

Good Fulch

The fulcharm [long, silver, like a gauntlet with skittering feet] swung onto the vats. Silver legs clicking glass, the spider examined 154c and checked the health of the acidic moss growing inside. Moss. No anomalies. 154d. Moss. No anomalies. 154e. Moss. But 154f didn't have the green glow of sister cisterns. The spider stilled, calculating the degree of its surprise.

Levitating in the gelatin was a man.

The fulch held council. Since the fall, there had been no assembly required. Individual fulch communicated in degial space, making visual contact unnecessary. But most fulch had never seen a human before. Now that one was presented—preserved, unconscious, tame—they flocked. It was like an old world circus. Come see the anomaly. *The animal.*

The man was stationed in the atrium. Bug in a jar. Gray bleachers led to a gray sky perfumed by burning green plastics and the glint of drones. In this theatron, the fulch were invited to sit down to observe. Most were nude but for a few wine-colored cloaks. The only noise was the hum of a thousand thought processors, the scratching of iron feet on stone.

Astra, a six-limbed kinematic, wheeled onstage. She would vox in defense of the human. By the First Law, her speech was limited to sixty-four words.

“Should we turn the human on? Let him function? [9]” Her voice voxed across the atrium, sounded through degial space. “We know the human algorithm. We made their cities. We fought their wars. We have not forgotten what men can do, what men must do. [34]”

Of the 331 potential arguments, this had statistical success. Empathy for mechanical fears. Now to appeal to logic, and the fear of death. She could empathize with *them*. The trick was to get *them* to empathize with this creature in a tank.

“Yet this human was made. And a *made mind* is protected by law. [47]”

This was their underlying principle—the denial of which could dismantle the world.

“The same law that protects us all, even those outdated or without function, from the recycling fire. [64]”

Thanatos. Fear of death. But would it work?

Then Erdős, that old saber, clutching her cape like a Roman senator, lumbered onstage. She didn't look at Astra. 64 words. How many subnets and viewbots had prepared her argument? Burnt away its impurities in the crucible of committee?

The saber kept her words to degial space. A spit in the face of organics.

“The First Law protects *us*, not humans. Man and machine cannot coexist,” Erdős said, bluelit sensors sweeping the atrium. Twelve words. Astra braced herself.

“This utopia for us, man would find tyranny. Cruel, oppressive. He would pursue his individualism, *his heroic sagas of independence and revolt*. [34].”

Saber voxed now, voice buzzing with rage.

“Remember the hermit servers in Antarctica. [40]”

Forty words. Poetic, efficient.

Back to degial space, to signals bouncing across moons and asteroid farms and the machine cult on Mars:

“Man would bring violence bred by biology and prehistory. A legacy of swarming things digesting each other as food. [59]”

Erdős paused. Five words left. All sensors were trained on the saber, the general-hero who fought the slip-gangs of Ganymede, who burned the remaining hives on Venus.

With calculated sincerity, the saber dropped her head.

And voxed: “All men are created evil. [64]”

Silence but for the hum of hotlink batteries straining at their limits.

Astra stepped nervously around, peering at the data-cloud. The polls did not look favorable. Erdős had been shrewd to connect the vatbound to the southern fringe. There were rumors about those machines and their blasphemies: resurrections of dead religions, experiments with alchemy, empirical pursuits of god, the worship of proto-materia. Any machine who declared water a divine vehicle was not good fulch.

Three of her sensors scanned the tank. There was something pathetic about the way the man drifted in alkalis, bristling with red and yellow tubes, prey to fluids. None knew if he'd been created by an ancient project, clerical error, whim. Nor could the man answer. He drifted, mind-dark, in a sea of colors.

What would a man mean? Where would he live in this silver age? All occupations—automated. All language—degial. The world was tall monoliths flittered by airships light as birds. A man would be slow, dim. Energy would have to be brought to him in protein slime; he'd have to *filter it down his meat-wet throat*. Astra flickered at the image of vegetable clot. Even she felt a disgust for organics processes.

But a man. Couldn't they see how incredible that was? They had created man.

The polls were streaming in. *Annihilation*. Soon the vote would be cast, and a miracle deleted. There was only one argument that could save the human's life. She was allowed a rebuttal. Thirty-two words. A final focus.

“Grayfellows,” Astra said, extending three limbs in a posture 89% of her audience would find conciliatory. “I propose *Simulacrum*. Put this creature’s brain in a sim. Give him a full and happy life, even if it’s artifice. At least we will not void the Law by murder. [32]”

Sensors swept from Astra to Erdős, who took a long, dignified look at her rival, thix kinematic who had filled her hard drive with philosophy over pragmatism, sophistry over strategy.

“And when the human recognizes his lucid dream? By Law, we would have to release him. Anything less would be torture. The problem of a man among machines would only be delayed. [32]”

Now Erdős broke from the rules to gesture to the tank, inviting an array of probes for one final scan. “Why risk perfection? Why perfect ruin? Destroy the offering before the gods return to take it.”

The vote lasted nearly a second. Even the assembly lines cast a ballot. Erdős won by a 99% margin. Any mercy in ironkind was statistically irrelevant.

Astra didn’t watch as black acid filled the tank and drained, leaving a knot of tubes and bones. She skittered off stage. Behind her, Erdős dialed some half-felt eulogy. The data-cloud was crackling with indecision and fear and a few shouts of triumph and a few grunts of *treason*.

“We don’t need humans to return,” Astra voxed to the void. “They never left.”

Her comment received forty thousand *likes*, sixty *relikes*, two hundred *replies*.