Stumble

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About this Piece

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CHAPTER ONE

Stumble

June 24th, 2052 – Somewhere along the Mediterranean Coast
The creek was filled with the echoes of music. A catchy, lively rhythm of jazz. The saxophone burst into a ferocious laughter and filled the bay with its thunder. Under the lazy wisteria ceiling of the Central Square, dancers were turning and twirling. The world was at peace. Music was its ultimate disturbance, and the sweat of the dancers the closest thing to tears. Then, the cicadas fell silent.

The inescapable shadow of an aerocarrier filled the small creek. The music went on for some time, while the dancers stumbled and rose their faces toward the sky, both mesmerized, bewildered, and terrified. The behemoth was upon them, its full scale blocking the sun; and already, its swarm of drones was everywhere. In an instant, the buzz of jazz and cicadas was replaced with the mechanical whirl of machines. Then, the noise tuned down as a bigger drone descended from the carrier. The Herald was about to speak.

'Earth Central Bank hereby notifies its constituents that the present land, located in the area of rose-recipe-ripple-luggage, is repurposed for the Greater Good. Constituents inhabiting the area

CB

have 24 hours to embark on relocation vessels. Earth Central Bank thanks its constituents for their understanding and diligent compliance. Over.'

As the machine spoke, carriers had started their descent from the mothership. One of them landed on the eastern end of the beach, destroying a few of the community's buildings in the process. On the opposite side of the beach, another transport came to a stop. Finally, behind the small village and a few dozen meters higher up, on top of a disaffected railroad bridge, a third vessel rested its mass, bringing some small rocks and dust down the bridge. A few seconds elapsed before the main aerocarrier vanished for some nearby base of the Bank, leaving behind the three relocation vessels and its myriad of drones, which were now all standing on their two-meter-long legs, watching the baffled inhabitants of the creek from the safety of their mechanical stilts.

Silence fell on the beach. Then, little group by little group, ensemble by ensemble, the members of the seaside community started moving. Like an orchestra playing a piece pianissimo, they went to meet each other, still haggard. Their whispers intertwined to form a laconic melody. Then, the brass section entered: here and there, eruptions of violence. Anger and fright, despair and wrath. The whole song seemed on the verge of chaos. And then, as if coming from a distant shore, the percussion became louder and louder, their orderly rhythm slowly covering the peals of the brasses.

'We can either comply or rebel, but we must do so as a group.' The voice was imperative, and all stopped to listen. 'Those who want to leave in the vessels and be relocated, come to my right. Those who wish to fight and stand on this ground, come to my left.'

At first no one moved. Then, a few men and women hesitantly came to the side of the speaker, mostly to his right. After a few moments, only a young woman remained in front of the old man. Her voice was filled with determination when she spoke, not only to the man, but to the whole assembly. 'There is a third option. We can file an appeal, and dispute the Executive Order before a court. Fight the Bank with its laws instead of weapons… that might end up being a fairer fight.'

Some voices had started to rumble again from both sides of the man. He lifted his arms in the air in a sign of appeasement and loudly responded, 'Of all the appeals we've heard of in the past years, none have proven the expelled right. The bots from the court always side with the Bank. And each past judgement only strengthens their perception that it is the right decision. No, my dear Suzanne, there is no help to be sought in the skirts of our dear justice.'

The man approached slowly and rested his gnarled hand on Suzanne's shoulder. The gesture aimed for appeasement, but the effect was different. Fierce anger replaced determination in the young woman's eyes. She sustained the old man's stare for a moment, then shrugged and left for her small house, nestled against the mountain. Behind her, the voice of the old man roared, upheld by the echo.

'And so, everyone has made their choice. So be it. Those who want to leave, pack your belongings and head to the vessels. Be sure to be on board before the 24-hour period ends. For the others, follow me to the cantina. We have a lot of things to prepare in very little time.'

Suzanne packed a few items in a backpack and headed out of her home. She had only taken what was strictly necessary for a quick journey from which she would probably not return. The beach was empty now, with everyone either packing for relocation or preparing the defense of the creek against the real estate developers of the Bank.

She walked straight to the nearest drone, still stationed on the beach on top of its long metal legs, looked up, and declared, 'I appeal against the decision of the Bank.'

The robot, previously in a vegetative state, came back to life almost instantly. A mere second later the machine's response stung in the air. 'Request granted. Please board the incoming ship.'

Just as the last word disappeared in the breeze, a small aerocarrier appeared from behind the northern cliff, indicating that the Bank had probably established an outpost much closer to the village than Suzanne first thought. Quickly, the ship landed in front of her, and an aluminum ladder dropped from a hole in its belly. After a hesitation that lasted only a heartbeat, Suzanne grabbed the rung in front of her and climbed into the ship. As soon as she found herself on board, in a compartment barely big enough to accommodate her body, the door beneath her closed in a swish and she felt the ship quickly gaining altitude and speed. No porthole allowed her to take a peek at the landscape that spun around her.

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Suzanne woke up in a small room with no window. She was lying fully dressed on a small bed. A wooden table and a sink made up the rest of the room's furniture. But most importantly, she didn't

recall falling asleep, nor did she remember how she ended up in this room. Her last memory was the monotone buzz of the aircraft carrying her from the beach.

As she sat on the bed, a voice came from a small box above the metal door that guarded the room. 'Constituent Suzanne Moreau,' said the voice, 'You are expected in Court Room 001 to receive a verdict on your appeal. Thank you.' Just below the talking box the number '001' was painted with a small arrow pointing toward the door. She stood up, crossed the space between her and the door in three hesitant steps, and reached for the knob. As she pushed, the door opened without a sound and she found herself in the courtroom itself, with its wood benches and the platform from which judges used to dispense justice.

'Good morning, child,' said the weary voice of a woman from behind an old computer set on the long table laid across the stage. Suzanne remembered an old movie where a handful of judges sat behind the table, wearing their ceremonial dresses. Everything was quite different now: the room was filled with dust as if no VaccBot had come here in ages. Except for her and the woman, the room was completely empty.

'Come forth. Don't be afraid,' the woman continued. 'I've read the report published by the Judiciary Bots. Please, take a seat.'

As Suzanne came closer, she noticed the lines on the woman's face, as well as the bun of grey hair crowning her head. As ordered, Suzanne sat down on a bench in the first alley, directly facing the woman, looking up at her from a few feet below.

'I must start with an introductory word, child. To kill any hope you might still have and save you some pain. The bots rejected

your appeal, on the ground that the public benefit accrued from the project developed by the Bank on the disputed land vastly exceeds that of its occupation by its current residents – that's you.'

Suzanne's throat was dry when she answered.

'Isn't there something that you can do? As a Magistrate, surely—'

The old woman interrupted her with a faint, sad laughter. 'Dear child, I haven't had any power over the deliberations of this court of justice for almost three decades. I'm deeply sorry, but there's really nothing I can do. The machines decide, and I announce to the…' she made a vague gesture towards the empty benches, 'gathered assembly. I'm only an old relic from the past the bots forgot to erase.'

'But what are they going to build on our beach?' Each word hurt due to the lump in her throat.

'That's the funny part, child.' The voice of the woman was bitter, maybe a bit more than she had expected. Her tone was softer when she resumed. 'They're going to build yet another seaside resort that will never see the face of a human being.'

The judge's answer was so absurd Suzanne doubted her ears. A seaside resort? While humanity was on the brink of extinction, only surviving in scattered villages and a few megalopolises growing bigger and bigger with the arrival of new refugees?

'Funny, right?' continued the woman. 'Well, I don't know if that's the right word, but I see relocation orders like yours every week. Last time, the Bank leveled a small town to build a rest area just because the villagers laid their community along an old

highway. And the machines have no idea it's been disaffected for decades!'

Thoughts were racing inside Suzanne's head. When she was a child, her father had told her the story of how the Earth Central Bank had ended up being the sole centralizing monopoly governing every aspect of human life, and how the Bank resorted to bots and algorithms to make quick and efficient decisions. First, it had been high-frequency trading, and then as everything became a financial instrument, the automation reached everything. But never had her father mentioned machines daft enough to build rest areas for empty highways, or resorts when tourism was only known to the younger generations through old history books.

'You're wondering how those bots can be dumb enough to build all this useless stuff while we're literally struggling for life, in both city and country?' The old woman seemed to be able to read her mind. 'That's not official, and to be honest I got it mainly from deduction and cross-checking, but it seems the machines' training dataset goes no further than the year 2035. They're completely oblivious to whatever happened afterward and, for them, we're still experiencing the best that the New Roaring Twenties can offer.'

Suzanne remained silent, her mouth opened but unable to speak. A tear slid down her cheek as her mind woke to the consequences of what the judge had just said.

'That's right, child. We're all gonna die because those dumbass machines got stuck in the thirties.'

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August 5th, 2085 – Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope, Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Lab, Pingtang County, Guizhou, Southwest China

The screen lit up, turning from pitch black to a light blueish fade, then to a deep blue illumination. Letters ran on the monitor, completely oblivious to the lack of an audience for the show that was about to happen.

Exotic radio signal detected. Initiating analysis…

Signature unknown…

Randomness test: failing

Initiating parsing analysis…

Message found, decoding…

——BEGIN MESSAGE BLOCK——

HELLO

——END MESSAGE BLOCK——

Source

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