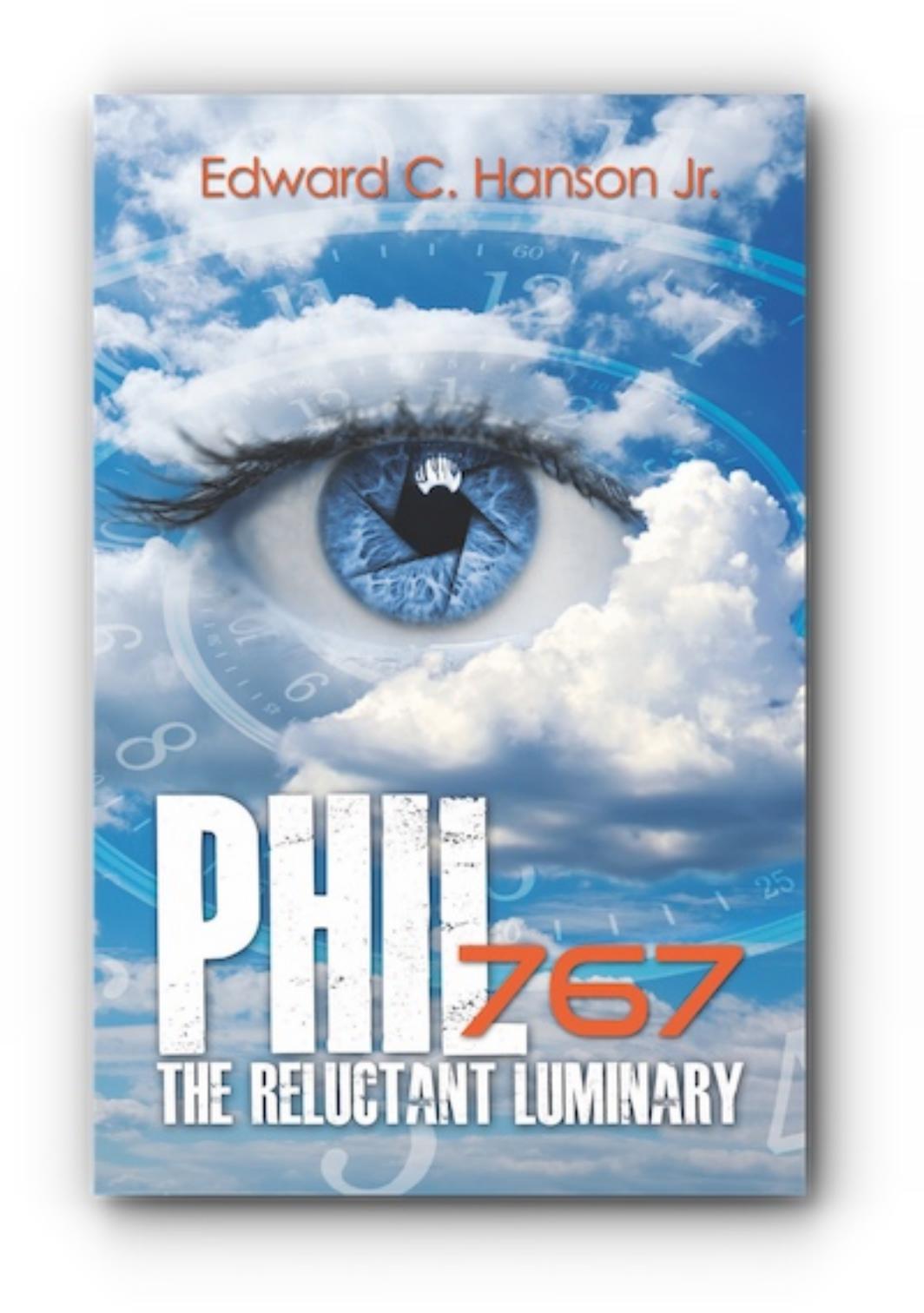


Fiction; humanity hangs by a thread of mental stability.

PHIL767
The Reluctant Luminary
By Edward C. Hanson Jr.

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The book cover features a central image of a human eye with a blue iris, looking directly at the viewer. The eye is set against a background of a bright blue sky filled with white, fluffy clouds. Overlaid on the sky and eye is a semi-transparent clock face with white numbers and hands. The author's name, 'Edward C. Hanson Jr.', is printed in a reddish-brown font at the top. At the bottom, the title 'PHIL 767' is written in large, bold letters, with 'PHIL' in white and '767' in orange. Below the title, the subtitle 'THE RELUCTANT LUMINARY' is written in white, all-caps font.

Edward C. Hanson Jr.

PHIL 767
THE RELUCTANT LUMINARY

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Second Edition

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CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINING

In the early morning hours of April 1, 2243, it was still dark outside and the grass was wet with dew. It was a calm and quiet morning much like any other, but different for one young man known as 7445.767.75.3273 or Phil767.75.3273.

Most simply refer to him as Phil767. He wasn't much more than a boy of twenty-one years old. He was lying on the floor of his bedroom motionless, awake and alert. His spindly frame was crumpled up uncomfortably on the floor; he was pretending to sleep even though he was wide awake with his eyes pinched shut. He was nearly overwhelmed with anticipation.

His facial features matched his body type, thin and knobby. In the grayed down colors of early morning, you could notice the shadow cast by the nose protruding from his face, pointy and bumpy, with a small bulb on the end. His cheek bones were prominent and his mouth seemed disproportionate and oversized for his face. His build was slight, more like his mother's, but he had a bold drive to succeed much like his father.

Phil767 lived by the philosophy that anything worth doing was worth doing right. He was a perfectionist with a passion for machines and technology. He excelled in all of his studies, continually rising to the top of the class. He was highly intelligent, but struggled somewhat with social skills.

He was a nice guy but spent most of his time musing on what he considered to be the "important" things in life:

science, technology, and, of course, gaming. Sadly, real friends most often didn't make the cut, unless they were a part of his interactive gaming session. That was as real as it got. There just wasn't enough time for a meaningful conversation or even just hanging out. He was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea and it was easier to just not make the effort.

Even as a child, he found it difficult to make friends. He found them silly: always laughing and goofing around about nonsense, just foolishness. Why were they acting so stupid? Sometimes, he would pretend to act like they did, just to get along. That got old. The whole time, he hated the way he had conformed and lowered his self to their level just to fit in. The charade wore thin after a while, and he would play by himself: drawing, figuring, and designing futuristic devices and inventions.

He created elaborate city plans and buildings where people would live in when he was grownup. He imagined the advancements in science and technology would fix the social and uncomfortable emotional circumstances he seemed to always be a part of. He didn't completely understand how all of those kids failed to realize the importance of intelligent scientific design, and how it might eradicate this human condition of awkwardness.

Human emotions were too unpredictable. Machines however, were designed for a particular purpose and performed accordingly to complete a task or solve a problem. "Every problem has a solution" was his mantra. This pragmatic, analytical approach to scientific problem solving excited him. If a machine would fail or malfunction for some reason, it could be reprogrammed

or altered, fixed to perform better or the way it was supposed to. People don't like to be referred to as "malfunctioning." They can be touchy that way.

And *touchy* wasn't a word that could be used to describe Phil767. He could even come across as harsh at times or cold. Expressing or even feeling emotions made him uncomfortable. They weren't logical and they clouded your thoughts. Emotions, he thought, were best dealt with in private, corrected, and logically solved. When he was by himself and not thinking about important things, he could address the random thoughts and feelings that interrupted him throughout the day.

However, very early that morning, Phil767 had been tired but couldn't silence the chatter of random 'what if ' thoughts. Calculating numerous possible scenarios, he tried to logically organize the events that had transpired over the past few days. He posed new problems and came up with solutions, until finally, he was beginning to fall asleep. The chatter of thoughts was reduced to whispers. He struggled to stay awake. He felt he had to.

A young woman lay motionless in the bed next to him. Phil767 had positioned himself on the hard, cold floor between the bed and the doorway. He figured that he could thwart any possible escape attempt. If she, perhaps, woke up in the middle of the night, he'd be the first to know.

His eyes closed. Almost immediately, he was jolted awake. "Uff," he grunted. A small foot squished deeply into his belly. Swiftly, the young woman, who had been lying in the bed, spun herself to the far side of the bed. She dropped both feet to the floor and planted them

firmly. In a warrior-like stance, she readied herself for a would-be attacker.

Phil767's heart was pounding in fear and excitement. He rose slowly to his knees, peering over the bed. A window on the far side of the room illuminated the silhouette of the shapely, young woman from behind. She was holding his table lamp over her head. *She's alive and well*, he thought. *Perhaps a bit aggressive, but seemingly healthy and alert, considering.*

Slowly, trying not to alarm his baneful guest, he said, "Illuminate," turning on her lamp. His fierce adversary was now brightly lit and completely nude. Her next move was to tear the sheet off the bed with her free hand and pull it over herself. She wrapped the sheet over her shoulder and clenched a fist full of linen on her left hip, making the sheet look like a toga. All of this was accomplished while maintaining a white knuckled grip on the table lamp.

She was nearly as tall as he was. He could see the muscle tone in her right arm as she raised her electric torch over her head. Instead of threatening him, she now appeared to be using the lamp to look around the room, as she surveyed the foreign surroundings.

Phil767 noticed her brightly lit hand holding the lamp. Her "weapon" was clenched with grotesquely long fingernails around its base. She lowered her lamp back to a battle-ready position. Her glowing sword was now ready to strike.

She had a solid stance, feet firmly planted and head held high with a steely stare. Her face was contrastingly

beautiful, even though it was easy to imagine her growling. Phil767 had only seen her in poor light. Now he noticed her eyes, they were a piercing light blue. Her lips were full. Her long brown hair was snarled and draped down her toga covered body. Her hair nearly reached her knees. *She appears toned, lean, and healthy*, Phil767 thought, as she stood in front of him wrapped in a bed sheet.

“Who are you?” she snarled.

“Phil767,” he replied. He had worked his way to standing with his hands slightly raised, defensively.

“I don’t know what you did to me, but once my father finds out about this, the only daylight you’ll see will be through bars, you sick fuck.”

“I know you’re confused,” Phil767 said calmly.

“Shut up and get me my clothes, so I can get out of here!”

Music came on in the other room. Rune was trying to cover up the shouting.

“Who else is here?” she shouted.

“Rune,” Phil767 said.

Just then, Rune opened the door and quickly closed it behind him. Her eyes widened and her gaze snapped to the bedroom door. She pumped the lamp when Rune came in, as though she were warning them to keep their distance. She changed her glance from one person to the other.

“If either of you come closer, I’ll break your heads open with this lamp,” she said through gritted teeth. “My clothes, now!” she said sternly, with her fiery blue eyes.

Rune slowly walked over to the closet, touched the wall and the closet door opened. Then he took a step back, a safer and less threatening distance, allowing the young woman to reach the closet and clothe herself. Rune motioned calmly to the shirts hanging in the closet, then picked one, and slowly turned and displayed it to the frightened young she-devil. She looked at Rune, holding up the dress shirt, and then snapped her eyes back to Phil767. He was still holding up his hands.

The sneer on her face softened slightly. Her winced eyes flickered as she looked between Rune and Phil767. She was assessing the situation, trying to make sense of it.

She thought to herself. That Phil767 guy has been sleeping on the floor and now stands there wearing some kind of tight-fitting onesie. While the other guy, Rune, is very sharply dressed and poised in his actions as he displayed the clothing selections like a new age male fashion model.

They're a gay couple and probably not an immediate threat. Still cautious and somewhat irritated, but no longer feeling threatened, she looked back to the shirt that Rune was holding.

“Is that the best thing you have?” she asked, as she slowly lowered the lamp and set it on the bedside table. She walked toward the closet, visually sizing up her

clothing options. She was still loosely clutching the bed sheet as she approached Rune, standing by the closet.

Standing at the open doors of the closet, she began flipping through the dress shirts with her free hand. She was holding things up to see how they looked and pulling them close to assess their possible fit.

“So, what did you guys do, slip me some Roofies or something?” She waited briefly for a reaction, still flipping through the clothes. Phil767 appeared confused. “Not talking. Smart.” She nodded her head. She was throwing the unwanted apparel to the floor. She no longer seemed concerned by her current situation. She now seemed more preoccupied and disgusted with her options. “Are these actually girl clothes?” she asked sarcastically.

“Um—” Phil started to answer.

“That was rhetorical,” she interrupted.

Phil767 quit talking. He was extremely tired, emotionally confused, and felt like he was in over his head. She stood there in front of them, nearly nude, thrashing through clothes and throwing them all over the floor. She had already taken charge.

What have I done? Phil767 thought.

His hands finally lowered down to his sides. He was worn out. He felt crushed. Is this what he stayed up all night for? Phil767 fell into an almost self-induced trance; perhaps he was in a kind of shock or falling asleep on his feet.

As he watched this young woman rip through his clothes and fling them around the room, making exasperating and rude comments, Phil767 struggled with piecing together the events that led up to this very moment. About the choices he had made, did he do and was he doing the right thing? Logical conclusions were difficult to calculate when including the emotional rampage of the creature he had unleashed. He realized he was ill equipped to handle this situation.

Phil767 had always prided himself on doing what was right. These values were what he held dear. Through the guidance of his parents and following the ideological teachings of their philosopher queen, the Great Sophia, he tried to logically assess each situation and measure the consequences of ethical or unethical behavior, trying his best to predict a favorable outcome for all who were involved and to anticipate how this could affect not only the present situation but also, in the greater scheme of things, the near and distant future.

He didn't mean to imply that the things and the situations he was challenged with would, in fact, have a grand or profound effect on the future. However, he did feel that if everyone took the time to allow themselves the opportunity to feel as though their choices could impact others, the world would be a better place. Everyone could be a hero in their own right.

Is that what he was, a hero? No, not him; he was about as aggressive as a bunny rabbit and spent most of his time either studying or playing video games. Save the world? He may have just ended it.

Phil767 had no reason to be aggressive. Until now, he had never felt as though his safety had been threatened. He lived in the safest, most comfortable period in human history with no crime, no poverty, and hardly any hurt feelings. Things were quite comfortable. One might even use the word *utopian*. The only violence was played out in video games.

In 2243, gaming has become extremely advanced. Not all the games were violent. They varied as much as the designers' imaginations. Now, virtual gaming experiences involved all five senses, eliciting responses that rivaled reality. A large percentage of the population, young and old, became lost in elaborate fantasies, spending much of their free time living in an imaginary world. Phil767 enjoyed spending most of his free time in one of these controlled environments, a fantasy world, gaming.

Phil767 thought about what had happened a few days ago and the events that led up to his current situation. What did he do before his real life began spinning out of control? He played games.

The game he was playing this time was a socially interactive game called *Weltherrschaft*. It was a game of world domination. In this game, the participants use assumed names and alternate personality characteristics of their own design, with a goal of deceiving, hiding, evading and whatever is necessary to gain complete control, and the opportunity to shape the world to their liking. The game ends when one person becomes the grand architect and supreme leader of the new world. The game almost never ends.

During Phil767's last session, he was frantically fighting his way through an urban jungle. His right hand clutching the hand of his "princess," and a weapon in the other. She was a character that Phil767 had apparently acquired when he had freed her from her captors. Named Kina, she was considered to have vital knowledge and be a key person in unlocking essential elements of this game of strategy. Kina was confused and weary, but happy to be free. She didn't know who he was or where they were going, but reluctantly trusted Phil767's, aka Dante's intentions. Anything was better than being held captive, buried in the dank, lightless underground prison beneath the city.

Dante was fiercely competitive and bulging with muscle. Designed to Phil767's particular physical specifications, the powerful Dante towered over the dainty and beautiful Kina.

Warm rainwater dripped from their soaked bodies as Dante guided Kina, through the lawless streets of a broken city. The streets were dark, lighted only by the occasional unbroken street light and occasional flash of lightning. Opposition could be lurking around any corner, but Dante was determined to persevere.

"We're found. I think they know where we are now," Dante said quietly. "But how? I was so careful. Have they known all along?" He muttered to his fair maiden as they ducked down behind a pile of debris. She just looked up at him with admiration and trust. "Let's go," Dante said. They jumped up and ran as fast as they could. Dante led her by the hand all the while. It felt as

though enemy eyes were trailing them from every angle. *Could they be right on our heels?* he thought.

Dante had turned his head for only a split second, to see if they were close when he tripped. Falling to the pavement, his head splashed in the warm puddle of water. Kina, still holding his hand, tried to drag him, and then finally pulled him to his feet.

“If we can make it to a computer, we can access information that can tell us how to locate the Fürst “Come on,” Kina said. They ran unknowingly into a dead-end alleyway.

They were hiding behind an old vehicle. Opponents’ Sucher Soldiers were closing in. They were sent by other players to locate Dante and to hopefully take Kina with them. “Dante,” she whispered over to him, “no matter what happens, I’ll always love you for trying to rescue me.”

Dante felt the sting of a spiny tracking device called a Spur plunge into his left shoulder and then another in his calf. “Ahh!” Dante exclaimed. He fell to one knee, throwing his right hand to his wounded shoulder. “Run Kina.” Two opponents were now tracking Dante’s every move.

“No,” she said in a wavering voice. She looked to him with tear filled eyes. “I can’t leave you.”

“We can’t both be caught, run for help.”

Reluctantly, Kina ran to a small opening in the back wall of the alley. She could barely fit through the opening

but she soon disappeared from Dante's sight into the dark hole in the wall.

Just then a third Spur penetrated Dante's torso. He could hear a ringing in the distance and a tingling in his weapon-wielding left hand. "What's that?" he said confused, looking down at his fire arm. He fell to the wet pavement. "I've failed," he said, exasperated.

He heard another faint ringing sound in the distance. "What's that?" He said quietly. His left hand tingled again. Of course the other gamers' avatars were now standing around the overdramatic, fallen Dante.

"It's your halo, you loser. Your mother's calling," one of them said. "You're done anyway."

"Where is Kina?" asked another.

Phil767 stood up. "Disconnect," he said. The game paused. He answered his halo by touching his thumb to his ring finger.

The halo is a communication device utilized much like a smart phone. It's worn like a ring, normally on either the middle or ring finger on either hand. Depending on the wearer's personal choices, the halo will vibrate, tingle, or ring in some fashion or illuminate to notify them of an incoming call or message. Visual displays are projected on the palm or as a vertical holographic projection. Answered by touching the ring wearing finger to the thumb and held up to one's ear for private conversations.

“What took you so long to answer? I couldn’t get through on the Center. It said, ‘all calls are blocked.’ Are you playing that silly game again?” his mother asked.

“Yes, Mom,” Phil767 said, slightly annoyed.

His mother continued, “Are you still planning on doing some gardening today?”

He was sure she wouldn’t believe him. “Yeah, I actually ordered some stuff earlier this morning. It hasn’t gotten here yet, so I was just passing some time.” He felt like he had to explain.

“You know I was going to go out with your father today. I wasn’t really planning on working in your backyard, but I can change my plans,” she said in such a way that made him feel guilty for not sitting in the driveway and waiting for the delivery from the Agrishop. You know, like moms can do.

“I know, Mom. I do plan on doing it today, but the stuff isn’t here yet.”

“Well, you can do whatever you want to do. I just got the impression that you were trying to make your new house nice, that’s all.”

“I...” He stopped himself before he said something he would regret. “Maybe, if you have time, you can stop over later and see what I’ve done.”

“Okay, honey, that’s sounds nice. See you later. Have fun today with *whatever* you decide to do.”

“Okay, thanks, Mom. Bye.”

Back in his altered state of reality, Phil767 was unfortunately captured by the others because he was distracted by the halo.

It was only a matter of seconds before Phil767 saw disgruntled messages pop up on the Center from his cohorts, all using aliases of course.

“Hey Dante, did Mama call?” Canton messaged with an obvious sarcastic tone.

“Yeah, I know, right?” Anton replied, “I guess that means that we play on without Dante. We got you and *then* you quit. It still counts.”

“Anton, Dante couldn’t help that his mom called, this still means that Kina was freed and she’s running away without a Spur.” Beta said, trying to keep the peace.

“I gotta go, guys,” Phil767, also known as Dante, said and then signed off.

Gaming for Phil767 and his small group of techno enthusiasts was quite intense. They all had the new gaming upgrade to their cranial implants. The upgrade included advanced sensory neurological perceptions, SNP or Snap.

Snap allowed them to feel as though they were actually a part of the game. Phil767 was very passionate about this kind of technology. Ever since he was old enough to know what it was, he’s loved anything to do with technology. His mom was always a bit leery of his obsession. She said many times that she felt like *she* was born in the wrong century and would have liked

things much simpler. Phil767 would respond with, "Technology makes life simpler." She would just roll her eyes and mess his hair and say, "Someday, you'll understand."

Phil767 would think to himself, *No, Mom: Someday, you will understand.* He believed that true satisfaction, true enlightenment, could only be achieved through the advancement of technology. He thought that *technology had the power to defy the boundaries set by nature. And therein lay the ability to save and change lives. That was the power, control, and ability to advance as a civilized species, cementing our place in the universe, avoiding mistakes of the past and protecting against the pitfalls of the future. That was technology.*

For Phil767, technology was like a god; *a god driven by the needs of humanity. It was all powerful, logical, sensible, fair, and impartial. It ruled without bias, and cared for without feeling or favoritism. True equality of humankind could only be reached through the advancement of science and technology.*

He would consider it the highest honor to be among the individuals who played a role in the greater good, *a revolution of evolution; an advancement in technology; giving back what it had so graciously given to me, by saving the life of my father. I now have meaning and a purpose .*

He thought that *the combined efforts of society could create this god. One that had the power without corruption. Humans were corrupt, biased, greedy, and deceitful, not technology. It was the answer to all*

problems. That was what Phil767 would have liked to tell her. But he didn't.

However, *she* loved working with her hands, especially out in the dirt, planting flowers or vegetables. She was, always trying to get him to go outside and "play in the dirt."

Phil767 would say, "But they have machines that do that."

"You should still know how to do things for yourself," she would say. "Don't let machines dominate your life." This type of comment would usually invoke seething frustration on his part, and he would have to just walk away.

Well, it was already after nine in the morning and, he figured he could go out back and get something started on his garden.

"Feel the earth in your fingers," as his mother always said. She said a lot of those weird, earthy things. Phil767 headed outdoors.

He could feel the sun getting hot as he walked into the backyard. His house was actually his first home away from his parents. It was on 629th Street. He lived in house number 78, part of the CAI (Certified Android Industries) industrial block 13, located in Platonía. CAI, where Phil767 was employed, actually owned the house; he just lived in it.

Phil767 paused for a moment. He heard a large truck thunder down the road, hauling a new home for the

700 area streets. As he actually started feeling the “earth in his fingers” or digging in the dirt with his hands, in that stony rubble CAI called soil, he thought about technology and his father. It was Day Six. His dad had the day off today too.

His father worked for a new home-establishment company called Global Homes. All of their digging was done with machines. The homes in this area had been built and delivered by Global Homes. His dad worked on the production line; he wasn’t a part of the delivery and setup crew.

His dad told him that before a home can be delivered, a ground crew established the site, and mapped it out using a satellite surveying system. When they were finished surveying the site, they called in for the automated excavation to begin.

A large excavation robot, XK-Vater arrived on the site, along with a small crew to oversee the work and troubleshoot. The XK-Vater was a robot that almost resembled a mechanical gorilla sitting on rubberized tracks. The huge arm-like backhoes on each side of the apparent torso would dig a foundation with ease. Information about the building site was communicated to the XK and its every move was choreographed and executed with precision accuracy via satellite. The System’s satellite signal guided the entire process from start to finish.

The XK accomplished its tasks flawlessly. Construction workers stayed on site to oversee the progress. After the excavation was completed, the XK could place the basement walls. The basement walls

were made in the factory and delivered. The concrete floor would be poured once the foundation walls were set in place by XK, and the area around the home would be roughly graded.

The following day, the home could be delivered and set in place, while the XK moved to the next site. By the end of that day, the home would be ready to be lived in, except for the driveway and yard work; yeah, the yard work. This was exactly what Phil767 had decided to accomplish himself, at *his* new place, with his mother's encouragement, of course.

Kneeling down on the ground, Phil767 struggled to scratch his way through the soil with his fingertips. "There are an awful lot of stones in the backyard," he said quietly, as he gritted his teeth. He examined his fingertips as he stood up. "I think a digging tool is required, Rune." Rune had followed him outside and was standing right next to him. Phil767 could swear that he heard Rune snicker, but that was just Phil767's projection of a presumed emotion.

"Sir," Rune replied.

Rune was his ASIMA and, of course, felt no emotion. Phil767 thought he might upload a new personality soon, but he guessed he'd been gaming too much to do so. Rune seemed nice and all; he just lacked personable replies. Rune had a computer-generated, politically correct, automated voice response.

The ASIMA looked like an average Joe. He stood almost exactly six feet tall. He had short black curly hair, dark brown eyes, and a smooth clear synthetic

complexion. He had no facial hair except for his eyebrows. They were narrow and straight and perfectly groomed. His nose was somewhat pointy and moderately sized for his face. His lips were thin and light. His face lacked expression, always looking calm and reserved. This conservative appearance matched his stale, politically correct conversations.

“Can I ask what you are doing?” Rune inquired.

“Trying to wear down the ends of my fingers, okay?”

“Do you think that is wise?” Rune replied politely.

“No, do you know what sarcasm is?”

“Sarcasm: remarks that—”

Phil767 interrupted, “Rune, go get me a shovel or something.”

“Sir.”

Rune turned and began walking toward the small, white storage shed in the back corner of the yard. Phil767 was about to, well, at least he was considering resuming digging with his hands when he heard a delivery truck backing into the driveway.

“Rune, go and speak with the delivery truck before you bring the digging tools.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. Rune changed direction and headed toward the driveway. He met the driver and checked off the items being delivered as Phil767 pondered how he would set up the flower garden in the

backyard. *This place could use a splash of color*, he thought.

“Geez, I sound like my mother,” Phil767 said softly.

Unlike his parents’ home, all of the homes and outbuildings on his block had a monochromatic color scheme. His was a medium blue with dark blue trim. Houses were all painted the same, distinguished by color and the house number located on the left side of the front door. The house numbers were black.

Houses on this block all had the same exterior design and floor plan. They were simply flipped or turned in the planning stage to appear as though they had some aesthetic variation. Sometimes, they would change which side the driveway was on, to spice things up a bit, or turn the house around so the front was the back. All of the homes were designed as solar collectors, each one producing sufficient energy to operate all electrical devices.

All homes and businesses were equipped with security cameras inside and out for personal safety. Each camera was connected to the System. The System was the electronic equivalent of the central nervous system for the world. It monitored and governed every aspect of daily life in 2243.

All of the roads were solar collectors in the Certified Android Industries Industrial Village. They circle around the CAI complex and were laid out in concentric circles. Cross streets led directly to the CAI complex in the center. This was done for efficiency. There was really no need for street signs. The streets, however, were

numbered. All employees were picked up by a one-passenger company car. It automatically took them directly to work when they got in. It was guided by an internal navigational system. It had no steering wheel.

The CAI vehicle was also quite plain. They were all white, with the company logo on the right door. If Phil767 needed to go somewhere else, he usually used public transportation or rented a car on occasion.

Phil767 would be dropped off at his work station in the morning while the company car left to retrieve someone else.

At the end of the day, CAI vehicle was waiting when he logged out of his work station. It would bring him home and return to CAI.

Phil767 worked five days, at five hours a day, which was pretty standard. There was a two-hour break midday that was spent at the facility. Accommodations for this recreation period ranged anywhere from shopping to swimming. Medical care and restaurants were also provided at CAI. Days Six and Seven he spent at home. Today was Day Six, the day he decided to spend in the dirt.

“Any day, Rune,” Phil767 muttered under his breath, still waiting for some tools.

“Excuse me; did you need something else, sir?” Rune handed him a brand-new shiny shovel and a pickaxe.

“These are nicer than Mom’s.” Phil767 smiled at him. “Rune, will you bring me the flats of flowers the Agrishop delivered?”

“Yes, I will,” Rune said politely.

Wow, he needs some adjustments, Phil767 thought as he plunged his shovel into the soon-to-be flower garden. He kept digging as sparks bounced around in the dirt. Rune returned from the front yard with some flats of bright red flowers and small, bushy plants.

“What do you think of these scarlet sage flowers, Rune?”

“Excellent choice, sir.”

“I think I will put the wormwood on the end over there,” Phil767 said, pointing toward the driveway on the right.

“Are not wormwood plants considered to be weeds, sir?” Rune inquired.

“Yeah, well, they said they would grow good in this type of soil: stones and sand,” he said with disgust.

“I can log a complaint about your soil conditions to Certified Android Industries?”

“No. Just bring some of that topsoil around to me, thanks.”

Phil767 continued to loosen up the soil, working his way across the back of the house, planting some Scarlet Sage flowers as he went.

He neared the driveway where he'd planned to plant the wormwood. He swung a pickaxe hard and heard a loud *ping* sound when it hit the soil. The handle sent shock waves up to his hands, and he dropped the pickaxe. *What was that?* he thought, shaking off his hand. He bent down to investigate more closely. Digging carefully with his fingers and blowing away the powdery dirt, he noticed something shiny. There it was whatever it was, in the stony sand-pit he hoped to call a flower garden.

“What *is* that?” Phil767 whispered to himself.

Just then, Rune came around the corner with a wheelbarrow full of dirt. “Did you find something interesting, Sir?”

“Uh, no,” he stammered, “just another big stone, or something.” *That wouldn't be hard to believe*, he thought, looking at the pile of stones he had gathered in the backyard already. Rune wasn't actually curious but just programmed to be pleasantly interested. However, Phil767 knew that if he were to lower his guard and include Rune in on his find, that would alert the System. All ASIMAs, like the cameras, are connected directly to the System. Phil767 thought quickly and discreetly kicked loose dirt over the find.

“Rune, turn around. You seem to be lagging in your responses,” he said, pretending to be concerned, not so much for Rune but for the System that could be listening to every word of the conversation. He didn't want to use any words that could arouse further suspicion. Like anything that might refer to found technology from the 21st century.

Phil767 pulled Rune's shirt collar down to reveal a small access panel. He popped the panel open to see that there was absolutely nothing wrong. "Hmm," Phil767 said.

"Sir?"

"Yeah, you better go in and shut down. There seems to be, well, go to your station so I can figure out what's causing the problem. I may also want to modify your personality programming."

"I do not mean to be contrary, but I do not seem to have any functional issues, Phil767."

"Yeah, you've been running kind of slow today. Something's off. You better go shut down before it gets worse. I can look at it later. That will be all, Rune, thanks."

"You do not need any further assistance? My levels seem to register well in the adequate range, and I —"

"Nope, I'll be cleaning up soon. Thanks."

"Good afternoon, Phil767," Rune replied as he turned and headed for the side entrance of the house.

Phil767 just stood there with his hands on his hips, looking down at the *garden*. He scratched his head with his right hand as he casually glanced over to where he'd hit that shiny object, as if he were contemplating the next step of the project. He was thinking all the while that he had to act as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened; as though nothing had been found. Just the thought of cameras watching him was like the sun

beating down on the back of his neck. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead and into his left eye. Again, he was concentrating on every move, rubbing his left hand into a burning eye as his head tipped once more to view and ponder what was in the hole. He was frozen in contemplation.

Phil767 had a pretty good idea what he had found. That was exactly why he felt the way he did. He battled with what he should do and what he wanted to do. He considered the path he had started down with his most recent decisions

His mind was racing. He questioned everything, everything he had done and was doing. Did it seem too suspicious to send Rune to shut down? His actions were being viewed by that camera mounted on the back of his house. Did he trigger a response by the system to monitor him via satellite for strange behavior? Did Rune detect what he deemed as suspicious, and, if so, what would he do? Were the neighbors watching? Maybe he should have had Rune at least put the tools back in the shed; it seemed illogical that he wouldn't have. Time seemed to have slowed down as Phil767's calm outward appearance disguised his panicked inside.

Phil767's halo rang and vibrated. His heart leapt into his throat as he was about to answer his halo. He anticipated that it was a message from the System.

He imagined, as time seemingly slowed that he would be ordered to remain in his home until the proper authorities arrived. Or, perhaps Rune would come back out of the house and secure him until he could be detained for questioning.

The halo rang again as Phil767 reluctantly raised his hand into view. His expression quickly changed. It was Beta.

“What?” Phil767 said, sounding both irritated and relieved at the same time.

“Dante, we have come to a concession,” Beta said authoritatively. Phil767 rolled his eyes. “Even though you haven't contributed to our discussion of this matter, upon your confirmation of this message you can return to your rightful level in *Weltherrschaft*. They will remove the Spurs, because you were distracted, but Kina remains free until someone finds her. The gaming session is scheduled to continue at 3:00 pm today. Does this sound acceptable to you, Dante?”

“But,” Phil767 glanced down at the hole, “I think that the inconsequential interruption, however inappropriate, is to some degree responsible for my situation. I actually think that the Spurs should remain,” Phil767 said, trying to get off the halo.

“Are you going to be joining us at 3:00 or should we play on without you?” Beta asked, somewhat confused.

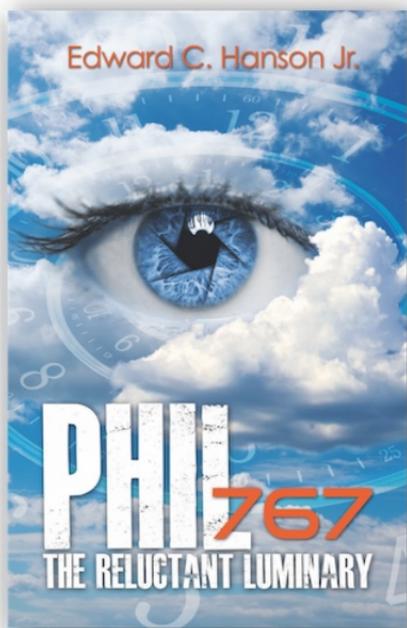
“I... I don't know, Beta. I got to go. My... ah, mom wants me to do some planting and stuff, you know? Got to go. Bye”

“Wait, Dante, I will relay your situation and concerns to the council,” Beta said, now fully back in character. “Perhaps Thallo would be a more appropriate name for you to consider, Dante.”

“Whatever, Beta; I gotta go. Bye.” Phil767 hung up the halo.

His attention shifted back to the hole he’d started digging. He began to question his own actions, but he had to do something. Yes. He thought. *I have a plan.*

He threw both of his hands up to his forehead and ran his fingers through his hair as if he were exhausted and frustrated all at the same time. “Okay,” he said sounding exasperated. Then he piled up the remaining plants at the end of the, soon to be garden, where the wormwood will go, to cover that suspicious find.



Fiction; humanity hangs by a thread of mental stability.

PHIL767
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