

Interface

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The sound came first, as it always did. A swirling muttering of incomprehensible noise ate at the edges of his consciousness, a baritone undercurrent overlaid with urgent chirps and insistent yet calculatingly persuasive voices. Dreams of warmth and solitude evaporated in a mist as his mind rearranged itself to the new reality of sound. Approaching wakefulness, dancing visions now imposed themselves, projected onto his retina. Proud brightly colored banners overlaid with text bounced, notifications at the periphery flickered on and off, messages scrolled here and there, and advertisements all competed for his attention. He lay still for a long minute, struggling to focus on his breathing, a purely physical sensation that might be called his own. Abandoning the attempt, his eyes flickered open and focused after a brief moment on the grey peeling ceiling of his unadorned room.

Titus slipped from his bed, struggled briefly for balance, groped at the wall, and retrieved his robe off its hook. Pulling the robe over his thin trembling shoulders, he dug in the pocket and retrieved his first two painkillers of the day, gulping them down a dried raw throat as he stumbled for the door. Head lowered, he navigated the empty corridors of the building, the slaps of his footfalls on the bare concrete echoing against the smooth walls. He trudged, half blind and half blinded, along the well-worn path trod by all residents, down the stairs towards the exit. The whole while a persistent rectangle of white light was flashing near the center of his vision, dominating the other myriad graphics that flitted about. A woman's voice joined the other sounds bouncing around the interior of his skull, repeating over and over, "Work now. Work now. Work now." There was no way of knowing if the voice was synthetically generated, or if somebody, somewhere, was sitting at a desk repeating those words into a microphone. Regardless, Titus felt compelled to obey.

The eroding pavement of the sidewalk, laid half a century before, stretched out before him. He shuffled along, shoulders hunched, feet sweeping across the cracks and crunching on the loose gravel that wavered in and out of focus. His mind drifted, his attention distracted by the swirling colors and wash of sound originating from his Interface. Subtle cues constantly danced at the periphery of his vision, unconsciously prodding him right and left as he walked, guiding him through his surroundings along the algorithmically optimal route to his destination. Unexpectedly, to both Titus and his Interface, he collided suddenly with an unknown object in his path, interrupting his scheduled progress. He halted and raised his head, struggling to look beyond the opaque wall of his Interface for an explanation. Before him stood an old man, hair combed neatly across his forehead, his skin wrinkled with age but still somehow almost glowing with vigor. The old man smiled warmly and stared back with the brightest, clearest blue eyes Titus could remember having seen. The man reached out slowly, gently, laying his hand on Titus's head in a comforting manner. The man opened his mouth, and was about to speak, but the warm touch of the man's hand had run as a shock through Titus. Titus jerked away, recoiling from the man's intimate touch. He twisted his body protectively and averted his gaze as he shuffled sideways off the edge of the sidewalk, focusing on the familiar navigation cues of his Interface blinking with corrective navigational instructions. His brief moment of shock and confusion at this strange shining man passed quickly, and his eyes glazed over once again as he

submitted to the familiar gentle prodding of the navigational cues. The whole time, the monotonous looped message played in the center of his vision, the avatar likeness of Boss repeating the words “Work now. Work now. Work now.”

After some time, during which the promptings from Boss had increased in volume and brightness to the point of requiring several extra painkillers, the navigational cues ceased and Titus found himself in familiar surroundings. He was inside a building with walls the usual unadorned and dirty grey, standing at the doorway to a small similarly grey room. In the room a single rickety chair stood in front of a panel arrayed with buttons. A prominent button at the center of the panel was flashing red. A last loop of the “Work now” notification from avatar Boss played over his Interface, then faded away. Titus sat at the chair, reached his arm out, and pushed the button. It stopped flashing.

Hours passed as Titus sat slumped in the chair, half scanning the control panel, and half absentmindedly focusing on the various feeds arriving through his Interface. Occasionally a light on the panel would flash, at which point he would coax his creaking body to action, reaching out to impose his will on the button, extinguishing its inner light. The whole time his Interface was a flurry of activity, bombarding him with light and noise, all but drowning out his task. As time passed he struggled more and more to retain any semblance of focus on the outside world and the array of buttons. He downed more painkillers as his headache increased, but they proved inadequate. His headache was soon joined by a confusing pain tearing at the depths of his stomach. It was an empty gnawing, only now successfully competing for attention with the mass of shouting within his head. Hot sweat gathered on Titus’ face and neck, dripping down under his robe. A high-pitched ringing bounced around between his ears, but he wasn’t aware that it originated not from the Interface, but from the culmination of deep-seated illnesses associated with the long-term neglect of his physical body. Titus’ conscious mind was being extinguished; neither the Interface nor the buttons were registering. His thoughts were collapsing in on themselves. First to go was his vision, as the flashing from the Interface faded out. He barely saw and did not comprehend as first one and then a second button on the panel lit up. His head slumped down, his chin resting on his chest. His hearing was already gone by the time his Interface started braying the urgent warning, overriding all other feeds. Titus was again in a world without light, without sound, without surroundings, without Interface.

Titus woke for the second time that day, his sweat now cold and soaking the front of the robe. For the second time his senses were welcomed by the sights and sounds of the Interface before those of the world of the concrete, and for the second time he was saddened at the loss of the tranquility of empty unconsciousness. For the first time, however, he was startled into clarity by the urgent braying noise overwhelming all other input from the Interface, which had in fact been playing to his dead ears for the better part of an hour. Looking at the control panel in front of him, Titus saw that every light, every single one, was flashing rhythmically. His stomach muscles tightened reflexively in fear, accompanied by other long forgotten emotions of urgency and panic. He kicked the chair away and leapt up, thrusting his arms at the buttons, pushing, desperately pushing. Regardless of how many buttons he pushed, or how hard, the situation remained unchanged. The lights continued their synchronized mechanical flashing.

After several swirling breathless minutes of action, and upon recognizing the futility of his efforts, Titus righted the chair and sat in it, defeated. He stared at the panel in disbelief and confusion. The buttons on the panel didn't respond, and his Interface gave him no instructions. The avatar Boss did not appear. All he received were generic broadcast messages, the ever-present advertisements, and news feeds.

Titus sat for several minutes, his arms hanging dead at his sides and his heartbeat slowing. As he sat, staring impotently at the panel, his attention was drawn slowly to one of the news feeds playing at the periphery of his vision. The news feed, accommodately, expanded and centered itself in his view. A concerned looking news avatar recited how, just minutes before, the area had experienced a massive nuclear energy generation plant failure. A runaway reaction in one of the plant's reactors had caused an explosion. Perhaps millions were dead, an entire city obliterated. The cause was unknown, as of yet.

Titus blinked, and the news feed vanished. His vision started to adjust to his physical surroundings. For the first time today he was able to push the Interface feeds from his mind as his eyes scanned the control panel in front of him. He carefully examined the lights and their associated labels which he now noticed, and remembered hazily from years before and his early Interface-mediated work indoctrination. One label read "vent steam," another "disconnect turbine." His gaze eventually came to the discolored brass plaque screwed to the wall above the control panel. It read "Reactor B Remote Operation Station."

It was clear now. The destruction had been his doing. The radiation pouring into the atmosphere, the murdered millions of unaware innocents, it was all on his head. His knowledge was sparse; he wasn't sure what his responsibilities were, what he had failed to do, or why the backup systems had failed to operate. Perhaps the backup operators had failed in their tasks similarly to how Titus had. Or perhaps he was the backup operator.

The outside world blurred as Titus' eyes filled with tears, but the images of the Interface remained clear. Some inane video, accompanied by a rollicking laugh track, misjudged Titus' needs and took it upon itself to invade the center of his vision. Titus shook his head in despair and disgust, but the video remained, pushing at what remained of his sanity. And it was then that Titus came to a new realization. The deaths were not his. They were not on his head. It was the Interface. That jagged piece of silicon in his head, which sucked his will and in return poisoned him, which had driven him off his mind and into unconsciousness, was the cause of this terrible event. It was the Interface that dulled his senses, his feelings for the world around him, his sense of himself. It was the Interface that had caused this catastrophe to occur. And it was the Interface that must be held accountable.

Titus ran from the room, into a hallway that he didn't recognize. His Interface, sensing his urgency and exertion levels, chimed in helpfully with a dramatic accompanying musical score, driven beats pounding synchronized with his steps. He ran down the hallway lined with doors through which he saw operators sitting at controls similar to his own. Some of the operators stared confused at their dormant panels, while others waiting complacently and futilely for the buttons to illuminate. At the end of the hallway Titus found a door leading not to a control room, but to a small storage closet lined with shelves on which were piled rusting and neglected tools.

His blood pounded faster and faster as he entered the room, and the Interface brought the music to a roaring climax of drums and cymbals. Titus reached for a screwdriver on the shelf with one hand, and felt for the small bald patch and bump on the back of his head with the other. He clenched his teeth, sank to his knees, and drove the tip of the screwdriver through the skin, working it underneath the lump of silicon, twisting and prying at the source of all happiness, sadness, and motivation, his only friend, and his only enemy, for all these years. With a crunch heard audibly in the room, and a silent synthetic scream reverberating through his nervous system, the misshapen lump came free and fell dead to the ground. His eyes, blurred now only by tears and pain, unobstructed by banners and lights, saw only the small lump of black on the concrete floor. His ears were no longer subjected to the ever-present trills and voices, and heard only his own belabored breathing and grunts of pain. He was now alone.

The back of Titus' head was sticky with blood; he ran his hands over the patch, and then wiped them off on his robe. His legs wobbled uncertainly as he rose to his feet, but his balance steadied, and he wiped the tears from his eyes, clearing them. The haze lifted, the room came into clear focus. He turned around, left the room, and walked down the stairs he found at the end of the hall.

Titus exited the building into the bright outdoors, the wash of natural light pouring into his dilated pupils, unfiltered by any digital intermediary. Outside the door he stopped and leaned against a railing for balance, as his motor system continued to relearn what it had once known. He paused, breath calming, blood trickling down the side of his head, and took a first careful look at his brave new world. The street was barren and decayed, garbage strewn. The city had obviously been emptied at one point of all extraneous Old World elements. No cars inhabited the street, as they had all been disposed of when efficient transportation had become outmoded. The buildings all presented the same grey utilitarian front. No neon signs adorned restaurants and shops, as those had all closed long ago as the Interface provided access to all needs, all desires.

What really struck Titus, though, as he looked around, were the people. They stumbled, singly, alone, in tattered threadbare robes and pajamas, to destinations known only to their Interfaces, and possibly to themselves. Eyes were glazed over and downcast, avoiding him as they did the rest of their surroundings, consumed by the visions in their minds, the messages and promptings of a world hidden to all, yet shared by all. There was no longer any way that Titus could share in what these people were seeing, who they were listening to, what they were living. They were now in a world apart from him. He was now an explorer of something new, or as he realized with a shrug, something old.

Titus shuffled carefully over to a strip of ground and lowered himself down to rest. Around him he saw the patches of unkempt grass and greenery, and he smelled the rich earth, moist from a recent rain. He pressed his hand down on the lawn, and as he brushed his palm gently over the grass he felt an emerging joy. There was now nothing to drown out the sensations. The hundreds of simultaneous feeds cut from his head were lying in a sticky pool of blood on the floor of the building behind him, and he could now relish the feeling of the individual blades of grass tickling his skin. He continued to sit, examining his surroundings and himself using his eyes and ears and body, and with wonder at the richness of it, simply felt. He could feel and hear the air

brushing against his skin, could feel the blood beneath the skin flowing and beating. He was alone now, isolated, but he was himself.

Now rested and revitalized, Titus stood, looking off into the distance. He could see the glow of the sun setting over the grey city. Red light streaked brilliantly through a large cloud mushrooming up from the horizon. The forms of people trapped in their own minds continued to stumble about in their own isolated worlds. They didn't realize it, but the old world was dead. Titus hummed quietly to himself as he went forward into a new one.