

THE SINGLE BEAR OPTION

“What’s it for, then?” Jonas asked.

“It’s for me to know and you to - ”

Polson stopped.

“To not find out,” he finished, lamely. “Seriously, it’s nothing to do with you.”

“I’m the designer,” said Jonas. “I don’t just design things into thin air.”

“It’s a commission, isn’t it?” Polson asked. “You do what they ask, you get paid, the end. I mean,” he went on, “if somebody asked you to design, I don’t know, a big watch - ”

“A big watch?”

“Yeah,” Polson said, “A watch that was ten times as big as a normal one, with massive hands and a huge winder...”

“That’s a clock.”

“Also there’s a strap. It doesn’t matter. If someone asked you to design a massive watch, you wouldn’t be going ooh please tell me what this watch is for, would you?”

“I know what a watch is for,” Jonas said. “But I have no idea what this is for.”

He indicated the device on the table. It was like an old-style arcade game, except that instead of being located in a cabinet, it had only its top off, and looked somewhat sawn-off. But in every other respect, it was a game. There were coloured buttons to press, and a joystick to twist, and even a ball to rotate in something called Fast Mode (Jonas had had some problems with Fast Mode because most of the time it went too fast and the game span out of control).

The rules of the game were very simple, and involved tying ropes around bears. The more points you had, the more bears there were: or at least, that was the idea. The people who’d hired Jonas had asked for a series of options where you could tie up two bears, or even one bear. This didn’t seem like much of an incentive to Jonas, who felt that players should be able to tie up as many bears as possible. But Polson, who was the gofer between Jonas and his hirers, said no: there had to be a single bear option.

“It’s not much of a game, is it?” said Jonas.

Polson shrugged.

“Maybe it’s not a game,” he said.

Which was when Jonas had said:

“What’s it for, then?”

There had been a lot of glitches with the game. For a start, Jonas had had to install several components without knowing what they were. As they didn’t interfere with the running of the game program, but rather seemed to react to what the game was doing externally, this wasn’t a huge problem, but it was odd working on something this way. Related to this was the annoying fact that every so often some large men in bulky jackets kept coming in and taking the device away, without telling Jonas where they were taking it or why. And when it came back, the device was often in bad condition, with scratches on the casing, or dents, or even on one occasion scorch marks.

Jonas complained about this to Polson, but Polson just shrugged.

After a few more days of fine-tuning, and some whingeing from Polson about deadlines, Jonas agreed that the device was ready. Polson made a phone call.

“They’re coming tomorrow morning,” he said, and there was a nervous edge in his voice.

“Who are?” Jonas asked, but Polson said nothing and just twisted his fingers together uncomfortably.

The next morning the tiny lab was full of generals. They seemed unhappy to be there, almost knocked over several things, and looked disapprovingly at everything on the walls, as if the periodic table was somehow subversive.

“They’ll perk up when you demonstrate the device,” said Polson, but he was wrong. As Jonas expertly worked the controls, showing his audience how to tie the ropes in ever more complex patterns, the generals began to mutter among themselves.

“Is the device not satisfactory?” asked Polson.

One of the generals was about to reply when a voice from the back of the room said:

“It is entirely satisfactory, thank you.”

The speaker was a thin, older man in civilian clothes.

“It’s just a toy,” said a general. “What good is it?”

“It is what it is meant to be,” said the thin man.

“Enigmas,” scoffed the general.

The thin man shook his head.

“This version,” he said, “is designed to appear, how shall I put it, user-friendly. But it is only the first level of the device. The next level, what you might call the business end, is the one which will deliver the results that you have in mind.”

The generals looked doubtful.

“When might we see the *business end* in action?” asked one.

The thin man smiled.

“Soon,” he said.

He turned to Jonas.

“You have done excellently,” he said. “Thank you for all your work.”

He proffered his hand. Jonas shook it. Polson stuck his hand out, but the thin man didn’t seem to see it.

That night, Jonas ran through the device’s protocols one more just to be sure. He had been told that the device was now to be tested by the finest scientists in the land, but it was his device and he felt he knew its quirks better than anyone. Sure enough, as the program reached the end of its test run, a fault appeared: the single bear option was malfunctioning. The problem was a simple one – every time a player tried to access single bear mode, the opposite of his intention occurred and the screen filled with bears. Jonas sighed: he was going to have to reprogram the whole device.

Six hours later, with the guts of the machine laid out in front of him, Jonas thought he had traced the problem to its source. It was, unsurprisingly, located in the external usage protocols, the unknown additions to the device which reacted to Jonas’ program in an unspecified manner. At first, Jonas, who felt he was flying blind, was unable to access any of the command programs for the externals, and was on the verge of giving up when he remembered a cleaning sub-routine which he had embedded in the program several months ago: with the right approach, this sub-routine could be used to access the protocols for external usage.

Half an hour later, Jonas had accessed the protocols. Ten minutes after that, he had fixed the glitch. But then, as he attempted to close the sub-routine and make his way out again, the screen suddenly filled with letters and numbers, instructions that had nothing to do with his game, and images.

Jonah was unable to stop looking at the images, which was probably why he forgot to close the sub-routine, and why security, who had been alerted the moment the external protocols were accessed, found him still sitting there, his face slack in the grey light of the screen.

Polson stared as the men carried Jonas' inert body past him, a bag over his head and his hands tied behind him. The thin man followed.

"Keep it shut," he said to Polson as the men dragged Jonas down the corridor.

When Jonas awoke, the bag was no longer around his neck and he was strapped into a large metal seat like that of a pilot or a dentist. There were wires all around him, some thick and insulated, some thin wisps of copper and steel, and there was a wad of wool in his mouth.

A meter or two away, the thin man sat at a table, the device in front of him. He smiled at Jonas.

"The single bear option, I think," he said, and pressed a colourful button.

The wires began to twist around Jonas' head, his shoulders, his throat.

He would have liked to scream.