Along, irritating hiss, the sound of decompression, rattled the still air. Emerging from a deep, artificially induced slumber, Richard Watkins groaned, opening his eyes a few millimetres and attempted to rise.

“Where…am…I?”

Suddenly, a bright light flashed across his face. He heard voices and tried to get out of his chamber, but immediately fell back, his muscles too atrophied after a decade of sleep to support his weight.

“Help…me….”

He felt his back hit his bed with a dull thud, and his brain slipped into unconsciousness as a cocoon of darkness surrounded him once more.

Five days later…

“Mr Watkins, MR WATKINS!”

His eyes opened, and he felt his pupils contract painfully at the bright light in the cabin. As his mind and body came back to life, he felt a torrent of distant memories assail him.

The mission…the new spacecraft… the suspended animation chambers, designed to bear him and his crew, unconscious, to Alpha Centauri at one-tenth the speed of light….

He frowned. The mission was a lone one. His spacecraft was built using cutting-edge technology; no other craft could have caught up with it. Then how…?

He looked around the room, but his eyes simply would not focus. The cabin was as he had left it before going into suspended animation—but sitting across the room, on a chair, was a man.

“Who are you?”

“All in good time, Mr Watkins Your body has been in suspended animation for two decades now. Rest. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Two decades? That didn’t make sense! At the time he had left Earth, scientists were confident that the propulsion drive that powered his craft would not be superseded for centuries. There was simply no way a craft could have caught up with his in a mere two decades!

“What do you mean? Who are you?”

The man stared at him. Watkins’ eyes had finally focused; he found the man’s expression inscrutable and strangely robotic.

“I see. You have no intention of resting, then?”

“Not until you tell me who you are, and why you’re on my ship.”
“Ah, that is what troubles you! I remember now when you left Earth, scientists thought the drive that powered your ship was the fastest one that would ever be built.” He chuckled, and a smile of disdain crossed his face. “The fools. They reckoned without the Network.”

“The Network?”

“I’ll explain in a moment. You see, Earth has changed beyond recognition. We have a drive now, a propulsion drive that can send spaceships hurtling through the cosmos at the speed of light. However, we don’t know enough about the long-term effects of space travel on the mind and body to establish a colony yet. I was on an exploratory mission when I found you.”

“You can travel faster than light?”

The man looked irritated, and spoke in a patronizing fashion, as if to a child.

“Yes, we can. Didn’t you understand me the first time? You non-networked fellows sure are idiots.”

“Non-networked? What?”

“I suppose I should show you. Mind you, it’ll take a few weeks to prep you and complete the process, but I can give you a glimpse.”

He paused, staring into Watkins’ face, cocking his ear towards the ceiling, as though he were listening to something.

“Yes, showing you the Network would be an optimum route to convincing you to integrate.”

“What?”

The man did not reply; standing up, he took a small, black sphere out of his pocket and striding towards Watkins, placed it on his temple.

“What are you doing?” Watkins gasped as the sphere dissolved into his skin. A second later, he fell to the floor, convulsing violently. He heard the man running over to him, plucking the sphere out of his skin, but not before his entire mind was overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts...thousands of voices coursed through his head...he saw, as if through the man’s eyes, his body on the floor, violently seizing as his mouth opened in a terrible scream. His brain felt like it was exploding... all was black.

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He woke up and found that his body was covered with black mould, throbbing gently. “Healing nanites”, he heard himself say. He frowned. How had he known that?

Looking around the room, he saw the man seated once more before him. He gasped as the full portent of what he had seen before he collapsed hit him.

“My God!”

“So, the integration worked. I’d forgotten that you were not used to integrating. The first few minutes are always hard. So, tell me what you learned from the integration.”

“What do you mean, tell you?”

The man smirked. “I want to gauge how effective the device was. We need to figure out how to integrate you with the Network effectively.”

Despite himself, Watkins began to describe what he had seen in the ‘integration.’ “I saw everything that has happened on Earth since I left. What you call...progress. Your device telepathically connected me to the Network, and the Network told me everything.”

“Go on.”

“Almost five years after I left Earth, a company developed a device to let users telepathically connect to information sources and download information like computers. In an era when the average human was flooded with information – news, statistics, facts – the device was a godsend, allowing people to process data without any need for a search engine, to access entertainment whenever they wanted it, to digest massive quantities of information without any learning effort on their part. It was awarded a clean chit by testing agencies. Millions of people bought it. But an inbuilt flaw, an error in the information portal, led to a massive malfunction, and the device accidentally not only connected humans to devices but humans to other humans as well. Spontaneously, a massive telepathic network was born. The Network.”

“You know, when I left Earth, neuroscientists were only just beginning to understand the human brain. Indeed, some of them just gave up, and said, in essence, that when 1.3 billion neurons connect, something magical spontaneously happens. The same sort of thing happened on that fateful day. Millions of brains, connected telepathically, spontaneously fused to create an intelligence that dwarfed the greatest geniuses ever born, from the very birth of mankind.”

“All individuality was lost; people became mere functional units in a gargantuan neural network, much like a lone neuron in a network of 1.3 billion of them. The rest was mere ceremony. Humanity was quickly outsmarted and connected to the network, and the largest and most powerful intelligence in the history of
mankind was born. An intelligence which you want me to connect to.”

“And you agree, I suppose?” said the man in front of him. “During those thirty seconds you were connected to the network, we caught but a glimpse of your experiences. Your experience during the first five years of your flight, when you were not in suspended animation, is invaluable. We need you to connect to the Network so that we can download them. Besides, we will bestow on you the supreme gift – integration!”

“And if I refuse?”

The man cocked his head, his eyes glinting dangerously. “You know, on Earth, babies are integrated as soon as they are born, when they can’t resist. We’ve not had to forcibly integrate someone for a long, long time.” He got up. “Of course, your acquiescence is preferable, but we can connect you against your wishes. I hear it’s quite painful.”

He reached the door and stepped out of the cabin. “We reach Earth in a few days. Arrive at a decision by then.”

Watkins suddenly remembered something. “Where are my crewmates?”

The man turned around. “Oh, they were too wasted away for integration. We flushed them out of the airlock.”

The door closed with a low hiss.

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Four days later, the man entered the cabin to find Watkins messing around with wires.

“I wouldn’t try to electrocute myself, if I were you. What have you against integration?”

“You really don’t see what a monster mankind has become?”

“Monster? Really? Earth is Utopia. Disease has been eradicated. We are close to achieving immortality. There is no such thing as discrimination based on skin colour, gender or race; there is no division of resources between petty little countries. There is plenty everywhere; there is no such thing as starvation or poverty, property or crime. Humankind has reached for the stars; averted climate change; rescued the Earth from catastrophe caused by human weaknesses and vices. Humans are no longer greedy; they are no longer selfish. They work as one unit for the good of the human race. Since the Network came into being, species extinction rates have plummeted. Technological development has proceeded at rapid pace; we are now masters of entire planets which were beyond our reach. There is no more conflict; no more war; no more time wasted on artistic pursuits; no more substance abuse; no more wastage of resources; no more sadness; no more grief, because emotion does not exist any longer. The world, instead of being at the mercy of the whims of human nature, is now ruled by logic. You said individuality does not exist. I say that that is a good thing! It was human emotions and human individuals guided by their instincts alone who created the miseries of the world. The Network, taking decisions through a thorough analysis by billions of brains, has brought about paradise on Earth! Human individuality is extraneous!”

“What do you mean, extraneous? Where has your moral compass gone? I have seen what your utopia is built on – it is built on the bones of a generation of humans. In your bid to connect everyone to the network, you massacred those who resisted. In order to prevent the spread of diseases, millions of people were screened, and those who showed a genetic predisposition for certain illnesses and the ill themselves were culled. To reduce the burden on Earth’s resources you used what you call the ‘logical’ route – the extermination of entire cities in order to reduce the population below critical thresholds. In order to curb emotions, because, as you say, emotion reduces work efficiency, you forced those who had not lost their individuality and were still human to take drugs which suppressed their emotional impulses. To boost efficiency and ‘promote’ human welfare, you turned all those who had an IQ below a certain threshold into mindless workers, controlled by the Network as slave labour. Of course, they had adequate pay, food, medicine, they live long lives, but they have not an ounce of free will, and spend their days as machines, unable to think for themselves. Is this your version of Utopia? A world where there is no such thing as free will, where all humans are part of a vast network which controls their every action, and are mere cogs in a gigantic wheel? Of what use is the immortality which all humans now possess, if there is no such thing as happiness or joy, no individuality, no art, no recreation of any kind?”

The man sneered. “You take the moral high ground now, but you don’t fool me. You saw the data which the Network processed. There was no other way to ensure the success and prosperity of humanity.”

“There is always another way. Your Network functions on logic, but logic is not the best way to solve all problems. By suppressing your emotions and turning humans into robots, you have blinded yourself to what is wrong! What you have done in the name of the success of the human race is mass murder!”

“What you call mass murder, we call protection. ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’ are moral constructs which serve no purpose in the real world. The only correct path is that which allows humans to multiply and thrive. Humans
are performing better than ever on many of the indicators which people from your time used to judge overall human prosperity and happiness – lifespans have skyrocketed; disease is gone; there is no such thing as war; no poverty; no hunger. Humans have spread out to claim the very stars for their own. Is this not what you dreamt of, what you prayed for in your pathetic past? A world transformed?"

"At what cost? Sure, I will admit that the Earth you describe is one I and my kinsfolk prayed for with all our souls, a world which represented the very pinnacle of human history. But all that you have described is useless; it is worth less than the dust under my feet if all human individuality has been lost. What use is a long lifespan if one is a mere robot working as a tiny unit in a gargantuan machine? What use is prosperity when it has been built on the bones of millions of corpses? I cannot condone what you have done! It is wrong!"

"Or so you claim. Ah, the capriciousness of emotion! I will argue no more with you. You will see all, when you integrate."

He turned around with a vicious expression as he prepared to lock the door. “Oh, I forgot to tell you something. My synapses must have saturated. I'll have to spend some time in a desaturation chamber before reintegrating. Anyway, I never did tell you why the Network wants to connect with you so badly. You see, we've detected an advanced extraterrestrial civilization located on the planets orbiting Alpha Centauri, and our analysis indicates that there is a 50.76 per cent chance that we will go to war. There is a further 25.67 per cent chance that we will lose. This is a chance which we will not take. Your mind possesses valuable information which will help us optimize our spacecraft for long-distance human travel. You will be instrumental in helping us exterminate this civilization. Good night."

He left, leaving Watkins gaping after him.

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The end was close. Struggling hopelessly, Watkins winced as he was thrown into a chair in the room. A massive sphere closed in around his head, blocking his vision. He felt electrodes touch his scalp. A gentle whirring issued from the machine, and all at once, his mind's eye opened to reveal the captivating vista that was the Network.

He saw, all at once, 5 billion brains working in tandem, the greatest and most complex computing device in history. And the Network spoke to him; first a whisper, then an almighty torrent of information flooded his brain. His mind was merging with the most powerful computer on Earth. He saw facts and tables full of data; he heard thousands of minds whirring as one as they slowly but steadily solved some or the other abstract problem; he heard the gentle clicking of trillions of neurons firing as they shared massive quantities of data. He was at once everybody, everywhere on Earth, and everybody was him; he saw, through the Network, the brain of every human on Earth.

And, suddenly, he did not exist any longer. There was no Richard Watkins; there was only his brain, a small part of a titanic system, even now blending with it as his identity slowly drained away.

His thoughts, his last emotions were absorbed, processed, and discarded as his personality was at last broken down.

But as the last flicker of his individuality was about to be extinguished, a change appeared in the Network itself. Slow at first, faster later, a tidal wave of neural activity took place, as his emotions, his desperate plea for humanity to return, were heard and echoed. All at once, across billions of minds, his message – an appeal to every human to preserve a tiny part of their humanity – was accepted. In a second, the entire Network restructured itself.

You see, Watkins’ appeal had been processed by the mightiest and most complex supercomputer in history; and, after being analyzed by trillions of neurons working in tandem, had been deemed correct. In a trice, every human recovered the cornucopia of emotions that are both the bane and boon of human existence – the humanity, curiosity, joy and sorrow, anguish and ecstasy, greed and industry, hope and despair that have made human life worth living, and at the same time, a key factor that had transformed human existence into a living hell for billions across the sands of time.

Every human body had, in less than a nanosecond, become more than just a simple computing unit, an infinitesimal part of a gargantuan processor; a mere cog in a titanic wheel. The human race had regained its soul.

Humanity was human once more! All of humanity rejoiced; but only Time would tell whether this change was a recipe for disaster, or a portent of astonishing achievements to come.

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