**To the Brink**

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The world was filled with constants and variables. High in the electric sky the mighty spotlight shone unnatural warmth over the 3D rendered landscape that Hiram could not feel but easily sensor.

In the unmanned man-made world, Hiram paddled through the sea of data on his plastic bottle raft. The end of his oar effortlessly divided a liquid list of names, ages, and places into ripples of undistinguishable lives until it struck a loud *boink* on the rusty hinges of an antique, crumbling book. At the sound, a flock of wiregulls took off from the steel branches of a great electric tree, singing in binary as they flew away, ones and zeros echoing through the landscape, bouncing off two rows of computing towers.

Hiram scouted. On the pixelated east bank, a pack of feral holographic dogs darted up a hill of containers then down a valley of packages, in search of leftover bytes. On the other side, the moldable marshes sculpted vinyl houses next to polymer farms, a skyscraper of glasses, then a synthetic playground where petroleum boys played soccer with a propane ball, never scoring.

Nothing out of the ordinary so far.

He zoomed in but couldn’t see in the distance. There was not enough processing power left to render past a certain point. Behind him, the other electric trees were already becoming cubist shapes, and would soon fade away into eternal nothingness. Hiram tried not to process the idea and kept his focus forward.

As the digital stream was about to branch off into two narrow channels, a lithium battery ad popped up out of the data and blocked the path. Hiram tripped from the shock and fell back on the plastic planks. He was forced to wait. 10, 9, 8, 7 seconds, as thousands of places, hobbies, shopping lists and memories swam around him. He saw kings suffocating, the fall of empires, a city of ashes, an awful movie about people swaying lightsabers around, a metallic arm fishing bones out of a brown greasy puddle... 3, 2, 1. 0. He tapped on the cross with his paddle and the ad popped down. He could finally go on and steered toward the left channel, skillfully avoiding the other one, which led to the edge, to shapeless lines and lines of code.

The raft drew swifter, the paddle felt stronger, and Hiram grew hopeful. But the software had something else in mind. The stream bended left and right and flickered hectically until it settled into a straight line. Hiram shivered as the artificial lights grew dim and dozens of borderless screens spawned on both sides of the stream. And with a click a smiling man appeared, under which the words “Human Pictures Ltd.” followed, and the show started.

Hiram first passed in front of inexpressive men throwing lifeless naked bodies onto a mountain of others. Then the next screen showed bony kids begging on a street as a diamond vehicle whooshed past, covering the boys in muck. The third screen simply displayed three books on altars, before which billions of beings were kneeling. Dozens of other scenes followed. Scenes of cruelty, of neglect, of indifference and pure malevolence. Hiram processed some, and some others were too foreign for his system, but he gasped as his raft stopped short before the final screen. On it, the Professor was rambling incoherently. Except it wasn’t the Professor Hiram had known. There was rage in his eyes, foam at his mouth, and strange bits under his nails. Hiram knew why. He knew what they were trying to do. The Professor had warned him. And he had been clear, milliseconds before his digitalized mind was wiped out when the Global Crash happened. “There is a safe place,” he had said. “Bring her there.” Time was of the essence. But time was not linear anymore, and it felt like a miracle would be required for Hiram to hold his promise.

When the rambling stopped, a maniacal laugh echoed through the level, from one cell to the other, and distorted the Professor’s face in a terrifying grin just as the current grew stronger.

Hiram plunged his paddled into the data, but it was no use. The current grew stronger and stronger, and he could do nothing to change the course of his raft. A shape appeared in the distance, which soon became a piece of land that drew closer and closer. Hiram sighed some static and threw his paddle away. He accepted his fate. He couldn’t avoid it. The raft crashed on a reef of TV stands and Hiram was brutally ejected forward onto the microchip sand.

“01110011 01101000 01101001 01110100,” he thought.

He looked around in despair, feeling purposeless. But the Mighty Narrative had granted him one last gift and he gasped when he saw it. The end of the voyage. For finally he found what had been lost. On a pile of discarded junk, a small little thing was curled up in an oxygen-full bubble box—her body flesh and bones, her breath drawing thin strings of smoke that expanded into splendid pillars as soon as it reached the deoxidized air. It was the strangest sight Hiram had ever witnessed.