

TABULA RASA

E06: Stage Left

ZOHEB MASHIUR

"Now the man of the hour is taking his final bow."

-- Pearl Jam, 'Man of the Hour'

Episode Five of Tabula Rasa can be read at: <http://bit.ly/1MMeU25>

Smith the mind-forger was in trouble.

"Absolutely disgraceful!" Fox roared, slamming a sheaf of papers loudly onto the coffee table, upsetting the delicate chinaware artfully arranged upon its surface. Tea began to flow everywhere.

"Oh, get a grip on yourself, man," drawled a weary Spinoza, pressing the buzzer on his desk to summon a quiet secretary to clear away the debris. "These histrionics of yours are such a bore."

"Histrionics? Spinoza, for God's sakes, this man's done more to jeopardize the reputation of this company than anyone else! We have on file at least *two* defective operations, and the most damned convoluted scheming to seal the breach this side of Harry Potter!"

Smith had been looking with silent contrition at the rubber carpet but at this he had to raise his head and ask, "Did you just compare me to Lord Voldemort, Mr. Fox? Because I don't think I deserve that."

Spinoza nodded. "Absolutely, a bit too strong there, old man."

Fox's eyes popped and he made choking noises. Eventually he remembered how speech works. "I don't f__ing believe this. Is *everything* a game to you, Spinoza? I suppose I can't expect better from *you*, Smith. You're a genius with the machines and we'll be sorry to lose your skills but clearly playing around with what people think is real's got *you* totally disconnected as well. But Lord Above, Spinoza, you have to take this seriously! Did you even see these reports?" Fox gestured at the now illegibly sodden mass of paper on the coffee table. "Ah, Christ... sorry about that. And your table."

The secretary returned with a large rag and a quantity of glass cleaner. Spinoza cleaned his spectacles good-naturedly and said, "That's quite alright, Fox. There's a reason I own a

glass table and a rubber carpet. Feel free to gesticulate to your heart's content. Sarah here can return with more tea if you like." He smiled at his colleague's swelling, tomato-red face. "Fox, you've known me too long to let my jokes fool you. I am quite familiar with the reports on our Mr. Smith's recent performance. I'm afraid it does make for very silly reading, Smith."

"I'm very sorry to have disappointed you, sir." Smith's voice was small.

"No doubt. Yet the fact remains that you botched the operations on *two* volunteers, and have had to waste valuable time and money on extensive follow-ups. Ms. Banks in particular had no less than thirty sessions! And *Project Lethe*? These are just volunteers, Smith! We don't charge them at entry, and we don't make any money from fixing your mistakes. And *Lethe* on a volunteer... do you know how much that cost us? I know you don't. Well, I'd be quite happy to show you, it's the sort of number that should advertise itself... but sadly it is currently being dissolved in caffeine - yes, thank you, Sarah, that'll be all."

"Don't forget the foolery with the barn," Fox cut in, his redness slowly mellowing.

"I refuse to even acknowledge that it happened. Reading about it hurt my brain, Smith. I'd get under your helmet to have all memory of it expunged, but I'm not trusting you with anything more complicated than a doorknob at this point."

Smith said nothing.

"Smith, as Fox rightly pointed out, you are a genius. You have more successful operations to your name than anyone else in this building. But--"

"You've gone too far, man. Anyone can make a mistake, but you didn't let yourself see that you weren't doing it right and kept on hacking away at these basket-cases. Spinoza and I didn't give you an unlimited budget to spend behind your private fancies! You know you should have reported these in. We did *not* want to have to learn about it from someone like Robert Louis or whatever his name is, for Christ's sake!"

"A programmer of your standing

shouldn't need to be chastised like a naughty child who's had too much cake. It is very boring."

Smith looked up. There was a wetness to his eyes. "I just wanted to fix them. And I did it wrong, and I wanted to do it right by them."

Spinoza and Fox exchanged a look. Fox was the one to speak first, and his voice was gentle this time. "We know, Smith. That's what *Tabula Rasa* is all about. Making people better. It's just that in these cases you knew you weren't helping. You should have stopped, or passed it onto someone else."

Spinoza nodded. "We can't allow you to absolve yourself at our expense, Smith. I'm sorry, but it's time you cleared out your desk."

Smith too nodded, and got up to leave. "Thank you, sirs."

Fox offered to escort him to the lift. As they waited for it to reach the 40th floor, Fox asked, "By the way... what did he settle into in the end? Anthony Blake or Paul Wickens?"

The lift arrived. Fox held the doors open as Smith entered. "He appears to have stabilized as Paul Wickens, Mr. Fox."

"And is that what he wanted, Smith?"

"I no longer know." The lift doors clicked shut.

Smith arrived at the lobby and the first thing he saw was a boy of about fifteen years of age sitting by himself. Ordinarily he would not have taken further notice, but in his current mood he walked up and introduced himself: "Hi, I'm Smith. What brings a young man like you to *Tabula Rasa*?"

"Oh. Uh. Hi. I'm Michael."

Smith nodded, smiling at the boy's awkwardness. "Pleasure."

Michael shuffled his feet and continued, "I was, well... I've been saving up. And I think I've got enough now. For the treatment, I mean."

Smith stopped smiling. "You want a session? Why?"

Michael sheepishly muttered, "It's only silly, really. But I may as well... do you work here?"

"I'm a brain programmer. Tell me what's wrong, son. I'll help you out."

"It's just that... well, it's hard sometimes, you know? I'm not that good at school, and I can't seem to really get the hang of sports. I'd really like to, but I don't know... I guess my brain just doesn't get into it that much? I mean, is that a thing?"

Smith nodded. "Yes, it's called having an interest. Or not, in your case. It's normal."

"Well, yeah, I know, obviously. But it's so hard to meet people who like the sort of stuff I do, you know? And I can't really trick myself into trying to enjoy, I dunno, football, right? Seems much easier to just make it so I've always been sportier, cooler. And smarter. I want to work harder at school. You know my parents, they're always telling me I should be like Sam or Ronny or Anika. Like there's so many people in my life who're just doing it better than I am, already. If they can get it together why can't I, right? But I just can't seem to."

Smith nodded through it all while trying to get at the heart of Michael's problem. Finally he said, "So you want to be the person other people want you to be? Is that what you're saying?"

"Uh. Yeah, I guess. I just don't like myself, and I don't think I should." Michael's voice was depressingly cheery. "Lucky I don't have to be myself!"

And suddenly Smith realized that for once he *knew* how to make it better. "Well, I've got bad news, Michael. Your brain's too young for the treatment. *Tabula Rasa* just doesn't do it for males under twenty-one."

Michael looked crestfallen. "Really? That sucks!"

"Yup, guess you'll just have to get okay with the person you are. Tough break, but what can you do?" A convincing shrug.

"Ah. Well, thanks, then," Michael gloomily slouched back into his life with its little aches and worries.

Smith grinned after him. Kid would just have to do his own growing up, how awful. Feeling self-satisfied for the first time that day, he softly sang as he made his way to clear out his desk, turning heads in his wake.

"You know that it would be untrue, You know I would be a liar..."