

The Last Refuge - 100 Word Synopsis

It is 2050 in London. At the heart of government sits the Whitehall Base and the Mandarin AI advisory system. Operating in line with the Mandarin Protocol, these digital AI advisors have supposedly helped the government achieve the long esteemed vision of the British Civil Service, providing neutral, impartial and evidenced advice for political decision-making. But Lira, a promising new recruit, discovers a shocking secret as she unravels the protocol's inner workings. These supposedly neutral intelligences are haunted, and it seems like the statesmen of old are still the ones calling the shots.

The Last Refuge

Lira Ramy gazed up at the People's Spine, a glimmering white tower on Whitehall in London. Stationed on either side of the entrance to the tower were marble statues of Churchill and Atlee. The two great British statesmen appeared powerful, yet corroded against the brilliant shine of the curved building. The Spine, as it was commonly referred to, had been built around 10 years ago in 2040. Replacing many of the grand old Victorian buildings, it now housed most of Britain's most significant government Departments. That included the Department of Health and Social Identity Systems, where Lira had recently been offered a job.

With a mixture of youthful enthusiasm and nervousness coursing through her body, she strode forward past the two statues to the entry way of the building. After being ushered through the door by the armed security personnel, Lira placed her hand down on a reader and lifted her gaze to the eye scanner, which swiftly confirmed her identity. Despite having already passed the extensive 9 month security check, Lira felt relieved to go through.

Before even arriving at the reception help desk, Lira saw a young man approach her.

"Lira Ramy?" he said. "I'm Sam, welcome! We've been in touch by message, how are you doing?"

"Hi Sam, yes I'm Lira. I'm doing well, thank you. Slightly nervous of course," Lira laughed.

"Of course, always nerve wracking starting a new job. Well don't worry, everyone is really excited to have you start and we'll get you settled in no time."

Sam was broad shouldered, with auburn hair and deep blue eyes. He wore the DHSIS uniform which consisted of a navy suit, black shoes and a crisp white shirt. Lira spotted the SpectraPin attached to his lapel, gold in colour and modelled in the shape of a column. The SpectraPin wasn't simply a form of ID. It was also a neural interface to the Mandarins, the digitised AI advisors that were embedded in every department.

Lira knew a lot about the advisory system from her studies. The fall out of the Westminster Disinformation Crisis in 2031 spurred a full and somewhat overdue overhaul of the British government's decision-making processes. The world had moved on from its distrust of AI and in

a turn of events, algorithmic governance was seen as the way forward to rebuild public confidence after the unrest and chaos that ensued from that period.

The Whitehall Base, a decentralised blockchain system that underpinned every department and data vault in the British government, was therefore born out of post-crisis necessity. Designed to ensure a secure and impartial way of governing, each Mandarin operated as a distributed advisory node across the Base, with all officials receiving their own Mandarin advisor to match their policy area. The Mandarins could only be accessed via secure tools like the SpectraPin. Of course the SpectraPin was only for junior officials like Lira and Sam, as political leaders and senior officials had different ways of accessing the system.

These Mandarin advisors were trained with the decades of institutional knowledge that the Civil Service had built up. Now they were able to directly assist civil servants in everything from policy design to legislative drafting, presenting a full range of evidence in all sorts of colourful ways. However they were also bound by a strict operating model, enshrined in the Mandarin Protocol:

1. A Mandarin shall always provide a transparent chain of reasoning.
2. A Mandarin shall remain neutral in its counsel.
3. A Mandarin shall, in every case, defer to the sovereignty of Parliament.

These weren't simply principles. The protocol, embedded in the design of the Base, ensured that the advice provided was free from harmful tampering and could always be traced. Importantly it sought to preserve the neutrality that represented the high spirit of the British Civil Service as it had been conceived in the 19th century. High quality, impartial advice from civil servants for political leaders to use for decision-making.

"The work on the new Biometric Retention and Consent Framework has been full on, so it's great to finally have you join us. Follow me, we'll get things kicked off for your onboarding. We're going to Layer 7."

Lira followed Sam down a curved hall with a series of displays and one showed the events of 2031. Sam caught Lira staring.

"Who would have thought Mandarins were the answer eh?" he said. "Transparency, Neutrality, Deference. Sounds a bit funny but better than constant chaos. And the best thing about the protocol is that it always outlives the people who use them." Sam smiled at Lira. "Anyway, we'll get your SpectraPin set up soon."

Sam kept his word and Lira was set up with her own SpectraPin after just a few days. He mentioned that it was a little different to the standard SpectraPins for new starters, but this was nothing to worry about. She was also assigned her own Mandarin, *LockeNode445*. At first Lira was in awe. She had spent 6 years training at the University of Oxford in Policy Computer Science for that moment. While many of her friends went off to much more lucrative careers, Lira knew she wanted to work on the real issues facing the country.

Now she was doing just that. Her first project was to support the implementation of the government's contentious new amendment to the BRCF, allowing citizens to opt out of default biometric tracking in public places. The data-sensitive citizen lobby was as loud as ever, but there were more unexpected voices pushing for the amendment too, like those who had undergone neuro-augmentation. They were concerned that unnecessary personal information was being picked up from their implants, which didn't fit the scope of what the biometric systems had actually been set up for.

It took Lira just a few weeks to start working in perfect concert with *LockeNode445* and her work analysing BRCF consultation material received praise across the Department. Impressed, Sam gave her a tougher brief - understanding how they could square security risks with the proposed amendment. Unsurprisingly, there were several reports coming in that detailed public fear around the security implications for the BRCF policy. Many couldn't understand why public safety should be risked for a bunch of young people harping on about 'cognitive privacy', whatever that meant.

Lira herself was one such young person, firmly believing in the right of cognitive privacy. So she was excited to get stuck in. Lira entered the pod after receiving her assignment and tapped twice on her SpectraPin. The words "Good morning, Ms. Ramy," flashed across the augmented reality screen in her line of sight as she sat down.

"Morning *LockeNode445*. Could you set out options for how the BRCF could include an opt-out, while also maintaining parity with prior rulings on national security and public safety protections?". For a moment Lira felt like *LockeNode445* hesitated, with the pause a fraction too long. Then a series of arguments appeared on the screen.

"Clause 14 of the 2016 Investigatory Powers Act prevents reconciliation...Security would be compromised by the BRCF amendment... But we have to move with the times don't we? Nonsense - security is timeless....Surveillance gaps that are non-tolerable would emerge..." The arguments stacked themselves, accompanied by evidence like old Home Office committee material and think-tank reports on the importance of public surveillance.

Lira was startled by the strange response to her query. The fact that some parts didn't look like *LockeNode445*'s usual writing could be overlooked. But what couldn't be overlooked is that she had asked for options to reconcile the opt-out with prior rulings - not for the reasons why they couldn't. "So much for 'Transparency, Neutrality, Deference'." Lira thought. Figuring it was simply a glitch, Lira rebooted the system. She restated the question, only to be met with the same response. Her stomach tightened.

She asked again differently, more explicitly, but again the same type of response. Now Lira was really uncomfortable. Panic started to settle in.

"The Mandarin Protocol should be preventing this, what's going on?" Lira whispered to herself in consternation. She switched off the system and went outside to get some air.

That evening after continuing to have problems with *LockeNode445*'s response Lira decided she'd try and work out what was going on herself, before reporting anything to Sam. If it was a bug she could probably identify it and save him the hassle. So Lira left the Spine and hopped on a train from London Paddington to Oxford. The study vault at the university had a set of high-power computers, which could be used to analyse distributed systems made available to the university for research purposes. In the spirit of open government the Whitehall Base was one of these, and luckily alumni had free access to the computers.

After an hour of sifting through mounds of data, Lira came across a thread labelled *Refuge*. Unusually the university servers stopped there and didn't allow her to go any further into the thread. Lira sat back, frustrated to be blocked as she edged closer to an answer. She thought about what to do and suddenly remembered her SpectraPin. Lira pulled it out of her bag. Would it work? Lira double tapped on the pin and the thread unlocked. "Yes!" she muttered under breath. Lira worked through the thread, expecting to find error logs or some form of documentary explanation for LockeNode's behavior. But instead there emerged a man's voice. No, not one voice. Several.

"The 2016 Investigatory Powers Act was set up for a reason, we can't simply do away with it."

"Yes quite, governments change but the security risks don't. We negotiated the act following all those problems in the Middle East. Tons of bad actors flowing through into the country. We still have them today. The opt-out fluff is a classic surveillance void issue."

"They've got a bit of new blood in to get the amendment through, which of course is an opportunity to sort it out."

The exchange repeated over and over. Lira froze. This wasn't the normal algorithmic governance she had studied, or that she had been using. Mandarin advisors were designed without vocal capabilities. Such capabilities were seen as a potential interference with the neutrality of the Mandarin Protocol. But these voices were not AI in any case. They were human voices, with human cadence. They reminded her of how her grandma used to speak, with words that sounded like finely cut glass sculptures. She went into the foundational logs of *Refuge*. As Lira scrolled through, her heart pounded through her chest, she felt dizziness come over her but couldn't take her eyes away from what she was reading. Yes the Mandarin Protocol was used for everyday governance, but a secondary layer, the Refuge Protocol, was still live. Built after 2031, it reconstructed and fossilised the entire beings of a select number of long-dead senior civil servants. These civil servants were granted overriding influence during moments of "epistemic instability".

LockeNode445 wasn't just citing historical arguments, it was making them. The Mandarin Protocol was haunted. Haunted by the old powerful ghosts of Whitehall, fighting today's political battles with minds that the state had placed behind a veil of machine logic. Who had done this? Surely not the political class, who believed the Mandarin AI advisors were an elite tool serving their political will. After decades these leaders finally believed they'd overcome the control of the bureaucracy, and were calling the shots with the best evidence in hand. Had the Civil Service

done this? The implications were too significant for Lira to begin to comprehend. “They didn’t just build AI advisors. They built a mausoleum.” And when it came to crunch time, the mausoleum was still governing.

Over the next few months, Lira befriended colleagues across the Department. She found that her SpectraPin unlocked the nodes that had been assigned to them. Yet their pins didn’t give them access to hers. Was this what Sam meant by her SpectraPin being different? It meant she was able to explore other contentious policy areas in the department. In 95% of cases the other nodes worked as they should, presenting information accurately, balancing with counter-information and supporting visual preparation in the spirit of “Transparency, Neutrality, Deference”. But when faced with the most sensitive or difficult policy areas, she found the same entrenchment of opinion. And when she dug into the roots of the data, she was faced with the same shock she had found with her own *LockeNode445*. Voices. Debating, whispering, arguing and reasoning with each other to reach their conclusion.

Why was she able to get access to the data lineage of each node? Lira resolved to speak to Sam. There must have been a connection with the SpectraPin he had given to her. And there must be a reason why he did it. The haunting of the Whitehall Base wasn’t the type of information that could just go anywhere. It threatened the very fabric of the post 2031 order.

On the afternoon Lira decided that she would speak to Sam, they sat together in the canteen. She wasn’t her usual self and was still building up the courage to say something to him. The night before had been sleepless as she thought through all the variations of how to broach the topic. But after finishing his sandwich and taking a sip of tea, Sam suddenly looked directly at her.

“So you’ve heard them, haven’t you?” he asked quietly.

Lira could feel her heart beating and she looked down, silent at first.

“What does it mean? I don’t understand.” she finally murmured.

“Meet me at Layer 26 tomorrow, 4PM, we’ll have a chat.” Sam whispered. He smiled at her and got up, and in a normal cheery voice called out, “Right I need to head off, busy day. See you tomorrow”.

“Sure, see you tomorrow.” Lira said. The room spun as she caught her breath. The images of Churchill and Atlee’s marble statues, watching each entry to the Spine, filled her mind.
