows of workspaces, separated by aisles wide enough for two people to walk down them simultaneously with little room to spare. Within each cubicle, there was a desk, a chair, a filing cabinet, a computer, and a worker seated in front of it. Most of them dressed similarly, in shades of grey or blue, jacket and tie, while others wore just a plain shirt. Some had personalised their workstations with ornamental objects such as plants or similar items. Folders filled with reports were exchanged, an attempt at a trivial conversation emerged somewhere, a phone rang, a printer spat out pages. It was like any other office.

He looked down. For the umpteenth time he noticed the silver-plated frame to his right, with the girl smiling in a sincere and convincing manner inside it. He had found the photograph on his first day, perhaps forgotten by

the employee from whom he had inherited the position. He was not acquainted with the young woman at all, but she was certainly beautiful and had an air of mystery, as if she were privy to a secret beyond Roger's comprehension, or as if she had access to a source of happiness he would never enjoy. Regardless, he liked it, so he had decided to leave it there. That had been several years back.

He focused on the next assignment, the last person whom the Ministry had judged to lack any usefulness and hence had no need to continue existing. He read the name, the biography, and looked over the picture. He wondered, as he had done so many times before, what could be the reason. Maybe he had simply grown old —the age was not stated and little could be inferred from the image, because all adults showed the same worn-out and resigned appearance— or fallen ill, something which was almost prohibitive in those days. Maybe there was no job suited to his abilities, or his output yield had decreased. There was also the possibility that he was a dissident, an activist, someone who had said or thought —with the Antares, both were one and the same now— something that he should not have.

It was too late anyway. Roger dragged the mouse pointer over the **"PROCESS"** button, hesitating for only a couple of seconds. He clicked it, there was a short pause, and miles away, someone fell as if struck down, just another figure to add to the statistics. The coldness and efficiency of it would likely have frightened his forebears. There was not really any need for his intervention. The whole workflow could have been automated, but due to some obscure legal reason, it was required that a human executed the last command for the governmental apparatus to declare it all in order. It was lacking in logic indeed, but such was the omnipotent and stifling system he worked for: illogical, efficient and ruthless. Nothing was left for chance and all was cautiously calculated, even within the irrationality. Everything had to be done according to procedure, oppression included.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to relax and remove the thought of having just killed a man from his mind. It was by no means his first, but it always provoked an inner anguish to which he could never be-

come accustomed, even after many years, nor did he have the confidence to believe it would ever disappear.

When he opened them again, his own face scrutinised him from the monitor.

He remained motionless for a few moments, trying to understand the situation. It could not be, it had to be a mistake. The next assignment was HIMSELF, the system demanded that he ended his own life. How could that be true? Had really the bureaucracy, the state's inner workings reached such folly? He re-examined the screen repeatedly, reluctant to believe it, but his eyes were not deceiving him: that was undoubtedly his own file. It was all madness! No one had noticed the foolishness that entailed to request a man to terminate his precious existence. That, or...

He approached the matter clinically, as he had been indoctrinated to do when he first got his job, and again at every biannual assessment thereafter. It could all be about a test to check his loyalty as an employee. In that case, his life was not really at risk, but his contract was. Or perhaps it was nothing but a computer error, kind of like the ones that emerged constantly. Almost with certainty the system would have included safeties to prevent the very person in charge of the purge to become a victim of it.

Yes, he was sure. He had been so naive to get scared in such a way. A sense of guilt and failure replaced both his fear and self-preservation instinct. He had been stalling for several minutes already, considering the issue, and this caused a growing anxiety. He had to make a decision, to do something. He turned his head from side to side. He imagined himself being observed and judged by his peers, in his mind they were all wondering about the delay. He then became the weakest link, a hindrance, the cause of an efficiency loss at the sacred Ministry. His output yield, he thought. The next evaluation... Would he be subjected to the Antares that time?

Not actually thinking about what he was doing, due to the instinct created by a well-rehearsed movement over the years, he moved the pointer to the **"PROCESS"** button. And like the hard-working and dependable employee he was, like the piece of the mechanism he was a part of, he accomplished his mission. He clicked the button.

He collapsed instantly, dead.

Patrick entered the office carrying his few belongings in a brown box that looked as unremarkable as he did. He introduced himself to the manager, and after a brief and polite conversation, the latter asked him to follow him to his desk. He felt in high spirits and full of energy. He was young, it was his first job, and he needed it, especially with a dependent at home. Many people would have killed for a permanent contract at the Ministry.

He arrived at his desk and prepared to organise it to his liking. He then noticed the photograph. It was framed and placed to his right. It portrayed a young woman —quite beautiful, he thought— who smiled at him with a mysterious aura, almost a knowing look. He assumed the previous worker had forgotten it there. He opted to leave it where it was. Maybe someone would return to get it, and he liked it anyway.

He took a seat and booted up the computer, ready to start his workday. He was intrigued as to what tasks he would carry out, and a little nervous due to the pressure associated with avoiding the mistakes of a novice and not disappointing anyone. He had to get ahead in a world that was so alien to him. All around him, the floor heaved with activity as always. He logged in and the data was loaded.

His first assignment was his own brother.