

TOURISTS

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NSL Reads 2nd Annual Writing Competition

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1st Place

Adult Division

“Bonjour! Bienvenue! Welcome to Paris. I am Emile, your local tour guide. On behalf of the city of Paris, I offer you a walking tour free of charge!” Black and white stripes adorned the tour-bot’s upper torso. Pictures of twentieth century Paris scrolled across its featureless face.

“No thanks, buddy.” Jim pushed past it and found the street café’s last available table.

“Party pooper.” Samantha sat down across from him.

“Me?”

“They’re romantic.”

“They’re creepy is what they are. And how do they know to speak English to us? I swear that thing’s been following us since Notre Dame.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No I’m not. Look.” With a thought, Jim brought the map of Paris up on his

comp-glasses and flicked it across the table onto Samantha's.

She stared ahead, eyes twitching behind her matching comp-glasses. "I don't see what you're talking about."

"The red dots are all the places where I saw a tour-bot. How many can there be here? It's got to be stalking us."

"Oh, stop it." Samantha blinked and refocused on Jim. "I want cheese." She picked up a menu coated in thick plastic. "Even the menus are romantic!"

"Dad said everything was paper in his day. What a waste it must've been, especially with as often as menus change." Jim queried the web for a digital version. Paper may be romantic, but it wasn't nearly as efficient as digital. The street café's menu displayed on his glasses. "They've got a normal menu too. I'll order the food."

A waitress with a buzz cut and an I-can't-wait-for-tourism-season-to-be-over smile arrived with a plate of assorted cheeses and a basket of hard rolls.

"At least the service is quick." Jim dug into the food.

They ate as Paris flowed along beside them.

"It is a romantic city. I'm just not into the tour-bots. Especially not after the AI scare they had in New York last year."

"Software glitch," Samantha said.

“Since when do software glitches do *that*?”

“People used to go mad all the time and do terrible things. It’s no different.”

She had a point, but Jim couldn’t shake the icy feeling in his marrow each time he saw any sort of helper bot. He tossed his napkin on the table. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for the Louvre.”

“Me too, but can we stop by the hotel first?”

“It’s a little out of the way. Do you have the key?” Jim patted his pockets. “Wait.” He pulled out a silver key with the number 16 etched onto it. “I found it.”

“Never mind, I just wanted my sweatshirt for the museum; they’re always so cold.”

“We can go if you *want*.” Jim spun the key in his hand.

“Not if it’s out of the way. We’ve wasted too much morning as it is.”

“Agreed.” He shook the key at her. “You want to talk about romantic? *This* is romantic.”

“See! That’s what I’m talking about. It *is* romantic.”

“And about a hundred years out of date. You remember Fred? He said they still use these in prisons, but if you ask me, they just seem unsafe and a pain to keep track of. Where’s the encryption? I’d put modern hemo-scanners up against

a metal key any day of the week.”

“Party pooper.” Samantha stuck her tongue out at him.

Jim requested the quickest route to the Louvre; it bounced into view, a ghost of lines overlaying his vision. “You all done?”

“Mais oui.”

They strolled down the bustling sidewalk. A steady stream of cyclists shared the road with the rush of automobiles and city busses.

A teenage boy walking the opposite direction shouldered into Jim.

“Hey, watch it, buddy!” Jim turned, hands in the air.

The kid muttered but kept on walking.

A phrase scrolled across Jim’s glasses in bright red; they hadn’t picked up all of the kid’s words, but Jim got the general idea. “Jerk.” A flash of digital white past the kid’s receding form caught his gaze. It flashed again, a featureless tour-bot head above a black-and-white striped torso.

“Let it go,” Samantha said. “The kid’s not worth it, and anyway he’s a local, you’re not. He wins by default.”

Jim spun around. “What a jerk.”

They continued down the street, following the map that had shrunk to a corner of Jim’s vision.

The subway metro was an outbreak waiting to happen. Locals and tourists stood shoulder to shoulder on the grimy platform. One infected sneeze and it would all be over, Jim thought.

“This is great.” Samantha squeezed his hand. “And so easy to follow. Here--”

A map like rainbow spaghetti popped up on Jim’s glasses. A hundred names he couldn’t pronounce dotted the tangle. “You sure you know where we’re going?”

“Yup, the golden-yellow line . . . that one.”

One of the noodles lit up and the word *Louvre-Rivoli* blinked along it. “You get us lost, you owe me ice cream again,” Jim said.

A sly smile spread across her face. “Who’s to say I didn’t do that on purpose?”

A Mechanical roar echoed up the tunnel, mingling with the human din. Lights like eyes rounded a corner and a sleek train breezed into the cavern.

They found seats next to an African man in colorful traditional clothing. He smiled at them and his eyes disappeared into fissures that spider webbed across his face.

The train eased into motion.

As the crowded platform slid past the window, digital light flashed above black and white stripes.

“Did you see that?”

“What?”

“The tour-bot on the platform.”

“It’s Paris, a tourist destination. Of course there’s a tour-bot out there!”

Jim wiped clammy hands on his pants. “Yeah, but it was looking in here.”

“They don’t have eyes. Quit being so paranoid and enjoy our vacation.”

“Right.” It was easy for her to say; he’d watched the videos of what had happened in New York. There was no way he’d go out like that, and he sure as heck wouldn’t let it happen to Samantha.

“This is our stop.”

The subway map on Jim’s glasses expanded into view from where it had minimized next to his street map of Paris. It showed them on the golden spaghetti noodle line at *Louvre-Rivoli*.

They made their way through the tide of bodies, down tiled corridors, and up steep stairs that led into the Parisian autumn air. The noon sun blasted down from a cloudless sky.

Jim’s glasses auto-dimmed.

“This way,” Samantha said.

He followed her across the street. The maps hovering in his periphery vanished at a thought. He flipped through his glasses app list and activated *Local Paris: For Travelers who want a Local's Perspective*. Glowing orbs appeared, suspended at eye-level, in front of nearly every store on the block. With a glance, an orb expanded to reveal full descriptions of the store, reviews, price lists, even employee names. “Hey, that app your boss suggested is great!”

“Yeah?”

A pink light up ahead described the hole-in-the-wall café as having the tastiest ice cream in town. “Three stores up, stop there.”

Samantha paused in front of the café. “But we just ate.”

“But you do not understand, *mon bonbon*. The best ice cream in town resides behind that façade.”

“Fine, but we get it to go.” She snuffed the air. “The Louvre is so close I can smell it.”

They picked-out ice cream and were back on their way.

“That app wasn’t lying. This *is* tasty.” Samantha smothered her lips with cold vanilla bean and kissed Jim on the mouth. “Uh oh, don’t look now, but your creepy stalker-bot is behind us.”

Jim spun around, wiping the ice cream from his face. A tour-bot stalked down the sidewalk, waving at passers-by. A digital handlebar mustache and too round anime eyes played on its face.

“Come on.” Jim grabbed Samantha’s hand.

“Stop it right now! You’re acting like a child!”

“Humor me, just this once, then I’ll stop forever, I promise.” He turned up an alleyway, dodging bulging trash bags and random puddles of god-knew-what. He stopped at the intersection of another alley.

“Just this once.” Samantha tossed her empty cup and spoon into a trash box.

“Hey,” Jim said.

Samantha shrugged, pointing at the decaying piles. “When in Rome.”

“Well this is Paris. I think we--”

A humanoid silhouette halted at the mouth of the alleyway. It turned toward them.

“Weird,” Samantha said.

Jim grunted. He had known it all along. Robots couldn’t be trusted.

Fire engine red flashed across the tour-bot’s face and it sprinted up the alley.

“Run!” Jim pushed Samantha around the corner.

News images from the incident in New York flashed in Jim’s head. It had been a tourist couple then too, which meant this was no coincidence. It was the beginning of the end for the human race.

Footfalls clanked behind them.

“Jim, come on!”

Samantha had always been the better runner. Jim leapt over an overturned box, slipped, and crashed face down on the asphalt.

“No!” Samantha stopped.

“Don’t! Go get help! RUN!” Jim flipped over onto his butt. Pain lanced through his palm; blood welled around a chunk of jade glass.

The tour-bot stepped onto the garbage pile Jim had leapt, crushing it with ease.

This is it. What can I do?

The tour-bot towered over him. The word “ATTENTION” scrolled across its sanguine face.

It punched a chrome fist toward Jim, stopping inches from his face. The hand opened. A twentieth century key with the number 16 etched into it sat squarely in its palm.

"Bonjour, tourist, I believe you left this by mistake at Café Saint-Michel.

Please do be more careful in future dining ventures."