

Caster Knox

by J. E. Cammon

Sitting in his seat on the train, the young man could see that a new someone was present: a young woman in her thirties, attractive and important-looking. He wondered about how she had come to be there. Maybe she was from a different sector, just relocated, or had been hospitalized but had recently woken from the coma. Caster read about the phenomenon in the archives; it was a side effect of connectivity. Like every time someone new was on the train, she was looking around in glances, taking in what would be her morning's surroundings. And when she found him staring at her, she smiled politely like they always did. Then she paused, as the mind-quick applications in her halo's tool bar failed to find the identity of the young man staring at her on the train. Like Caster didn't exist. Then she frowned, realizing what that meant. Because he was obviously not a child, his being disconnected meant one of two things: he was either a criminal or he was a low mind. Caster watched her quickly avert her gaze, put her head down, and turn away from him. He imagined her instantly sharing the embarrassing ordeal with a thousand, a million people in a hundred different places. Someone behind him chuckled from the joke he couldn't hear.

Caster had always imagined the Consensus as a big room, as big as the world, filled with white space and people with quantum wings, flitting about, creating information. There were tinted bubbles for people to share for privacy, and the lights never went out, because the Consensus was always on. But he didn't really know, because he wasn't allowed access. There were health restrictions and requisite tests. It was dangerous unless things were fine in his brain. And things weren't fine. Caster watched the new woman leave the train at the Central sector stop. She must be someone important, he thought alone to himself. After she was gone,

things went back to normal. Everyone got off at the stops he knew they would, and the same people got on the train after them and filled their seats the way they did every morning. In a few minutes, the train would be at his destination, a hundred miles away.

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Footsteps behind the thick, metal door made the people about to attack him slink back into the shadows. A jaundice column of light split the darkness, pointing from the opened doorway. There were two people, just like last time. The woman was dressed in clothes that didn't say Detective, but she had shown him her badge as proof. The man's attire didn't say Officer, either, but his identification at least was pinned to his chest. His shoes were shiny and his clothes all matched. He was dressed identically to a bunch of other policeman he'd seen when they had brought him into the building.

"Mr. Knox," the Detective said as the Officer jammed a piece of metal into the door. He put his hands on the bars and slid the portal sideways. Caster stood. He put his hands out so they could restrain him again. Caster thought it would be good to be away from the others locked in the tiny room. Holding cell is what she had called it. "I'd like another word, please."

The walk to the interview place went through a large room filled with many desks covered in paper and clumsy looking devices, some of which people seemed to be communicating through. There were more policemen that had their badges in their pockets. The Detective opened the door to the interview place for him and he stepped inside, staring down at the rings of metal chaining his wrists together. He liked the side of the table that faced the big mirror. The chair was uncomfortable, but hers looked to be the same, so he guessed it was fair. Like last time, she removed a silver device from her pocket and spoke into it.

"Interview. One-fifteen pee-em. January third, two thousand one," and she cleared her throat. "Sleeping well, Mr. Knox?" the Detective asked, taking her seat and spreading out stacks of paper covered in unreadable script.

"No," he replied, looking at himself in the mirror. The

swelling in his face had gone down.

"Well, I imagine not. Even other criminals look down on people like you."

"People like me?" he asked, looking into her face. The woman stared back at him, anxiously, but didn't clarify.

"Mr. Knox, the psychiatrist we had you talk to," and she paused, "the older gentleman, in the jacket, he says you are delusional. Do you know what delusional means?"

"No."

"It means you don't know what's going on, you're not connected. With reality," she said, then stopped. Caster looked at his own face again. He was frowning. "Now, it might have to do with the reasoning behind giving us a false name," she said.

"My name isn't false," he said. Caster stood up halfway out of his chair and turned, then sat back down. The Detective had her hand at her side.

"What I mean is you think it's actually your name," she said more slowly.

"It is my name," Caster said quickly. He slouched, then sat back up again. The table was crowding him so he pushed it away. He stood to his feet. "I don't understand how you can keep me here," he said. The Detective still had her hand to her side.

"You need to calm down, Mr. Knox." Then, two men came into the room with the painful, short rods. Caster looked at himself in the mirror as they came, wondering what his face would look like when he woke up again.

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"Hey, Caster," the crewmen said as he approached. He was always the last to work because he always took the later train; he took extra time to access the archives every morning. But they couldn't start until everyone had arrived. It was only fair.

"Hello," he said. "Has anyone seen the Doctor?" he asked. "I went through the building like I always do and he's usually there but he wasn't there today," he said. Each of the others shrugged. They didn't wonder about the Doctor because he was so important, but

the man actually talked to Caster. And Caster liked him.

“Can we just start?” one of them asked.

“Yeah, yesterday we weren't able to get in a full seven.”

“Some of us are way behind,” another said. Caster shook his head, like his teachers used to, with his lips pursed and his eyebrows sad. Then he grinned and put on his glasses. He made sure the earplugs fit snugly. As the app started up, everyone ran off in all different directions, looking for the best place to begin. Everyone knew that Thursday was Custodial Commandos, which required more running around. In the corners of Caster's vision, figures and tallies and scores popped into view. He was notified of his place among all the others of the Facility, how far he was behind, and how far he was ahead. After all the crewmen stopped moving, huge numbers in the center of his vision began counting down. When it got to zero, he began looking for points. Leaves were worth the least, but they were also the most populous; leaves were always falling. Everyone thought that they were empty points, but Caster had maintained an overall rank of silver for over fifteen years because of a quantity vs. quality system. However things like untrimmed hedges he would always stop for. Each side was worth points with bonuses for overall symmetry and complexity of shape. Caster sprinted along, eyes searching.

Around the back of the Facility, Caster found a row of round, uneven bushes along with the Doctor.

“Caster,” the man said, leaning up against a back wall of the Facility. He was on a halo break, Caster knew. Too much time disconnected from the Consensus created withdrawal, and halos didn't work inside the Facility. “You winning?” he asked.

“Ten seconds, please,” he said, removing a laser tool from his pocket. Tetrahedrons, Caster had discovered, counted as both complex shapes and were easier to make symmetrical. In his vision, as he cut, he watched his score jump from third position to first position. And he even further outpaced the crewman in second place when he stopped to fetch the excess clippings. “I am now,” he said. The Doctor chuckled, and looked up into the sky. Then, he looked at

Caster with a strange expression on his face.

"Caster, come with me, please," he said, and pushed himself from the wall. Three steps before reaching it, a security door opened for the two of them. Then, it closed behind them and locked itself. Caster looked at the floor, the walls, and the ceiling of the clean hallway. He was going to lose; finding points indoors was next to impossible. "Don't worry about your score," the Doctor said, leading them through the halls.

"Okay."

"You hear about what happened today?" the Doctor asked.

"Today? No." The archives had to be updated every day with all the information created within the Consensus. And it was always behind. Caster never knew why; it didn't seem like it would be that hard to keep them even. It took weeks sometimes for the archives to update, if they updated at all.

The last door they went through Caster knew to be the one to the Doctor's lab, where he made all the Technology the Facility was known for. When the door opened, so did Caster's mouth.

"Here, give me those," the Doctor said, gesturing for the glasses. Caster handed them over quickly. The Doctor reached into his pocket and fetched his own tool, a tiny pen laser with buttons and dials. He jabbed it into the side of Caster's glasses and worked for a moment. "Congratulations," the Doctor said, handing them back, "you've just won. Now, let me show you something important."

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It was morning when he woke up, and the Detective was there waiting. She didn't look happy.

"Are you prepared to behave, Mr. Knox?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Caster asked. "I am behaving." She looked at the Officer with the means to open the barred door. He shrugged, and she sighed, scratching her forehead.

"Get him out," she said to the Officer and stepped backwards, crossing her arms. Caster stood to his feet, counting the other people in the holding cell. None of them had moved during the night.

Halfway to the interview place, though, the three of them were stopped by someone who looked even more upset than the Detective. He didn't have a visible badge either, and the detective deferred to him.

"Take Mr. Knox here to interview room 3, please. Thank you," the Detective said to the Officer, who grabbed Caster by the arm and began walking him away. Caster tried to walk more slowly, while listening.

"Are we still going round and round with the mystery man?" the important man asked.

"Sir, I really like him for this one." The Detective seemed very confident.

"Look, you got at least two other leads. With motive," and he emphasized that last word. "You're getting nowhere. I just found out the vic was doing consulting work for the private sector in communications, and I'm starting to get phone calls. A lot of powerful people want answers. That means a conviction."

"I just need more time."

"Time is one thing you don't have."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The door to the interview place was closed in Caster's face. He turned to find himself alone with the table, its two chairs, and the mirror overseeing it all. Caster decided not to sit down. He walked to the mirror and observed his features. His face looked about the same, but he was sore all over from the beatings. He inspected the strange device linking his wrists, and wondered if the same tiny thing used to open them also opened the door to the holding cell.

The Detective entered in a rush then stopped. Caster turned to face her. She stared at him, and then showed her hand to someone on the other side of the doorway.

"No, I think we're okay," she said to them, and then to him, "Sit down." Caster sat. She walked over to her side of the table. For a while, she just looked at him. Caster split time between staring at her and observing his own face. "Do you like spending time in the

holding cell?" she asked. Caster shook his head.

"No."

"Well, there are some people coming for you soon," she said. "Because of what you told the psychiatrist, they're going to put you in the back of a van, and drive you to a big holding cell up north. They're going to throw you in and never let you out."

"What? Why?"

"Because you won't answer my questions," she said.

"But I did answer your questions," he said.

"I know you think you did, but you really didn't. I need to know what really happened," she said slowly. She looked nervous, then glanced back at the mirror. She inched forward, biting her lip. The Detective whispered. "I know you're smart. And that sometimes things happen, and we have to make up things to convince ourselves of," and she paused and slowly reached forward and grabbed his hand. "What happened? Did she call you a name? A bad name?"

"Who?"

"The girl," the Detective said. "She was coming home from school, from college. She was smart, advanced, and liked everyone to know. She saw you, maybe passed you on that street. And you two spoke? Did she say something to you?"

"No, I mean, I didn't know her," he said.

"Right, but did she say anything to you?"

"No. I mean, I don't really remember. I don't know."

"Do you want to go to the big holding cell?"

"No."

"Then tell me what happened."

"I," Caster began. "I was just, just. I was just trying to make things better," he said. There was a sound like a knock from the mirror. The Detective turned her head. "What was that?" Caster asked. The Detective waved at her image.

"Ow. Let go," she said, turning back around, her hand going to her side. "You need to let go of my hand."

"What was that?" Caster asked again, standing up. With a better view, he could see he was holding onto the Detective's hand

with both of his. He let go, but not before men came into the room again. These were different though, all in white. Caster put his hands up, surrendering, but that wasn't enough for them either.

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"What is that for?" Caster asked. The lab, it turned out, was filled with all sorts of inventions, big and small, but what interested him the most looked more like a sculpture than anything else. It had huge, circular rings, each smaller than the next, fit into each other. And in the very center was a fist-sized aperture, like an eye. The Machine was sitting near a glass wall covered in pictures.

"Interesting," the Doctor said. "I'm sorry, I'll answer your question in a moment. Caster, of all these devices, why did you come and stand in front of this one?"

"I don't know," he said, turning his attention to the wall of pictures and back again. They were connected somehow, he knew. "That's a lot of pictures."

"Indeed it is. And not just images. Photographs. Analog. You know they used to use a flash of bright, blinding light. It damaged the retina. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Caster said quickly. That was the best answer to that question. It made people stop talking, stop yelling, stop looking sad. Yes was better than no. Caster stood as close as he could get to the pictures and stared. One was of a little girl looking at him, smiling with her hair done up in a strange way. Her arms were somewhat visible, like she was reaching out to hug him. The photograph had burned edges. Another was of a man kissing a woman, but the scene had no color. The happy couple was surrounded by a huge crowd of people, all celebrating. Yet another was of a man standing in the middle of a road, looking down at a dog, which was lying across yellow lines as if it were trying to go to sleep. "What?" Caster said, turning away from the wall.

"I said: which is your favorite?" the Doctor asked. Caster turned back to the wall, his eyes darting this way and that.

"I don't know," he said. "I like a lot of them. This one is pretty." He pointed.

“Good eye. I believe that's a waterfront shot of a fireworks celebration at the turn of the millennium.”

“Wow,” Caster said. The Doctor chuckled.

“Let me show you that thing.” The Doctor opened a public view-screen in the air and played for Caster a vid-clip. It was of a man walking down the street. He seemed untroubled and happy. The stranger passed a couple, who both turned and pointed back at him, talking amongst themselves, first slowly and then in an agitated way. The stranger stopped also, turning around as if he could hear their whispers. He started walking towards them, then quickly began waving his hands at the couple, and then turned his attention on others nearby, frantically begging: a group that had paused in an auto at the traffic light, another group staring down from a window of the building, even the person whose halo had captured the scene. Then the man began screaming. He mouthed something to all of them.

“What did he say?” Caster asked.

“He's saying ‘You've got the wrong guy,’” and the Doctor began talking to himself. “But that's the price. That's the price, Rome in a day,” he said. “But. But you can't remake something that's been unmade.” But he did that sometimes. It was a symptom of the withdrawal. Looking on, Caster watched as the Consensus took shape about the stranger in the clip. The manifestation made the data wavy and muddled. But Caster had seen its effects before, current time. The man on the corner would scream, and then he would run. And then, it was like he just ran into a pocket of space that opened before him and closed behind him. Like a popped bubble, one moment he'd be there and in the next he'd be gone. Caster shook his head.

“What did he do?” he asked. The Doctor shrugged.

“I was out ciphering when you found me. It's a bit unclear. Typical post-judgment protests and trials. I'm not even sure that he was who that couple thought he was.”

“That's not right,” Caster said. The Doctor looked at him strangely again.

"Caster, your parents, they were evolutionists, right?" he asked. Caster nodded.

"Yes. They didn't want a son made in a lab."

"Right. Made in a lab."

"They wanted me to be what I was going to be."

"Yes, I understand," the Doctor said, stepping back towards the wall of pictures. "Let's get back to your statement."

"It wasn't their fault that I," Caster said.

"Right, but your statement," the Doctor interrupted. "Why isn't it right?" Caster paused to think.

"What if he was innocent?" he asked. The Doctor smiled.

"You mean, what if everyone was wrong?" he asked. Caster stopped again.

"Yes," he said. The Doctor clapped his hands together.

"Genius," he said, and walked over to the Machine near the wall and began pressing buttons. A very low hum could be felt more than heard as the parts began to turn and swivel. "You know what I found out last month? They have decided to come and shut down this lab. But you wouldn't have known that. Or even me," and he paused, looking at Caster. "Stand there, please," he said. Caster stepped forward. "One of them gets an itch, and soon the whole is scratching feverishly. You ask one of them to think independently, to step away from things, and they'd die. Literally, which might be an indication that it was all a bad idea in the first place," the Doctor said to himself.

"It's almost time for lunch," Caster noted. There were flashes like tiny lightnings as the bits of the Machine spun near one another.

"What?" The Doctor asked. It was becoming louder and louder as the parts began moving faster and faster. Caster thought to wait until it was quiet again. He raised a hand up to shield his eyes. After the noise became almost deafening, the Doctor hit another button and the Machine became perfectly quiet, although the parts were moving too fast to see. And the light was so bright that everything was cast in stark blacks and blinding whites. The silhouette of the Doctor was cautious, stepping around the invisible

machinery. "Do you know why we can't travel through time, Caster?" he asked. Caster forgot about his stomach as he thought.

"No."

"It's always moving. Every bit of it at every moment. There's no," and the man danced a little in place trying to find a moment to jump into the parts of the Machine. "There's no way to time it," and he chuckled. When he turned back towards Caster though, his posture was serious, pointing at the pictures. "Did you know that people used to believe, for hundreds of years, that those simple devices, cameras, had the power to freeze time? That for that moment, that tiny, narrow space was a hole in that perfect, fluid stream."

"No," Caster said. The Doctor shook his head.

"It is tragically amazing how we have misused our collective focus. How many points did you fail the quotient by? Did they tell you?" he asked.

"My parents told me," Caster said, quietly. "I missed it by two points."

"Two points, and you could have been brained like the rest of us. You know who developed that scale, right? And do you know who mothered that movement?" The Doctor asked.

"No." He knew the name of the Organization, but had never known it could be traced back to one person.

"Well, I'll tell you," then he looked away from Caster, talking to himself again. "If only for a modification here, an addendum there. Are you ready, Caster?" he asked, stepping back around the spinning parts of the Machine to its controls.

"Ready for what?" The Doctor turned like he was staring at him, and shook his head.

"Hold still. This is going to feel," and the man paused, "funny. Then, I'll tell you why you're important."

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"Excuse me, Mr. Knox?" the Nurse said. "You have a visitor." Caster knew who it was before he turned around.

"Detective," he said, turning away from the window.

"Mr. Knox," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," he said. "I understand the rules now. How is the investigation?"

"I imagine you know how the investigation is. People are satisfied that the guilty party has been locked away in the best place for him." She looked into his face.

"I want to show you something. Can I show you something?" he asked, and began walking. He knew the Detective was following, and making eye contact with the men in white at the corners of the room and the Nurse. But they all nodded that it was okay. He had behaved. Caster looked around at the other patients, making sure none of them saw the hiding place. He brought into view the tiny scrapbook.

"What is that?" the Detective asked.

"Some child made a book of photographs, and it was donated here to help people with disorders. This is her, here," and Caster pointed. The Detective's expression darkened. "These pictures are from 1990. How old were you in 1990?" he asked.

"That is none of your business," she said. Caster nodded.

"You're right," he said. "It doesn't matter. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to try to make it up to you."

"The case is already closed. What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Nevermind," Caster said, closing the book. He replaced the item in its hiding space, making sure she was looking. "Come back tomorrow. Can you come back tomorrow? I want you to come back and look in here," he said. "Can you do that?"

"You want me to come back tomorrow and look at this with you?" she asked. Caster paused.

"Yes," he said. "Will you?" The Detective sighed.

"Fine," she said.

"Thank you, Detective. I hope you understand. And I'm sorry."

But when she returned the next day, she couldn't say why. She didn't have the time, honestly. "Important people" were furious

about the precinct's lack of results. The story was all over the internet; everyone thought it was so sad that someone with such potential could die so young. She had been a pioneer in the making. The Detective distracted herself with the vaporous motes of recollection serving as breadcrumbs: she knew the name of the Nurse, the shape of the room, even the hiding place of the little scrapbook, yet had no reason to know any of those things. Inside the keepsake were pictures from a happy childhood. It made her think of her victim, and to some degree validated her never having children. Mostly though, it made her angry that whoever committed the crime was still at large. Flipping through the pictures, one stuck out. The girl, who had likely made the album, was smiling, the shot taken extremely close up, like she was holding the camera. But just over her shoulder, completely out of place, was a figure with its back to the lens. It looked like a man walking away. And for some reason, that stood out to her.

She flipped open the pocket notebook she always carried and clicked the end of her pen. But a fire alarm somewhere in the building activated, making her start, and drop the scrapbook. She looked around at the huge group of disturbed mental patients slowly rousing, agitated by the noise. She exited hastily, but not quickly enough to escape the tugging sensation of wondering why anyone would want to burn down the Asylum. The keepsake she forgot behind her.

Later, she would discover the light indentations on the first page of her pocket notebook, and boredom, or maybe frustration would make her stencil in the grooves. But she would gain nothing for her efforts. She had yet to hear of anyone by the name, and even more confusing, had no idea why she had written it down.

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The Clerk sighed, finally stepping from behind the counter and walking up to the customer who was taking his sweet time.

“Sir, can I help you with something?” he asked. “I hate to be rude, but we're near to closing.” When the customer turned around, the Clerk tapped his watch. “You're almost out of time.” But the man

shook his head.

“I'm still undecided about that,” he said.

“Okay,” the Clerk said slowly, confused. The customer smirked.

“Right, nevermind,” he said, gesturing at the row of merchandise. His finger stopped, pointing at a specific model. “How much for this camera?”

