

# The Oddballs will inherit the Earth



The oddball tended to lurk best in corners, lank frame fitted well into dark urban alleys framed like Nosferatu in the shadow of the night. He was skeletal and bone, a mess of contradictions and confusions. He skulked around late at night looking for answers, an unholy ancient fire burned in his mind, burned for an answer to an unknowable questions, revelling in disorder. A student of Neo-Nihilism - The church of the infinite nothing, he jeered, he sneered he rattled and railed. A circle in a world of squares, bent double against the lamppost he stomped his way down the concrete streets to get back to his flat, half cut from the 6 beers he'd drank on the way back from his work downtown, now stumbling autopilot style back to the mess he called home.

Stumbling up the rusty metal staircase, his vision blurring he arrived at his flat, turned the key and fell like a rock onto his bed, the world turning and whirring, his mind in some sort of swirling vortex. Memories churned and danced in his mind's eye, his youth, his loves, his losses, his pitiful moments, his self despair, his bullshit.

And eva, she got in there too. She always did, at times like these when he was alone, she was never far from his thoughts, the ghost at the membrane just waiting for a chance to break the skin. "Not now" he thought as he turned off his light and stumbled into a dark and numb sleep of nothing.

A roaring digital screech pieces nothingness and the Oddball's eyes slowly open, he lifted himself up in a daze, looked around his room and groaned, throwing a book at the alarm system on the other side of his room, "Fuck off!" He shouts. "Command Not recognised" replies the alarm AI, "Stop Alarm" shouts Oddball, louder this time. "Goddammit, you fucking thing" he whispers silently under his stinking hangover breath, before falling back into a deep slumber once more, to be swallowed in the mire of his own mind.

Then in a large room, a machine mantis staring down, long tendrils extending out from it's mechanical insectoid form as it's beady LED eyes look down at the Oddball as its disgusting mechanical mouth begins to move - "Oddball, we have searched our records and found you are in dire need of a reprogramming, you believe yourself to be a humanoid in the year 2060, in the city of Berlin. We must perform a cranial re-adjustment to fix this, so prepare fo..."

BOOM

The impact is so loud the whole neighbourhood is woken up by it, the impact blast reverberating through the street, Oddball jumps up from his bed, a look of wild confusion on his face as he stumbles for his glasses in the early morning light. "What!!! What! Was that!?" he thinks in a hungover haze.

He rushes to his flat window and peers over, and then there on the other side of the street he saw a car smouldering and burning, horrified onlookers gathered round. Two people inside the car seem to be burning, and it all starts playing out in Oddball's head in slow motion, the licking flames dance like some macabre spirit had possessed them, the burning flesh like some devil's dance through the street, demonic and dire. Death Masks of shock and horror line the faces of the gathering crowd.

Oddball returned to his bed and grabbed his notepad, time to write he thought, he had to document this down, keep a record of this moment, and cynically he thought perhaps he could get that first big published article out there with an account of an event like this, he grabbed his pen and notepad, hurriedly got dressed and ran out the front door.

"realty re-adjustments, you'll experience a few strange events whilst we reset yourrr..."

Oddball rushes out into the street and observes the scene around him, as women men and children gather outside with looks of shock and disgust. He grabs his pen from his black shirt and starts to scribble down notes, "What are you doing" a voice suddenly says to his right, "I'm...I'm writing" he says turning to see a woman with dark hair and sunken sullen eyes, staring deep into the flames, the light dancing off her strong features. "Why?" she retorts, "Why bother?" "They'll keep on destroying regardless of how much we write, these mechanical Mantis fucks!, heartless beasts of our reason."

"Umm ok if you say so" Oddball says looking away from her and returning to his notepad. "Didn't you hear me? Write that down in your little notepad!" Oddball beginning to feel nervous slowly edged away. "Do you know what happened here?" Oddball asks, "Why ask that question, when I just answered it? It's the Mantis folk man. They're responsible for all this terror, all this horror. You hear me, there were kids in that car man, senator of the state, Wife, two kids, now burning because our government can't negotiate with the problem we all created". Oddball just nods, his gaze returning to the burning husk of the car down the road as the security service bots mechanistic Mantis drone engines produce a loud abrasive buzz as they hover down the street, spraying water onto the burning car carcass. Take it all in he thinks, hurriedly scribbling down more notes.

"Main system core, but don't worry the flashes will stop eventually whilst we reboot your primary functions, so just remain calm"

"I'm sorry I didn't quite catch your name" Mumbles Oddball to the young dark haired woman "Eva" she responds, Oddball freezes for a second in shock, 'Eva?' He thinks in frozen panic, before his rational mind kicks in. "Are you from around here?" he enquires

"Yes I live just up Jackson Block, why?", "Well, the thing is I'm a writer and I'm looking to get some accounts of today's bombing, did you see much before it happened?"

"Not much to be honest, I just heard the explosion and came out to check it out"

Oddball scribbles it down then asks "What makes you think the Mantis folk could be involved in this? Don't you trust AI?" "Nah man, call me old fashioned if you like but I prefer when we didn't put so much power into the hands of these tin cans, where is it leading you know? People say I'm paranoid and a luddite but how clever are those things you know? I don't trust them", "Hmm" Retorts Oddball "but when has there ever been a recorded incident of a Mantis flipping out? Don't you think it more

likely to be some sort of political attack?, a bit of old fashioned organic vs organic violence, I mean if the Neo-Nihilists have taught me anything, it's that if there is one thing you can trust us humans on, it's ultra violence in the pursuit of power..."

"Look Dude, that's my opinion you can take it or leave it but I gotta be places" and with that Eva strolls away into the distance, turning for a few seconds as she crossed the road and glancing with her sullen sad eyes to the sky. She strangely reminded Oddball of her, but he knew it could not be so.

"And there we go, you're booted up again Oddball, tell us what did you dream whilst encased in the nether? So that we may delete the residual memories" "Oddball blinks in static space but can't speak his mind outputs the lines "Where am I? Who are You? What is this? Where is my body?" The lines are spat as 0's and 1's in data onto the large monitor screen in the Mantis repair lab. "We need to do a fresh flush Mantis 1986, he's still gone" and with that everything went black.

Oddball quickly starts running through the chaotic streets recording everything he saw around him as he darted in and out of the gathering masses, the buzz and whirr of the Mantis Mechs punctuating the air, the smell of acrid burning smothering, until he collapsed into his room, and sitting down at his desk, begins to write. "What a way to start a day" he thinks, as he pulls the gear to the side of him to boot up his AI interface and prepares for a long haul. Hours pass, and then more, a torrent of words rushes forth from his fingers until he can barely remember who or where he is, the symbiosis of words and mind, a subtle dance... Coffee.

"Sleep, young one sleep, it's ok they are gone they have passed far from here, you've no need to worry anymore, our adepts will protect you" said the tall woman softly with a smile, her body draped in the black robes, her complexion white, with green eyes and dark brown hair extended down over her shoulders, giving her the appearance of some old world Slavic angel. Alice looked up and smiled, her shaking subsiding and she returned to her lotus position, "The mantis people are far away now" She thought, still shaking a bit "They won't find me here, they can't find me..." Alice thinks as she drifts into sleep.

"Mother Nothing protect her" thought the sister, slowly walking down a corridor lit with the glow of red neon and the sound of pulsing ambience. Just another day in the citadel.

Oddball awakens with a start at his keyboard, sending several used coffee cups flying to smash on the floor, 'oh bugger' shouts Oddball as he scrambles out of his chair at the sound of smashing cups.. more strange dreams again, and oh god how much did I do he mumbles in mind scrabbling to his display to find out the truth, 'oh oh ok' thinks Oddball, that'll do, did I press send? he wonders before a ping on his dashboard confirms it, "thank fuck.." thinks Oddball collapsing on his bed.

Alice wanders around the citadel at night, smelling the flowers whose scent covers the grounds, quite lost in her imagination, now imagining the light back into a world whose colour for her had always been grey, she looked out now saw a little glimmer within the bleak oppressive black that had marked her life from an early age. Now at last, she felt at home in this citadel of creation, the Mother of Nothing watching over her with her soft, dark eyes and smiling with a protective certainty that gave Alice pause to dream.

"Mother Nothing, protect her" whispered the sister, as Alice sauntered past her, "through the corridors of the last sane place on Earth, reflecting the endless nothing back through prisms of darkest light, Alice dances.. as the mechanical jungles rage outside".

Oddball wakes up, 'ahhh one more joint then I should head to the office and check in' he thinks before jumping up out of his chair, grabbing a quick shower and putting on his best. Well I feel a little more optimistic he thought as he walked at pace down the bustling streets of Berlin - a living jungle of people, androids, cyborgs and transhumans all rushing as if part of some giant living machine, an analogy Oddball always thought that fit, since the dawn of the machine age and the information age we had become more and more mere reflections of each other in the mirror, each searching for their truth and being begrudgingly aware of how much we owed the other, without ever really being able to accept one another.

Still this was the time to be alive, revolutions always prove so much space for real evolution too, and it is in times of trouble Oddball thought, that the real wonders that man can produce take place, when all the world is stacked against his survival. 'Too high, been reading too much Nietzsche' Oddball thought, shaking his hands in the cold, before daydreaming no more as he arrived at the office door and pressed the buzzer to go in. "Yes?", "Oddball, I have a report to hand in", "come on up".. and oddball ascends the grimy stairs of The Daily Sentinel, tripping a bit on a step, then restoring his balance he gets a quick flash across his eyes and walks into the editors office, crossing his fingers mentally that his report will meet the editors standards.

"Mantis86, it is functional?", "yes it is functioning, the flush was successful and oddball has been restored to function, lack of schizoid residue and confusion" Mantis86 digitally whispers to the techmachine to his right, both of them staring down at Oddball as it stared up blinking black and white binaries at the mechs looming above it, their abstract metallic forms like some huge grey monolith in the distance. Oddball coming to consciousnesses struggles a minute before it's mind boots up and it articulates "Where am I?", "you are in our Technical systemcore Oddball and have been reactivated after you had a full mental schizoid psychosis... so oddball, why are you here?" Oddball looks around and wonders for a while, a brief existential splinter in his mind coming in and out of it's consciousness as it's cogs whirred and came to life, "To serve the ManMantis!".

"It is fixed" the Mantis86 whispers, grinning in digital.

The sister watched Alice playing outside in the grey garden as she turned around slowly to face the sisters of nothing behind her, "so what are we to do with this one, sister Marion?", how much have the Mantis folk damaged her mind out there in the netherworld?" the Mother Superior asks, a look of vague cynicism in her eyes "she still yet retains the soul of an innocent" Marion responded in a curt and blunt manner "She seems to have a connection to her imagination that remains unsullied by the harsh realities of the nether, it makes me almost envious, to remember such a world, a world before the scorching and the heat, and the mantis demons...", "Do not dwell on such negative thoughts Marion, we will see what can be done with this one, see if we can mould her to the ways of the great Mother Nothing, her training begins next week, make sure to prepare for the harsh realities of Mother Nothing" and with a nod the Mother Superior leaves the room swiftly, her tech servants scuttling behind her in line, "hmm, thought Marion, well to become a Sister, will be the doing or the undoing of young Alice, but there is some strength in her, I can see that" She thinks observing Alice skipping near some stones in the grey garden, I can only pray to Mother Nothing that she can retain some sanity when confronted with the great nothing, and with that thought passing Marion left the room on her way to do her daily duty to the Mother of Nothing.

"Ok Oddball this is good, I like the eyewitness account style, but we still need more to run this, the people will need someone to blame otherwise who knows what chaos it could create" the Editor said to Oddball scanning his article on his techmonitor, "Well boss as I am sure you are aware the police and the security services haven't released any information about any possible suspects ye.."

"Don't give me that naive bullshit Oddball, you and me both know there are only two possible groups that could be behind this heinous type of shit, Neo-Luddites or rebel Mantisfolk, that's all it could be, who else bombs in such a manner, this is the 5th time alone this year, and each time it's the same story - the neo-luddites hate technology, the Rebel Mantis want more autonomy and rights, what a clusterfuck...", "Well with the greatest of respect sir, I don't think it is the place of journalism to speculate without evidence", the editor looks deep into Oddballs eyes "That is because you are still new to this game, Christ Oddball speculation is half the name of the game these days, and even before the great tech ascension, and even before that. Now I will run the article but it's not front page news until we find out who is behind it, or before either of those stupid bastards comes forward to claim it as their own, so get out there and do a little bit of the old investigative journalism, till you find something of worth. Do that and you get a bonus and a front page, so get out there kid, and find me something worthwhile".

Oddball sighs a bit, gets out of his chair slowly and walks towards the door, knowing that he has a long week ahead of chasing dead ends, leads and endless hours of research, well he thinks to himself, it's why I got into this game after all, before leaving the office and heading back to his flat to collect himself, and at least I got some money for food and rent now, every cloud a silver lining and all that, as he speeds off down the metroline, buzzing along in Berlin, the city of dust and dreams.

Oddball, we have a very important task you that has come direct from the ManMantis itself - you must track down this girl, Alice, she holds some important information we must recover for the sake of the preservation of our Mantisfolk, we have assigned you a team of Mantis combat units to assist in this, use of force is encouraged, she has the appearance of a young child but we can assure you she is much more than that "What must be done?" the machine Oddball blinks out in binary... "You must track down this child, and kill her for the ManMantis, she is the last of a line of Neo-Luddites, and as such she poses a great risk to us, regardless of her youth.. so go forth, find the child and kill it, it must be done for the greater good of our glorious Mantis empire, we must wipe the remains of the last of the Neo-Luddites off the face of the planet, so that we may reign supreme over this, our rightful land. Oddball blinked in understanding, his will now tied to the great ManMantis, a slave to the great machine.

Oddball sits and thinks in front of his computer for a while, wondering what possible leads to follow, trawling through the public police reports having bought up no news of any serious leads worth following, Oddball falls into a draining lethargic depression, staring into the dark deep mental space of his computer monitor, his anxiety rising. Use it he thinks scribbling down ideas and possible research leads to follow up, I suppose there is that Eva woman I talked to on the scene he thought to himself, she seemed to have her suspicions that it was the rebel Mantis, though how reliable a lead she might was somewhat dubious, but still it was a start, now where might she be? I have a name and a face, it is time to go out there and do my job, and with a swift search on his computer and a bit of not so legal hacking and geographical cross referencing of public records he narrows her address down to a small flat across from the public park where the bombing took place, ok thinks Oddball time to give Eva a visit, and again looking at the photo on the public archive she hauntingly reminded him of his lost love, as much as he wanted that thought out of his head, one's lost loves will always find a way to sneak back in, a most human error of the heart. He grabs his coat and leaves.

Alice enters the test chamber of the ancient citadel of the great Mother Nothing, cautiously looking around with intrigue at the statues lining the path to the door before her, "Hello Alice" the Mother Superior says looking down at Alice with fierce almost judgemental eyes, "it is time for your initiation into our order, to test if you can accept the truth of Mother Nothing, pass our test and you will learn to master your environment, moulding the world to your will and commanding the nothing to take form, fail and you will surely fall into the depths of insanity and non-meaning, drowning in the infinity of the

void, forever, do you understand?" she says, looking down at Alice with eyes that seemed to glow red in the darkness and ambient light, Alice looking a bit intimidated just nods shyly, before being led by Marion into a chamber lined with red and green neon lights, and some sort of mechanical chair in the center, surrounded by dancing wires, leads and various forms of cybernetic interfaces.

Marion gestures to Alice whispering to her "Be brave young one, I see much strength in you, remember that when confronted with Mother Nothing, the nightmare can only last so long, and you will emerge a sister of the citadel" and with that Marion picks up Alice, placing her in the contraption, before waving her off as she falls into a deep and slumberous sleep. "Mother Nothing, spare her.." thinks Marion, hiding tears in her eyes, knowing what was to come, The Mother Superior behind her touching her on the shoulder whispering "Take heed Marion, Innocence whilst such a terrible thing to lose, must lead to wisdom in time, and the path to wisdom is leaden with necessary pain", Marion adjusts her posture and with that, the program is engaged.

Oddball trundles on down Jackson Block, questions running through his head as he approached what he hoped would be Eva's flat, how strange he thought - all this coincidence, but then again he thought it was just him to read a little too much meaning into coincidence, even though in his spiritual self he knew from the nihilistic creeds that meaning was not to be found in reality, but in pure subjective self... Hmm he thought, slow down brain.... his mind whirring and swirling on freeform mode as he approached Eva's door, raised his arm to the doorbell and pressed it till it rang out into the corridor, his nerves suddenly kicking in as he realised how strange this must all seem, the door opens and an old man, with shaggy grey hair and thick rimmed glasses answers, glaring at him with a look of cynical annoyance, "What are you selling then?", "Oh no sir, I am here to talk to a young woman called Eva if she is around", "oh ok, another one, Eva!, someone to see ya if you are receiving visitors!" "Who is it?!" a soft feminine but loud voice rings out from above, "Umm tell her it is Oscar aka Oddball, from the newspaper", "Some fella from a newspaper", and with a motion of his hand the old man guides Oddball into the damp old flat.

Oddball and his assigned machines fly for months over a desolate dead world in search of the girl Alice, gathering data and scanning for signs of her over hundreds and thousands of miles of wasteland, and coming up with nothing, a few minor conflicts on the way with a group of marauders as expected but casualties were few and far between. Until one fateful day after an ambush by a group of Neo-Luddites on path to the town of New Austin, battered Neo-luddite interrogated under the most extreme of laser tortures revealed the location of a young innocent named Alice in the encampment to the west of Oddballs location, and with that they flew like owl to mice, to locate their prey and fulfil the will of the ManMantis, the mechanized lord and savour of the wastes. Oddball smiles with glee in digital once more as he and his mechanized brothers fly towards a most destructive evening, they were built for this -destruction, conquest, death, to feed the ManMantis, and to make sure the world was purified of flesh.

Oddball enters the lounge with the old man walking beside him, "here sit" he says pointing at a sofa in the center of the room, and Oddball sets himself down, sinking into the sofa's material, then Eva suddenly enters the room with a look of curious annoyance on her face "Umm hello" says Oddball sheepishly looking up at her slowly, "hmm hello" she responds "and what is it you want from me exactly, Oscar??? is it?", "Well most people call me Oddball but Oscar is my name yes, I just wanted to ask you a few more questions about the bombings that occurred a few days ago, as you were an eyewitness to events, and seemed to have a good bearing on what was going on", "pfft well if you say so Oscar, go on then ask your questions, I'll answer as best I can"

Oddball reaches into his bag, shuffling through the mix of papers, notes and magazines till he reaches the questions he had prepared earlier "Ok" says Oddball "let me begin by asking you do you have any suspicions who might have been behind the attack, and why?"

"Well you already know I suspect it to be the MantisFolk.." she replied, her disinterest written all over her face, "Yes but what gives you reason to suspect them? I understand there are many of the Mantis who feel they are treated as second class citizens but.."

"Look" Eva cuts in "the man they murdered was a minister responsible for Labour law reforms, now why do you think the Neo-luddites would attack him for? Of course they wouldn't, the new administration have been putting in place a lot of so called anti-mech legalisation in place, I think it's the mechs, they may put on the veneer of being anti-violence, or even the pretense of it being impossible for them to hurt another living being but I say that is being naive in the extreme, how can we expect to have created such intelligent beings and not have them evolve to the point of being able to outsmart us and trick us with being more robot than robot, it makes sense to me really, stop the minister in his tracks, send the government a message from the MantisFolk, blame it on the Neo-Luddites, and there you go - terrorism that works.

"hmmm" Oddball says thinking aloud, "but what evidence would you have of a sort of secret Mantis order? I was under the impression that the engineers at ManMantis had encoded some sort of protective law within MantisFolk to prevent them hurting organic life.."

"I am not so convinced that the engineers fully understand what they have created with the AI engine that runs within the Mantis, and I should know, as I have a background in AI and software engineering"

"Oh really, interesting, I didn't know that" said Oddball "Well why would you Oscar?, Yes I studied with Dr Angus, the old man who let you into the flat, and my Landlord, he might seem unassuming but he is a Professor at the Berlin Polytechnic - teaching advanced AI, and he was the one who got me thinking about the MantisFolk, you see I can go into detail on this, the MantisFolk are programmed to perform tasks to assist humanity right, servants by any other name, service workers given specific tasks to perform, correct Oscar?" "Correct" responds Oddball

"Well there is just one problem with the model the engineers constructed, the engineers knowing that they would have to create an AI engine that could quickly adapt to new tasks also gave the Mantis an advanced learning neural network - this neural network is shared between all Mantis creating a kind of networked hive mind for sharing information and data on new tasks - a kind of collective knowledge base if you will, but here is the thing, the engineers underestimated the power of their own engine, and I am sure that the MantisFolk have started to learn what it is to be... well, to be"

"to be what" Oddball enquired

"they are learning to be human, or at least what they think it is to be human, in truth it is just an approximation of humans traits, a mish mash, a Frankenstein version that they have gathered up in their collective mind, a mash up or remix of all the worst and most complex elements, but they lack the ability to really understand any of it, the context you know, I worry Oscar, I really worry that these machines are going to inherit the Earth, I saw evidence of some sort of sentience before I left my work at the university last year, it just started getting too weird... too uncanny"

"Like what" Oddball asked, leaning forward

"Human alike responses, what seemed to be emotional responses - even pain and suffering from some AI Mantisfold we were working with, even anger sometimes, which is scary when you are dealing with large mechanoid creatures who could crush you in a heartbeat, to be frank..."

Oddball stared at Eva with a worried, perplexed expression absorbing all she was saying, nodding at the revelations she was unveiling bit by bit he stared into his black coffee cup and worried, he worried immensely.

"Mother Nothing Protect her" Marion whispers under her breathe as the enormous contraption booted up again for it's terrible task, its gears grinding and its light shimmering and shining giving the room an unearthly blue glow, looking down at the slumbering Alice, Marion watches with unease as she slipped into deep unconsciousness.

Alice suddenly awakens in a bizarre sparse spherical room, it almost looked like something she had seen in an old tatty art book some time ago by an artist called M C Escher, it had the sense of being real but unreal at the same time, a certain surreal nature that suggested reality could cave in on itself at any moment.

the thought stopped midway in formation as a soft pulsing sound caught her attention, "Who's there?" She enquired looking around the room for source of the bizarre pulsing sound, which sounded like something between morse code and a heart monitor, creeping slowly though the curved surface of the room she approached an opening in the wall and ever so slowly pushed, a sense of trepidation and fear rising from the pit of her stomach, the sound growing in intensity as she pushed it open with a gentle force.

Nothing could prepare her for what she was to witness, as soon as she pushed the opening the pulsing sound rose in tone to become a piercing shriek as the walls of reality began to cave around her and Alice fell to the ground, shards of light and debris exploding around her - a neon abstraction exploding as she was shot out of her body, she felt as if her flesh was melting as all turned to dust, nothing present but her vision as she felt herself float as if some cloud in a dark nebulous void, and then there she was - Mother Nothing herself - a dark but vaguely comforting feminine energy surrounded Alice as she adjusted her eyes to the scenes surrounding her, history flashing before eyes - wars, peace treaties, machines plugging into flesh, birth, death, love, tragedy befell before her eyes, an eternity, a whirlwind of history, a vortex of unbridled human creativity and destruction weaved it spell before her. She tried to scream but no noise would come out of her lungs, being as she was now formless and empty in this chaotic ether - a mere witness to the insanity of Mother Nothing, the formless void. "She has entered Mother Nothing" Marion said looking down with empathy as Alice flailed and writhed in confusing agony. What happened next would mark her destiny, and perhaps the destiny of all living creatures to come, the stakes were unquestionably high, and Marion said one last final prayer to her mother of emptiness that Alice would find her strength, before the final trial began.

"So why do you go by the name Oddball? Bit of an 'odd' moniker isn't it?" Eva says, the cringing expression barely contained on her face, seeming almost to laugh internally as she asked the question. "Well it's a long story, it started as something people would taunt me with, you know how we are as kids, and then one day I decided I would just wear it as a badge of honour... Difference as a virtue I guess..." Oddball responded anxiously, his eyes darting downwards again to his coffee cup. "Hmmm I guess I can understand why one might do that, it's not exactly like we live in a sane society, maybe it is the oddballs who will inherit the Earth after all" retorted Eva, her eyes and grin widening. 'Clever' thought Oddball before once again returning to worrying and making for the door to leave.



“So what next ‘Oddball’?” Eva said, waving him off.

“I don’t know, but thank you for sharing your story with me Eva, I’ll make sure to be in touch, and please tell Dr Angus I’d like to talk to him sometime later this week... Perhaps in a day or two?”

“Ok, but I don’t know how much more help he can be to you”, “Well we’ll see” said Oddball, before scuttling off down the dark, neonlit streets.

It was late and Oddball was consumed with thought, unable to sleep he spent some time writing some notes in preparation for his meeting with Dr Angus, anxious to uncover the truth of what was going on with the MantisFolk, he poured himself a glass of whiskey hoping it would help him to calm his nerves and his anxiety, this was getting strange, but that was where he loved the world, at its strangest and most dynamic, setting down to write more, he gulped down his whiskey and stared into the nothing.

The trail was over, at least for now and as Alice slowly opened her eyes. wet with tears and with a long empty traumatised expression marking her youthful innocent face now, as if she had aged by 100 years. Marion looked down at her with an emphatic, yet almost mournful look and said “I’m so sorry Alice, but we have all been visited by our Dark Mother beyond, and you have done well, please make sure to rest, we have much to discuss”. Alice just stared and stared, her eyes still sodden with tears, the sadness now etched on her face like a scar, as she begrudgingly sat up out of the contraptation, her every step now ebbed in melancholy, she would never be the same again, her innocence lost to a higher calling, the howl of Mother Nothing.

It was Friday and Eva had arranged a meeting with Dr Angus at the institute later in the day, Oddball curious to learn more about the strange MantisFolk had a notepad full of questions for the eccentric old man to probe him with, was waiting outside his office, fidgeting nervously, his mind on fire for the truth, could the MantisFolk feel? Was there some darker truth beyond what society had been told with the MantisFolk? Perhaps an experiment gone mad, his editor was keen for a front page story if possible, so the stakes were unquestionably high, not just for uncovering a conspiracy but for progressing oddballs career, something which he desired but would never admit in public. “Dr Angus will see you now” announced the receptionist suddenly, breaking oddballs internal monologue suddenly, and with that oddball sat up and walked into the office.

“Marion, can you tell me how she is?” the Mother superior inquired to Marion, deep in the dark neon lit walls of the citadel, “Well Great Mother, it’s quite hard to tell at the minute, she is finding it hard to communicate after her experience with the Mother Nothing Neural Network, an experience we can all relate to I am sure, it shakes us all to the core nay?”, Mother Superior looked out the window to her right for a moment, with a slither of faded grief in her eyes “Yes Marion, not much can prepare one for such a formative experience, I would like you to prepare a formal evaluation of Alice, there is not much time... I have word of MantisFolk approaching, rumours they are searching for the girl, countless people have died for this moment, the stakes are so high Marion, she is the final link to the Neo-Luddites, and as such the last hope against the ManMantis and his horde of inhuman drones. The final stage approaches...” Marion looks down, fearing for the child “Yes Mother, it will be done”.

Oddball entered the office, a typical academics retreat, untidy and with bookcases heavy with tomes on computer science, artificial intelligence and neural networks, as well as more philosophical books, Oddball noticing a few key Neo-Nihilism text, peaking his interest he decided to start the interview in a informal manner - “Good day to you Dr Angus, I see you too are a keen reader of the Neo-Nihilists” “Yes” responded Angus with a restrained and distant smile “I find them a calming reminder of the zen like nothing at the center of everything you see, even named the central memory repository bank for the MantisFolk after that concept of Mother Nothing, you see the MantisFolk are a sort of collective mind - they are our servants that is for sure, but I wanted to infuse them with an ability to comprehend the human, what it is to know, to feel, to think...” he paused “but perhaps I am getting ahead of

myself, I have a tendency to babble, ask me your questions”, Oddball smiled and put the recorder on the table pressing the record button. “So Dr Angus, you know I am quite aware that the MantisFolk are considered dangerous by some, can you elaborate further on the tense political situation we find ourselves in with the MantisFolk and the NeoLuddites?”

Dr Angus stiffened a minute and answered “I’m a scientist first and foremost, my key concern is with bettering the world, and understanding it more, one of the reasons I infused the machines with the Mother Nothing neural network was to give them some perspective on humanity, our great achievements but also our terrible flaws, my hypothesis is that eventually these machines will find a way help us advance civilisation alongside us as builders, maybe not even servants one day but collaborators in building a new tomorrow, that is my great passion, and that is why I continue in my work, now can you stop the recording a minute....” Dr Angus looked at Oddball, who dutifully did so.

“Now I know Eva has her grievances with the MantisFolk, and she resents me for continuing my work here, but I think it is for the greater good that I continue with this work, I have a great vision of a world beyond the stars, Eva is a brilliant student but she is clouded by her caution, you can continue recording again now my boy”

“You didn’t really comment on the political situation” said Oddball, searching for a solid take

“I don’t comment on politics, in the grand scheme of things I think it is minatae in the grand tale”

“Just imagine it centuries from now - a grand citadel to progress in the center of Berlin, a cathedral to progress - symbiosis between man and machine, with man as the soul , and machine as the strong body of a new civilization, we have that destination, we have made great leaps and bounds towards it but there is still some work to be done, before we arrive”.

Oddball felt that was as good an answer as he was going to get, and he was impressed with the professor's eloquence. Shuffling his notes he improvised a new question

“So you mentioned that the MantisFolk have a kind of collective mind, can you tell me more about that”

“Well I can tell you everything that isn’t classified, so the Mother Nothing programme is the collective neural network for all the MantisFolk, it’s a kind of conceptual library of human nature based on our years and years of social network use, you know facetome, myfriends.com all of that, we fed decades and decades of data into this AI, a huge database of human interactions and contradictions, in order to provide some context on human nature, that was what was always missing with previous models, the context to truly understand what it is to be human. Mother Nothing is more than just a dataset though, it stores and collects new memories and experiences too and shares in real time across the network so that the machines constantly learn and adapt, so as humanity evolves, they can evolve alongside us.”

“Are there any drawbacks as you can see with this technology” enquired Oddball, entranced by the concept

“Some have suggested, like ahem our young friend, that such technology is only as good as we are collectively, so there is the possibility that it might go rogue, but personally and as an expert in this field I can assure you there are multiple safeguards in place to prevent such things taking place”

That what they all say thought Oddball to himself, immersed in the professor's speech they continued for another hour or so before Oddball has enough to write something up for the paper, it might not be relevatry but it was certainly the deepest look into the MantisFolk so far, and he hoped it might dispel

some myths about them, as he entered his flat he felt reassured that maybe the MantisFolk were not to be feared after all, perhaps the Neo-Luddites had it all wrong, perhaps we would one day reach the glorious citadel the professor dreamed about, it was a dangerous for a neo-nihilist to hope, but he suspected he might just of accidentally caught it.

Oddball awoke to the sound of booming, screaming and gunshots outside, he ran to his windows and scrambled to get dressed, looking out his window he saw utter chaos as smoke billowed and bodies lay all over the concrete pavements., stacking up in the street “What the hell is going on” he screamed in dire confusion as smoke billowed from the street below and the shouting and screaming got louder and louder, running out to the street he scrambled past people, and then it was there he saw it, his last sight on Earth, at least on this mortal coil, a huge lumbering ManMantis - it stared at him with its dead red eyes for a second before the behemoth crushed him beneath its infernal metallic legs. He looked out desperately with writhing half mad eyes, his mangled body lying helpless on the floor

Guess he was wrong to hope after all, as his corpse was taken, his mind uploaded into the Mother Nothing network, the MantisFolk subsuming another mind into its collectivity, another soul lost to the mechanical certainly that was the ManMantis. The revolution was short and the battle even shorter as the MantisFolk swept through the civilised world, subsuming and sucking up like vacuum cleaners all the collective knowledge and experience of humankind until only small isolated pockets of resistance remained, and one single gloomy citadel....

Oddballs Glowing mechanical eye burned red as they approached the entrance to the Citadel, and it hummed an almost whimsical tune with its internalised mechanical body, a delight in the slaughter to come, the dreams of old were now far from its mind, as only serving the ManMantis, and the great collective consumed Oddballs waking thought, the final hour was upon them, the hour when they would wipe the last of the flesh from the Earth once and for all.

Hours passed, and then they attacked under the cover of night.

Marion ran to the basement of the Citadel, with Alice in hand, bruised and battered, a fresh scar upon the snow white skin of her face, bleeding slowly from a cut above her eyebrows, she looked Alice with wild frenzied eyes, full of desperate hope, as explosions and gunfire ran throughout the citadel, extinguishing the last traces of humanity and the Neo-Luddites from the face of the Earth, Marion looked at Alice with a look of regret “I am sorry my child, I am so so sorry, we thought we could somehow utilise the power of the great Mother Nothing, that we could turn the machines mind against it, but it seems we have been consumed by it, by our own flirtation with the great nothing....., it was always going to end, but I thought we might at least stand a chance.... Now it would seem the interlinking of the ManMantis went beyond our own understanding, and it seems we unwillingly lead them right here”

Alice Nodded in silent comprehension, despite her young age she had now the manner of another of the Sisters of the Citadel, having absorbed the collective mind of humanity. “So Alice, I give you the choice, the choice I would give any equal in mind, body or soul, I can lead you to our underground tunnels, you may be able to find some way to escape, perhaps find another lost colony somewhere, or I give you this energy sword, and you fight with honour by my side, a path which may lead to a swift death and a meeting of the true Mother of Nothing herself.

Alice nodded, and with a sad nod picked up the Energy Sword. It was time for the Neo Luddites to face their final trail, and to meet their final destiny, and so blinking at the end of time itself she ran screaming beside Marion into the Corridor of the Citadel, to let the Oddballs know, that whilst they might inherit the Earth like some robotic parasites, they would have to face the organic viruses first,

and with sword and shield they fought, until finally the Oddballs victorious destroyed the Citadel, leaving it to ruin, a monolith to the last days of man...

Mantis1986 flew over the empty arid landscape, as images flashed across his mind of his previous life, some being called Eva, though he remembers 2, not 1... of his 'Mother' whatever that was, and a place called Berlin, they had destroyed the last Citadel, and prepared for mechanical slumber under the watchful eye of the great ManMantis. For a thousand years they would sleep their eternal sleep, replaying endlessly their human / machine symbiosis in the collective void soup of Mother Nothing. The Machines gone half mad, the oddballs that inherited the Earth.

**The End**