

The High Tribunal

He had stayed pure in thought, word, and deed for twelve years. He had done what he needed to do. He contributed to the good of humanity. Everyone saw, everyone knew and agreed that he had done good deeds - they knew it all with the right query.

After the Governance came to power, they made a Public announcement: *“Behavior that causes human suffering will no longer be tolerated.”* He saw the hearings of those who didn’t do good deeds. The painful Public revelations of pride, envy, greed, and other evil emotions. Those who transgressed were discovered, tried, then permanently Removed from consciousness.

For twelve years, he lived by their words: he resolved that his behavior must cause no more suffering. After the Public announcement, he retreated within his home, within himself. His mind roiled, turned away from the paths he had been considering, the paths he knew were motivated by greed. He sold his dwelling in the center of the city for well under its price, although the buyer had agreed to pay more. He took the proceeds and fled to farmland, dirt under his fingernails as he grew his food.

The first year provided little. He survived on rations from the food bank in the village. He became accustomed to his community, he grew to know them. He attended their gatherings, and he became their family. In the few years of plenty, he provided food to the food bank. When reserves drew thin, he struggled along with his village. He loved the village, as deep and as genuine as he could. And the village loved him, and all was well.

Then a Public announcement comes, the first communication from the Governance in half a decade. It finds him in his village, his hairs graying, stocks running thin as the effects of a two-year drought devastate the fertile landscape. *“Humanity’s impact mounts, We must reduce ourselves in number. An Independent Panel will scrutinize transactions from the past until a suitable population is reached.”*

The members of the Governance Council then speak of evil acts they committed before the Governance came to power. They describe how patterns of pride, envy, greed, and other evil emotions had once consumed them. Then, each member of the Council permanently Removes themselves from consciousness. *“A planet under such duress requires its inhabitants to change radically. Leaders lead the way.”*

He is chilled by the Public announcement and the sacrifices of the Council. He goes back to what farming he can do, but the ground is too dry to be effectively worked. They had not expected it to become dry here this soon. Many members of his village leave for the wilds to find better land, to avoid the scrutiny of the Panel. He doesn’t go. In the eyes of the Governance, populating the wilds causes human suffering. He grows feeble as the crops of his village fail.

Days later, the village calls an official meeting. In it, those who remain are provided with details about the Panel’s impending visit. The Panel will arrive by nightfall, sleep in the old schoolhouse on the main road, then start trials at the break of dawn. Community members are expected to be in their homes and fields, and will be personally collected if they have been selected for a trial.

Before the meeting draws to a close, the village leader sets down the papers he holds, removes his glasses, and clears his throat. “Twelve years ago, we experienced a drastic change,” the leader says. “Tomorrow will bring much the same. I have grown fond of you since this village expanded, tribulations and all. If they come for me, know that I go for you. And I expect each of you to do the same. For the good of us all.”

Sleep that night is hard to come by. He thinks back to the path he was on, the business he conducted, the people he met, his former apartments, his ex-wife. He revels in the warm memories, shudders at the unpleasanties. Now, it is only a matter of time.

The following morning, the Panel finds him in his field. He is erecting a shade cover for his remaining rows of potato plants when they approach. “Paul Yates,” a member of the Panel calls. “Your time of trial has come. Please join us.”

He tries to relish the walk to the old schoolhouse. The dirt road now dusty, the early morning sun, the fenceposts and rooflines, his neighbor’s back shed, the painted doorway he has always appreciated, the meetinghouse, the food bank, the large family’s home up the street. He catches a face through a cloudy window as he is escorted along, but he can’t tell whose it is. Then, they reach the schoolhouse steps, the creaky door through which learners once came and went. The room is cleared save for four chairs, which face each other in a loose cross. The Panel members occupy three. Paul occupies the fourth.

“Paul Yates, our records indicate you may have lived in the clutches of pride, envy, greed, and other evil emotions for years, neglecting grave risks, common knowledge, and ethical respect for your fellow humanity. Although we cannot prove that all of the following transactions were motivated by these emotions, their volume, frequency, and timing in conjunction with major world events suggests beyond reasonable doubt that you repeatedly harnessed evil to enrich your self at the expense of the greater whole.

“First, on March 16th, 2026, you paid a mechanic service to remove the exhaust gas recirculation systems from three thousand two hundred fifty-two diesel combustion engines. This was despite apparent and overwhelming evidence that these modifications would contribute to the existing environmental crisis.

“Second, on March 31st, 2026, you approved the financing of a gas-fired power station outside the city of Accra. Subsequent transactions indicate you then directed the construction, operation, and maintenance of this facility. This was despite apparent and overwhelming evidence that the operation of this station would contribute to the existing environmental crisis.

“Third, on April 7th, 2026, you approved the financing of an oil-fired power station outside the city of Kampala. Subsequent transactions indicate you then directed the construction and operation of this facility. This was despite apparent and overwhelming evidence that the operation of this station would contribute to the existing environmental crisis.

“Fourth, on January 5th, 2027, you approved the financing of an oil-fired power station outside the city of Kinshasa. Subsequent transactions indicate you then directed the construction and operation of this facility. This was despite apparent and overwhelming evidence that the operation of this station would contribute to the existing environmental crisis.

“These are the allegations against you. Speak now, Paul Yates, or forever hold your peace.”

“The projects I approved and oversaw expanded existing energy infrastructure to untold millions of humans. These were swollen cities ravaged by poverty, which was exacerbated by uneven energy access. During electricity blackouts in these areas, people suffered, babies died. The projects I approved and oversaw provided these metropolitan areas with consistent electricity, which saved countless lives,” says Paul.

The Panelist responds: “In addition to the untold climatic impacts that will stem from these transactions, which have and will undoubtedly continue to induce human suffering across the Earth, investigations completed for this trial shows that you profited immensely from the structure, size, and nature of these transactions. Subsequent transactions in the years of 2027 and 2028 show that you funneled profits into various real estate development projects across the United States, as well as personal properties which were used to-”

“This is unjust. My business years ago is of no business to you.”

“The new humanity has no capacity for privacy. The lives of every being on this Earth are inextricably intertwined, and we must reduce the chances of negative outcomes in the future. All decision-making agents on this planet must be aligned and connected: our current selves, our offspring who inherit our traumas, their own offspring, and so on. This connection requires a great transition, and present generations will feel pain. But this pain will give way to a new species of human, the likes of which have never been seen before on this planet Earth.”

“Would you not want to spare the humans who have overcome their pasts and conquered their demons to guide others in doing the same?”

“All humans must overcome their pasts and conquer their demons. If we do not, we will die. It is the nature of humanity’s beingness that we have challenges to conquer. There is no shortage of humans who have done this. The dangers of leaving transgressors alive far outweighs their potential benefits.”

“It is unfair for you to use my past against me. That is not who I am anymore.”

“The present is all that there is, but the present is shaped entirely by our memory and history. Change can occur, but the implastic nature of the adult brain means that habits of the past can be difficult to truly renounce. The transparency of previous transactions has given us the opportunity to select for the features of our new humanity, removing as many traces of evil emotions and tendencies as we can. We do not know how long the Governance will exist. This is a chance to craft our species into inherent good before it becomes too late.”

“Just let me live my life.”

“Our planet’s sustainably habitable areas are decreasing at an accelerating rate. While humanity’s efforts to mitigate our environmental crisis have been somewhat effective, the complex nature of our biosphere has proven unpredictable. In theory, we have the technology needed to support well over a billion well-natured humans, but the environmental impact of each individual is impossible to project in the context of their unpredictable agency. Expand that improjectability to groups of humans, especially when those groups are collectively faced with an existential threat, and the consequences are potentially insurmountable. It is in the best interest of our future humanity to reduce our numbers as much as we can. That is why our leaders sacrificed their bodies to the cause. That is why you have been selected.”

“Will it hurt?”

“The Removal of consciousness from your body does not need to scare you. While the body of Paul Yates will no longer be inhabited by a perception, the consciousness will be reabsorbed into the greater whole, then eventually redistributed into new forms. In this sense, there is no individual. The notion of individuality we carry with us in these bodies is illusory. We, as a self-collective, benefit from this selection and improvement of humanity. Although this may be the end of Paul Yates, it is not the end of perception as a whole.”

“But will it hurt?”

“No.”