

Block C

Camille Millier, 2015

This is Warden Hartwell McCullen of Rosenbaum State Penitentiary trying to reach District Attorney Steve Zenotov. Friday, September 27th, 2163. 10:42 PM. Calling to report an accident involving prisoner 339 and Officer Brett St. John, guard in charge of Block C. Full report with details will be filed and sent to the office as soon as possible. This has been a terrible inconvenience, will need a temporary replacement guard immediately. End transmission.

Thursday, September 26th - 8:52 AM.

Brett St. John exhaled smoke as he leaned against the stone wall just below the stairs leading up to the giant, ancient doors of Rosenbaum State Penitentiary. He sweated underneath the militant green pea coat and matching peaked cap of the uniform in the early fall air. Down the hill a distance, the ocean crashed at the edge of the grounds. The great, stately fortress structure of the prison and the ocean must look beautiful from the water to an outsider. The insomnia was getting bad again. In fact, he couldn't remember a time in his life that he didn't have difficulty sleeping. Even in his blurry childhood. But today was just another day like all the rest.

"Officer St. John!"

Brett looked over to see Alexander Snodgrass strolling toward him, holding up a hand in front of his face to shield his eyes from the sun. Alex was the young guard in charge of Block D. He had dark brown hair and the demeanor and attitude of a chipper character from an old film. He treated every encounter with Officer St. John as if he were greeting an older brother home from college for the first time.

"Morning, Alex." Brett dropped the cigarette butt and scraped it with the toe of his shiny dress shoe.

"Gee, am I nervous." Alex said with a breathless laugh. "I'm getting a new one in today. Warden McCullen said he's an armed robber. Made away with about two million down in Westmore 'fore they caught him."

Brett nodded as Alex continued, before turning to walk up the stone steps while Alex trailed alongside, still talking excitedly and looking at Brett for approval, through the doors, down one hall, and then another. "I bet he won't be so tough though. Say, it's not as exciting as your job. That's a fine gun you have there. I wish I could be on the block with the automatons. You'd never know what to expect." And then "Okay, see ya later, Officer St. John," as Brett opened the steel door to Block C and tagged out the night-shift guard.

Block C was the smallest of the prison, with only twenty cells lining the hall and only about five of them ever occupied at a time. There were no cots

or toilets or sinks in these cells, just concrete walls. Although they were almost indistinguishable from humans now, the automatons didn't need any of those comforts. They only required a confined space to stay in for a few days until a government truck came to pick them up and take them to the CTM—Center for Technology and Machinery—to be shut down. Automatons used to have a kill switch on their bodies, at the beginning when they were made of steel pipes and gears. But too many instances occurred in which the switch was accidentally bumped or pushed, resulting in a permanent waste of a perfectly good automaton. Now they had to be shut down officially if they malfunctioned, short-circuited, or wreaked havoc.

Officer St. John walked down the hall and looked into the occupied cells. Printed on the labels outside the bars were the prisoner number, model number, and reason for confinement. *Prisoner 336, model number CV 4.568 X, short-circuit, killed family dog and destroyed home. Prisoner 335, model number CV 6.889 J, corrupted SIM chip, seduced male owner, caught by wife. Prisoner 338, model number CV 8.113 L, malfunctioning hard drive, could not understand simple tasks—did opposite.* And so on.

Brett sat down at his desk, placed at the end of the hall. The job was easy, to make sure none of the inferior beings caused any trouble. They usually didn't, and he would spend his time reading. He had never had a chance to use the gun. It was a revolver loaded with highly magnetized pellets, designed to destroy an automaton's main circuit board, or at the very least, wipe the hard drive, reverting the machine to a dull yet docile personality. He was given the gun on his first day, five years ago. Warden McCullen had handed it to him delicately, ran a hand through his own white hair and looked intensely at Brett.

"It won't be necessary very often, but I've had to use one a time or two before. Believe me when I tell you these no-good pieces of tin are strong, and it ain't worth you or anyone else's life to clam up in the moment. So if one of 'em gets outta line, don't hesitate to take the motherless bastard out."

. . .

The steel door crashed open and in came Warden McCullen and Alex, each struggling to hold onto one armpit of the automaton between them, who dragged his knees on the tiled floor. The automaton was a male, with curly brown hair that flipped vigorously as he convulsed and snarled. He was wearing a dirty white T-shirt and black jeans. Brett sprang from his chair and helped push the machine into one of the empty cells. The other automaton inmates slowly walked to the front of their cells and watched curiously. Prisoner 338 stood up straight in his gray suit and turned his head to see the action, while Prisoner 336 hugged his knees and rocked back and forth on the floor inside his cell, his shoulders twitching up and down from the excitement. Prisoner 337, who had caused a six-car pileup on the highway while driving his owner to an optometry appointment,

stuck his arms through the bars and yelled, with extreme volume, "We got a live one!"

The three men panted. McCullen wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Sir, what's the deal?" Brett asked. "You didn't say anything about this."

McCullen caught his breath and sighed.

"It's bad. Just happened. He needed to be contained immediately."

Just then, the new prisoner slammed his body against the bars and made the officers spring backwards.

"Come to my office, St. John."

Thursday, September 26th - 9:05 PM.

"Hey, St. John," Warden McCullen called as Brett crossed the office door threshold.

"Don't work too hard or you'll become one of 'em yourself."

The warden laughed, and Brett said, "Will do."

Brett carried the newly written label to the newly occupied cell and hung it on the tiny hook. *Prisoner 339, model number CV 5.600 X, strangled elderly owner with rope until dead.*

"Hey." A scratchy voice came from inside the cell. He appeared to be sitting with his back against the side wall, but only his legs and dirty work boots were visible. Brett slowly turned his head back.

"What's wrong, prettyboy?" The prisoner cackled an airy laugh. He appeared in the light as he neared the front of his cell. He extended an open palm through the bars.

"My name is Jamie," the automaton said.

Officer St. John looked at the hand with its shiny white skin, and then up at the prisoner's face. His eyes were still and tranquil, focused on the officer's own green eyes. So different from this morning, when his glass eyeballs were rolling back in their synthetic sockets.

"Your name is Prisoner 339!" Brett said slowly, "and you are not to speak to me unless I speak to you first." He turned and left Jamie there, hand still outstretched.

Thursday, September 26th - 11:15 PM.

Brett sank deeper into his leather couch and swallowed the rest of the vodka tonic. His tie was draped around his neck at both sides and the starched white button-down was loosened to reveal a gray-stained T-shirt. Victoria appeared from the small kitchen with a refill in her hand. She was wearing a tight red dress and her chestnut hair was swept back into shiny rolls. She folded herself onto the

couch next to Brett and stroked his strawberry-blond hair. Silver and diamonds glittered on her wrist.

"Are we gonna do somethin' or what?" she asked. For whatever reason, she was programmed with a Jersey accent.

"No," he said.

She scoffed. "I've just never had a customer who wants me to pour 'em drinks and sit next to 'em."

"Then go," Brett moaned, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the back of the couch.

She looked at him apologetically. "What's on your mind, love?"

He looked at her. She was pretty, he supposed. She better be, for the price her owner was charging. Philonels Robertson—the town treasurer who owned over fifty female automatons and sold them off wearing revealing clothing and smelling like a French bath house for \$500 a night.

He rubbed his eyes. "I got a new prisoner today."

"... and?"

"He murdered his owner."

Victoria looked confused.

"Sometimes I just feel like," he thought for a moment, "every day is the same. I do the same thing over and over. I don't want to become so robotic, mundane."

Brett knew she didn't understand. He told her never mind, and kissed her unnaturally firm red lips.

"Same time next week?"

Brett lay awake in bed like every night he could remember. Tonight, he blamed his insomnia and lack of sex drive on recurring thoughts about Prisoner 339. The glassy, empty eyes that stared through him. The eyes that watched the brutal death of its human owner. Brett had predicted it a long time ago—the automatons were going to be the downfall of humanity. The fatal flaw that would develop into mindless evil, created by humans themselves.

Friday, September 27th - 2:30 PM.

Prisoner 336 made a constant buzzing noise in his cell. Prisoner 335 sang softly to herself. Brett sat at his desk, scribbling his initials down the side of the twenty-five page cell maintenance report.

"Hey," a scratchy voice came in a hoarse whisper from a cell on the left row.

Brett shifted his eyes from the paper up to the source of the sound. After a few seconds, he continued the report.

"Officer St. John," came the whisper again. It was Prisoner 339. He

sounded as if he had an urgent secret to reveal. Brett ignored it.

It came again a few seconds later, louder this time.

"Officer St. John. Hey! Come here."

Brett's chair scraped the floor as he forced it back and strode to Cell 5, where Prisoner 339 stood, hands wrapped around two bars like a child at the zoo. Brett stared at him in disgust and expectation.

Prisoner 339 scanned the officer's chiseled face and made a grin that evolved into a high-pitched, insane laugh.

"What do you want, filth?" Brett snarled.

"Jamie," Prisoner 339 responded.

Brett laughed. "I will not call you by name like an equal."

"Suit yourself," Jamie hummed, "but we're more equal than you know."

Brett told the prisoner to shut the fuck up, and turned to walk away when his arm was caught with a crushing grip through the bars.

"Wait, listen," Jamie pleaded. He licked his lips and his eyes darted around before settling back on Brett's face. "I want to talk to you. Outside of this cell." He suddenly looked concerned. "Trust me, it's something you *need* to know. Please." Jamie loosened his grip and gently let go of the officer's arm.

Brett glared at the prisoner, and straightened his own rumpled jacket. Jamie's automaton eyes looked desperate and pleading. Brett decided to humor the prisoner with a little metaphorical game of wit, which he would most definitely win against a lowly, scum-of-the-earth creation. It could be entertaining, if nothing else. If anything happened, he had the gun at his hip.

"You get five minutes. Later tonight," Brett said.

Jamie's eyes darted. "Thank you for trusting me, Officer."

Brett turned around and gave the automaton a sharp look.

"I don't trust you," he said coldly. "I'm just bored."

Friday, September 27th -10: 15 PM.

Brett lit a cigarette and stared across his desk at the disheveled automaton sitting on the chair opposite him. Jamie was rocking slightly, rubbing his hands on his knees.

Brett exhaled smoke.

"Talk."

Jamie watched the officer smoking for a few seconds before speaking.

"You're a man of your pleasures, I see," he said. Brett took another drag and quoted a favorite vintage *film noir*.

"What else is there in life, I ask you?" Brett smiled, partly impressed by his slight to the automaton.

Jamie smirked.

"You know, it's funny..." he trailed off. "I've always been intrigued by the concept of being human. I mean, as I sit here and have this conversation and I wonder...what's the difference, *really*, between a human and an automaton?"

"I'll tell you the difference, my friend," Brett said. He reached into a bottom drawer of his desk to pull out a clear glass and a bottle of amber liquid, expensive brandy labeled year 2105. He poured the alcohol into the shallow glass and lifted it, as if giving a toast.

"I, for example, can enjoy this brandy. I can smoke cigarette, I can make love to a woman." He looked Jamie in the eyes. "Furthermore, I'm capable of a higher level of thought and consciousness than you could even *try* to understand."

Jamie leaned forward, not breaking eye contact.

"Actually, Officer St. John," he said "they're beginning to adapt automations to be able to partake in human pleasures, such as food, drinks."

He looked at Brett. "Want me to prove it?"

Brett slowly poured another glass of brandy and slid it cautiously across the desk, staring suspiciously at the machine opposite him.

Jamie tipped it back and poured it down his throat, letting out a sharp sigh afterwards. He set the glass down and looked at Brett. Brett watched in horror.

"I'll still never understand the appeal, so you got me there," Jamie said about the alcohol.

"Unfortunately they still haven't mastered the sleep or sex thing, though." He shot the officer a mischievous grin. "Tell me, Brett, do you *actually* do those things?"

"I have insomnia," Brett quickly answered.

Jamie laughed hysterically.

"Officer, I disagree with what you said earlier. In a way, I have a level of consciousness that you will never be able to understand. Because I know things that you'll never accept."

Brett clenched his fists, digging short nails into soft palms.

Jamie continued. "You and I. We're actually very much alike." He smiled in reminiscence. "I knew from the second I first saw you."

"Shut the fuck up!"

Jamie laughed. "It's clever, really. To create such a perfect prison guard, programmed to hate his prisoners."

Brett shook his head back and forth violently, as if trying to stop the input of sound and words flowing through his brain.

"You really are a magnificent creation," Jamie said.

Brett reached across the desk and grasped Jamie by his dirty shirt collar, pulling him close with extreme force. He talked in a harsh, breathless voice into the small gap between their faces.

"I am not like you. You're a useless, filthy piece of metal covered in rubber meant to look like the human form," he growled. "You're a perversion of nature."

Jamie looked at Brett's still, focused eyes, and then began to laugh the same high-pitched, insane laughter he had on the first night in his cell. Just then, he pulled the officer over the desk and slammed him onto the concrete floor. Brett fought back, with equal force, bringing Jamie down with him. Within two seconds, Jamie was standing, pointing Brett's own gun at the officer's chest.

"I just want you to see."

The gunshot echoed through the long hallway of Block C.

The magnetized bullet drove through Officer St. John's chest as if it knew it was on a mission. It traveled through skin, metal, and through the fundamental hard drive. The information was destroyed—Brett's first day at the prison, the pixelated memory of a red-haired mother driving them to the grocery store, the conversations with Alexander Snodgrass, the hatred for automatons, all fizzled out like a broken firework. The bullet continued and obliterated the main circuit board. Nothingness.

A few seconds later, Warden McCullen crashed through the steel door, his tie blown over his shoulder. Alexander came through after him, looking frantic and nervous. They both beheld the scene in front of them. The warden turned and walked in a panicked circle while pulling on his disheveled white hair. Alexander looked like he might cry.

McCullen kicked the bars of a nearby cell and the sound rang out through the hall. "God damn it," he yelled "They said this wouldn't happen!"

Alex collected himself and jumped into action, grabbing Prisoner 339 hard by the back of the neck and forcing him into an open cell, angrily yelling something about the motherless piece of trash. They regrouped and both stared down at Officer St. John—his handsome pale face motionless with eyes closed, just above the open cavity in his chest where twisted metal shone. The last tiny flame went out with a final electrical *pop*.

Friday, September 27th - 10:38 PM.

Warden McCullen sat down in his dark office rubbing his forehead. He shakily lit a cigarette and sighed smoke. He pulled the transmission machine across his desk, picked up the receiver, and began to speak.

Friday, September 27th - 12:02 AM.

McCullen watched as the Center for Technology and Machinery professionals closed the final seal on the large, rectangular wooden box. One of them muttered something about how it was a shame—a waste of one of the most advanced experimental automatons of the age. “Yeah,” the other replied, “They haven't even started adapting them for the market yet.” The first man carefully taped the label to the lid of the box.

*For disposal at the CTM.
Model Number: CX 10.650 J
Fatal gunshot wound - unrepairable.*