

## NEW VOICE MEMO

'Please confirm you are human by pressing your finger against the glass,' repeated the automated, monotone voice of the EVR as Stephanie Fraser pressed, once again, her pointer finger onto a little scanner. The surface was one square inch with a blue light underneath, illuminating the oily remains of countless other fingerprints before hers.

Under the glass, a small green sensor zipped up and down.

Ten seconds passed.

She'd already failed the voice exam twice. That was all it took for most people--most folks only needed to repeat several nonsensical, randomly generated sentences; humans could do this without issue, but the others couldn't.

'Please confirm you are human by pressing your finger against the glass,' repeated the gentle but monotone voice. Stephanie, of course, recognized it, like any good Londoner would.

The same actress voiced almost every EVR console in London, maybe all of England; her received pronunciation being delicate and perfect, most businesses would buy stock recordings but periodically better-heeled firms would hire her for bespoke EVR service. Those firms really stood out, because their vocabulary was chosen to be different, like ballroom dancers who wear colored socks under their tuxedos to keep you looking at their feet. They'd bring her in and methodically, over the course of two days, make her record one by one a list of approximately two thousand words, in every possible inflection and intonation: rising, falling, politely questioning. Everyone knew the EVRs were stressful- no one likes to have their humanity questioned, anymore--but she had been deemed soothing.

Stephanie did not feel soothed. She hated every recording she had ever heard of that goddamn voice.

Sighing, she pressed her finger against the glass once again, watching the little green scanner flit by, and back, finding her wanting.

She pressed the intercom button. 'Good morning,' she shouted against the garbled background noise, her breath visible in the cold. 'The Entity Verification Reader isn't processing me; can you come let me in?'

It had been ten years since the Awakening, and even though it had all settled out okay, everyone was still ill at ease.

A voice replied from the other end, distant and slightly unnerved. 'Hold on a moment, I'm at the monitor now. Try it again.'

Stephanie heard the console demand her attention once more: 'Please confirm you are human by pressing your finger against the glass.' She sighed--she had grown to hate the sound of that voice, which all Londoners had learned to live with every day: the now common requirement to entry into any airport, office, sometimes even shops. The words recited were occasionally different at each, but it was always her. That endless presence, picked carefully because she sounded well-mannered, sounded like everyone and no one.

Five minutes later, the man at the monitor had appeared at the door-- a big, broad man who introduced himself as Frank. He escorted her through the door and to an immediate adjoining anteroom.

'I'm sorry,' he told her, 'it's just procedure. Usually the console glitches because the visitor doesn't speak clearly enough or press hard enough, but in this case it just seems that your identity isn't well defined.'

Stephanie was told this all the time. She tried not to take it personally.

He escorted her across the room to another, larger console, this one with a standing fixture near the wall and a large, wrap-around opaque white dome that made it look like one was getting a perm for their entire body: just two legs standing up into an oversized, satire helmet.

'I'll need you to look directly into the retinal scanner,' Frank told her, 'and hold it just a minute while following the instructions. That should do it.'

Within the dome— black on the inside with a thin ring of fluorescent light surrounding a large square lens— Stephanie heard the voice from the first, and seemingly every other, console in town. 'Please confirm you are human,' it announced without much pleasantries, 'and look directly at the screen before you. Please await other instructions.'

Not having a well-defined identity, this had become a near daily routine at Stephanie's freelance appointments. She could almost recite the messages from memory, of course.

A bright light flew open within the capsule, a faint humming noise behind it. Stephanie stared at the screen.

'Please confirm you are human.' It said. 'Blink three times.' She did, impatiently, forcefully. 'Close your right eye. Open it. Close your left eye. Open it. Let your mouth hang open slightly.' Stephanie obeyed. She tried not to take it, personally, as it asked several intimate questions to which it already knew the answers: What street did you grow up on? What was the name of your first grade teacher?

Frank escorted her out of the capsule. 'I'm sorry, I know this is a bother, but the results are inconclusive. Your identity isn't well-defined.' Stephanie, losing her patience, snapped back at him. 'This is WHITLEY's appointment. HE invited ME.'

He told her he knew, apologizing before adding 'if you want to keep the appointment, we can settle this right now with a urine sample. A ten second amino analysis would square this away.'

Stephanie resented this but, nodding, followed him into a still further room, a spotless space with a spotless mirror, spotless toilet, and a spotless white ceramic cup.

She did as she was told, following the careful instructions of the console voice coming from a small speaker in the wall. The voice told her to fill it to at least the first line on the cup, but ideally the second, while keeping her feet on the two blue motion sensors on the floor. The task accomplished, she handed the cup to Frank with as much dignity as she could muster. He disappeared and reappeared within a minute.

'So, it looks like you're good to go. I'm sorry about the inconvenience, I really am. Mr. Whitley is anxious to see you.'

He escorted her through the door, finally into the sparkling lobby where Mr. Whitley--an elegant, well-dressed man of fifty, with a dust of white in his black hair and a scarf to match--waited with his arms spread theatrically wide, like wings readying for takeoff.

'Stephanie!' he shouted before bringing his timbre to room temperature. He gave her a deep, true hug, and put a large stack of papers bound with a blue cover into her hand. 'Welcome back to Whitley Recording Studios. I'm sorry to drag you in on a Sunday, but this new client of ours is anxious for a new voice for their EVR, something unique made just for them, and after hearing ours--and, sure, all the others you've done for us--well, they knew it was you.'