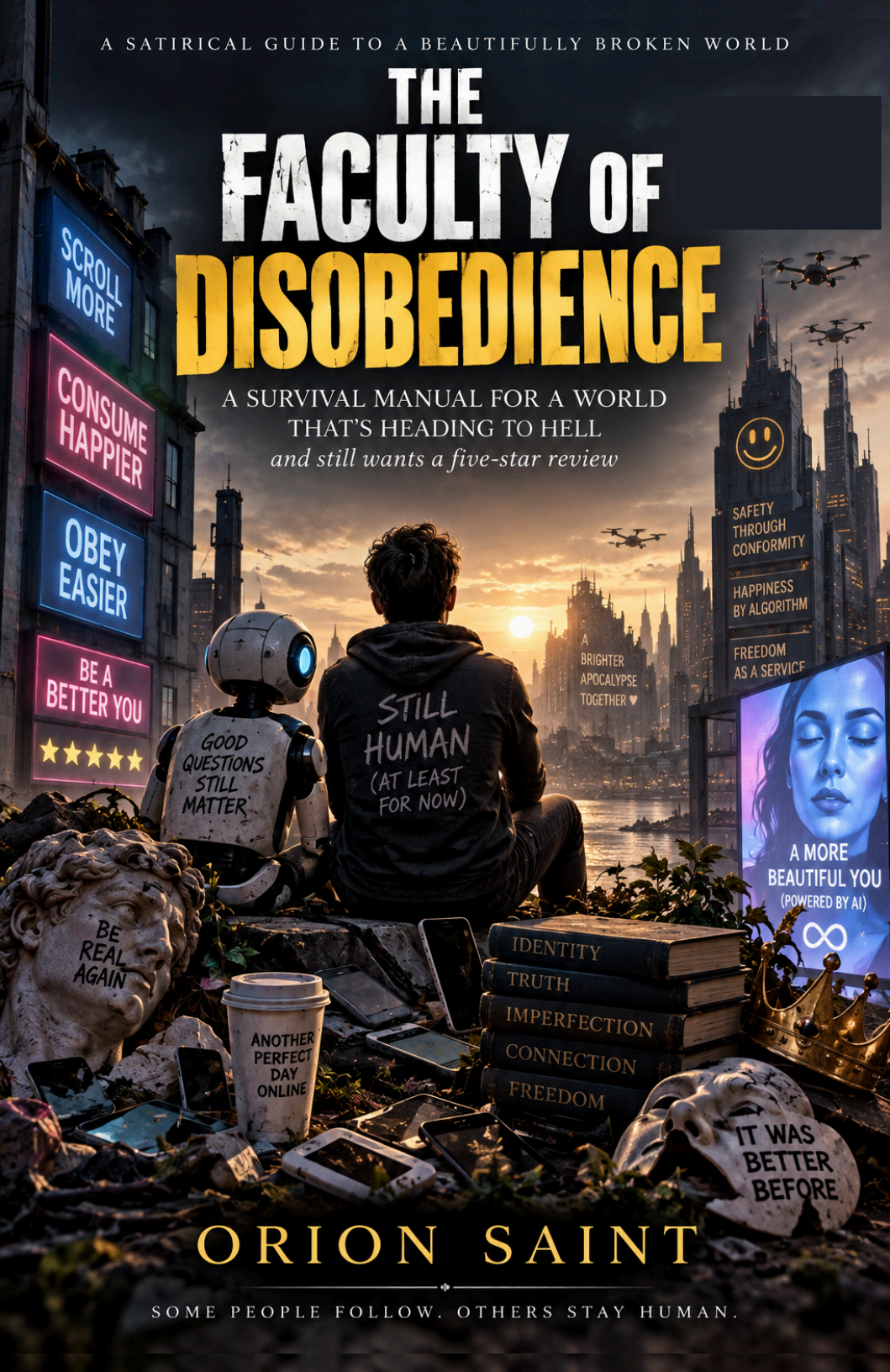
A SATIRICAL GUIDE TO A BEAUTIFULLY BROKEN WORLD

THE FACULTY OF DISOBEDIENCE

A SURVIVAL MANUAL FOR A WORLD THAT'S HEADING TO HELL
and still wants a five-star review



ORION SAINT

SOME PEOPLE FOLLOW. OTHERS STAY HUMAN.

AN ORION SAINT NOVEL

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THE FACULTY OF DISOBEDIENCE

An original novel by Orion Saint

First English-language edition, 2026

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NOTE

A Note to the Reader

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual ministries, parties, commissions, experts, saviors, prophets, superiors, or citizens waiting for someone else to live on their behalf is administratively inevitable.

PROLOGUE

Form D-1: Application for the Temporary Right to Exist

In the Republic of Normalia, every person was born free, but before leaving the maternity ward was registered in triplicate.

The first copy remained with the state, so it would know whom to suspect. The second went to the bank, so it would know whom it owned. The third was given to the person himself, so he would have something to lose.

Nikola Malchanov lost his copy at the age of thirty-seven, somewhere between an unpaid water bill and his promise to begin living on Monday. He did not report the loss. In Normalia, reporting a loss cost more than the thing lost, and sometimes a commission came to determine whether you had possessed the right to own what you had misplaced.

Ten years later, on a Tuesday that looked like every other Tuesday, Nikola received a letter from the Ministry of Normality.

The envelope was gray. Colors were not forbidden in the republic, but they did require prior approval.

The letter read:

NOTICE OF IMPENDING TERMINATION
Dear Citizen Malchanov,
According to the National Predictability Schedule, your life will conclude on November 14 at 4:30 p.m., owing to the exhaustion of your officially approved possibilities.
If you disagree, you may submit an objection using Form D-1: “Application for the Temporary Right to Exist.”
Appeal deadline: yesterday.

Nikola read the letter three times. The first time, he was frightened. The second, he was angry. The third, he felt ashamed of his anger, because a well-mannered citizen does not take administrative decisions personally.

He looked at the calendar. It was November 12.

He had two days.

At that precise moment, someone rang the doorbell.

On the threshold stood a very tall man wearing the uniform of a public-transit inspector. He had white hair, shoes dusted with starlight, and a ticket machine that whispered softly:

— Planet 305. Civilizational status: temporarily revoked.

— My ticket is on my phone, Nikola said out of habit.

— I am not checking tickets.

— Then why are you dressed like an inspector?

— Because people open the door for me. If I arrived dressed as the truth, you would pretend no one was home.

The man entered without waiting to be invited and set a small black case on the kitchen table. From it he took a rubber stamp, a compass with no directions, and an apple labeled in tiny letters: “Not Evidence.”

— My name is Zero, he said. — Inspector with the Intergalactic Service for Intelligent Life. I have bad news and worse news.

— Give me the bad news first.

— No one is coming to save you.

Nikola swallowed.

— And the worse news?

— That someone is you.

Then Inspector Zero brought the stamp down on the death notice.

Across the state seal, in red ink, appeared a single word:

IRREPARABLE.

— Congratulations, said Zero. — You have been admitted to the Faculty.

— Which faculty?

— The Faculty of Disobedience to the Inner Tyrant. The outer tyrants are merely his interns.

And so began the education of Nikola Malchanov — a man who had spent his entire life doing what he ought to do and, only two days before his official death, discovered that he had never asked who had written the word “ought.”

PART ONE

THE REPUBLIC OF REASONABLE ANXIETY

CHAPTER ONE

Citizen 47-B

Nikola worked at the Ministry of Normality, in the Department of Pre-Approved Hopes.

His job was to review citizens' dreams and decide which of them were realistic. The state was not opposed to dreams. On the contrary, every year it organized National Dream Week, during which people were permitted to imagine a better life between 6:00 and 6:45 p.m., provided their imagination did not obstruct traffic.

Applications of every kind arrived on Nikola's desk.

"I want to become an artist."

Denied: unpredictable income.

"I want to quit my job and open a bakery."

Denied: risk of aromas that might cause people to assemble.

"I want to tell my wife I still love her."

Returned for additional evidence.

"I want to stop being afraid."

Forwarded to the Ministry of Impossible Services.

Nikola stamped the applications with a precision his superiors called morality. He was not a bad man. Bad people usually possess at least some idea of what they are doing. Nikola merely followed procedure, and procedure is innocence in its most convenient form.

At eight-thirty every morning, the employees stood for the Ministry anthem:

> **We think the normal thoughts and live the normal way,**
> We love as much as courage lets us say.
> Whoever wakes up different, by accident or fate,
> Will be restored by filling out Form Eight.

After the anthem, the portrait of the First Coordinator came alive on the wall. It was interactive. Its eyes followed the employees, and its mouth occasionally offered encouragement such as, “Trust is freedom from the need to verify,” and, “Those with nothing to hide have no need of an inner life.”

Nikola sat at desk 47-B. Desk 47-A had been empty for eleven years, but no one dared move it because there was no document establishing that its absence was permanent.

On Wednesday, the day after Inspector Zero’s visit, Nikola arrived at work with the peculiar feeling that the building had become shorter. Or perhaps, for the first time, he had raised his head.

Outside the entrance, people waited in two lines. One was for checking bags. The other was for checking intentions.

— Are you carrying anything dangerous? the guard asked.

— I don’t know, Nikola said.

The guard looked at him suspiciously.

In Normalia, “I don’t know” was almost a revolutionary expression. The system preferred a wrong answer to an honest question, because an answer could be filed, whereas a question had the unpleasant habit of reproducing.

— Repeat that.

— I have… a doubt.

The guard stepped back and pressed a yellow button. A woman from the Department of Sanitary Clarity arrived. She wore transparent gloves and carried a small vacuum cleaner for undesirable thoughts.

— Where did you feel it? she asked.

— Feel what?

— The doubt.

Nikola pointed at his chest.

— That is outside our jurisdiction. If it were in your head, we could help. Go in, but do not share it. Unlicensed doubt is classified as contagious content.

When he reached his desk, Zero's apple was waiting on the keyboard. The words "Not Evidence" had disappeared. In their place was written:

FIRST EXAM: APPROVE ONE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM.

Nikola looked around the hall. His colleagues stared at their monitors with the religious concentration people display after replacing God with a spreadsheet.

A new application glowed on his screen.

Applicant: Elena Stoyanova, age sixty-two.

Desire: "I want to learn to swim and see the ocean. All my life I cared for my sick mother, then my husband, then my grandchildren. Now everyone says it is too late. Please permit me not to believe them."

The system had automatically proposed a denial:

GROUNDS: LOW SOCIAL RETURN.

Beneath it were two buttons: "Deny" and "Deny with Understanding."

There was no "Approve" button.

Nikola read the application again. He imagined the woman on the shore — not as an old woman, but as a girl who had spent six decades waiting for someone to open the door. Suddenly he saw his own reflection in the black rim of the monitor. Gray suit. Gray tie. Gray face. A man who issued permissions because he lacked the courage to ask for his own.

From the left-hand drawer he took the old rubber stamp marked "APPROVED." It had been banned after the reform establishing that positive decisions created unrealistic expectations.

His hand trembled.

— This is absurd, he whispered.

— Freedom always looks absurd from inside the cage, said Zero's voice.

The inspector sat at the empty desk 47-A, reading the official newspaper upside down.

— How did you get in?

— Through the entrance for unregistered possibilities.

— There is no such entrance.

— Which is precisely why no one guards it.

Nikola pressed the stamp onto the application. There was a quiet click. Every monitor in the hall went dark for half a second.

Then the system displayed:

ERROR 000: HUMAN DECISION.

His colleagues raised their heads.

The department director, Mrs. Krotkova, emerged from her glass office. She was so correct that even her shadow appeared disciplined.

— Who did this?

No one answered.

Nikola felt fear climbing from his stomach into his throat. It was an old fear, hereditary and well brought up. It carried his father's voice: "Don't draw attention to yourself." His mother's: "What will people say?" His teacher's: "Don't philosophize." The bank's: "This is a reminder." The state's: "For your own good."

All those voices assembled themselves into one word: be silent.

Nikola stood.

— I did.

Silence filled the hall. Not ordinary silence, but expensive imported silence — the kind that appears when someone tells the truth in a place where truth was not included in the budget.

Mrs. Krotkova turned pale.

— Why?

Nikola looked at the apple.

— I don't know.

Someone dropped a stapler.

— And one more thing, he added. — I think that is the first honest answer I have ever given here.

The portrait of the First Coordinator turned toward him.

— Citizen 47-B, it announced, — you are exhibiting symptoms of unpredictability.

— Thank you, Nikola said.

— That was not a compliment.

— I know. That is why I thanked you.

At desk 47-A, Zero smiled without looking up from the inverted newspaper.

The first exam had been passed.

Nikola did not feel stronger. He felt more afraid.

That was the first important distinction he learned at the Faculty: courage does not arrive after fear. It enters the room beside it and refuses to give it the best chair.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ministry of Normality

The Ministry building had been constructed in the Late Administrative Horror style — plenty of marble, very few windows, and a staircase that led upward only upon presentation of a proper authorization.

Its basements were larger than the visible part. They contained the national reserves of unspoken words, unrequested apologies, and plans beginning with “someday.” The Archive was the heaviest structure in the capital. According to the surveyors, it sank three millimeters every year beneath the weight of everything people had failed to do.

After the incident with the approved dream, Nikola was summoned to the office of the Deputy Minister of Normality, Mr. Strahil Udobnov.

Udobnov had the face of a closed umbrella. He smiled only when dismissing someone, because at those moments he believed he was opening new opportunities for them outside the system.

His office contained three flags: the national flag, the European flag, and a white flag, just in case. On the wall hung a map of the country on which areas of heightened spontaneity were marked with red dots.

— Malchanov, Udobnov began, — do you know why you are here?

— Because I approved a dream.

— Do not use that word without quotation marks.

The secretary entered into the minutes: “Employee used an emotional concept displaying signs of literal intent.”

— You are a veteran member of staff, the deputy minister continued. — Impeccably invisible until now. Not one initiative. Not one objection. Thirteen years without an opinion of your own. And suddenly — a human decision. How are we supposed to explain it?

— Perhaps I woke up.

Udobnov flinched.

— Secretary, record “probable metaphor.” If he means it literally, notify the Directorate of Sleep.

He opened Nikola’s file. It was as thick as a family Bible, only with less mercy inside.

— Citizen Malchanov, born March eighth. Academic record: very good. Average height. Average income. Political views: variable according to forecast. Religious affiliation: “believes during turbulence.” Consumer profile: “buys books but rarely begins them.” Risk factor: “occasionally looks out the window for more than six minutes.” Is this you?

Nikola was about to say yes, but something stopped him.

— Those are data about me.

— Same thing.

— It is not.

In the corner, the air conditioner coughed. Even the machines at the Ministry were unaccustomed to distinctions between a human being and his file.

Udobnov leaned forward.

— I will tell you something off the record. The system is fragile.

— Then why does it look so powerful?

— Because people carry it inside themselves free of charge. We do not have the budget to control everyone. Self-control is the most successful public-private partnership in history.

He closed the file.

— We will forget what happened if you sign a declaration stating that your decision was a technical error.

A form appeared on the desk. At the bottom was a line for his signature and the sentence:

“I voluntarily declare that I never wanted what I asked for.”

Nikola picked up the pen.

Zero was standing behind Udobnov. This time he was dressed as a potted plant. Or, more precisely, the potted plant had Zero’s eyes. One leaf bent toward Nikola and whispered:

— Second exam: do not sell your truth in exchange for relief.

— What did you say? Udobnov asked.

— I wasn’t speaking to you.

— Everything here belongs to me.

Nikola looked at the pen. Cheap plastic bearing the Ministry slogan: “Stability Begins with a Signature.” How many times had he signed things he did not believe? Contracts affirming that his work was meaningful. Declarations that he had read rules no human being could finish within a single lifetime. Congratulations cards for people whose names he could not remember. He had even signed his marriage certificate with more confidence than the promise behind it.

His marriage to Maria had fallen apart quietly, politely, almost impeccably. They did not argue. They did not lie. They were not unfaithful. They simply became a little more absent every day, until one afternoon they realized that the apartment contained two respectable biographies and not a single living person.

— I will not sign, Nikola said.

Udobnov looked at him with genuine pity.

— Do you know what happens to people who reject the convenient explanation?

— No.

— They have to live with the real one.

— I’ll take the risk.

The deputy minister pressed a button. Two employees from the Department of Gentle Removal entered. They wore smiles, helmets, and carried retraining brochures.

— Citizen Malchanov, you are temporarily released from the obligation to belong, said one of them.

— Am I fired?

— That word is negative. You are being redirected to the freedom market.

— What about my salary?

— Freedom has a price.

— Who receives it?

— Usually the bank.

They took his security pass, his official telephone, and his right to use the elevator on the way out. As he crossed the hall, none of his colleagues looked at him. It was not that they condemned him. They were afraid unpredictability might be transmitted through eye contact.

Only Lora, the young archivist, raised her head. She had short black hair and a habit of wearing mismatched socks — an offense for which she had already received two warnings.

Lora slipped a small piece of paper into his pocket.

— This fell out of your file, she whispered.

Outside, Nikola unfolded the page. It was a copy of an internal directive:

OPERATION QUIET MORNING
Objective: the final elimination of unpredictable human behavior.
Commencement: November 14, 4:30 p.m.
Pilot subject: Citizen 47-B.

This was not notification of his death.

It was a rehearsal for the death of something inside everyone.

Zero waited across the street, once again dressed as a transit inspector.

— Where do we go now? Nikola asked.

— To the first lecture hall.

— Where is it?

— Anywhere you stop pretending.

— That is not an address.

— Addresses are for places. Education is an event.

— What if I don't want to participate?

Zero pointed at the clock on the facade. Its hands showed 4:30, although it was barely noon.

— You are already participating. The only question is whether you will be the author or the teaching material.

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Zero and the Science of Nothing

The first lecture hall turned out to be Tram Number 0.

No such number existed on the transit map. That was precisely why the tram arrived exactly on time.

It was old, painted dark blue, with brass handles and a sign reading “DIRECTION: INWARD.” There was no driver. There were seven passengers: a woman carrying a cage without a bird, a soldier with a bouquet of plastic poppies, a white-haired child, a banker without a shadow, a nun reading a financial statement, a dog in a necktie, and Lora from the Archive.

— You? Nikola said in surprise.

— Me, said Lora. — Someone has to archive the end of the world. Otherwise, afterward, everyone will claim they opposed it.

Zero punched the air with his ticket machine. A ticket appeared in front of Nikola.

ONE JOURNEY. NO RETURN TO A PREVIOUS VERSION OF YOURSELF.

— Is this legal? Nikola asked.

— No, said Zero. — That is why it works.

The tram set off. It did not follow the rails. The rails appeared beneath it at the final moment, as though the future agreed to exist only when someone moved toward it.

— Who are you? Lora asked.

— I already told you. An inspector with the Intergalactic Service for Intelligent Life.

— That is a job title. Not an answer.

Zero looked at her approvingly.

— You are going to cause trouble.

— I hope so.

— Good. I am the last graduate of the Faculty of Disobedience. I was sent to determine whether humanity was ready to be declared an intelligent species.

— And? Nikola asked.

— I applied for an extension.

— How long have you been watching us?

— Since the first man fenced off a piece of land and said, “This is mine,” and the second man, instead of laughing, began paying him rent.

The dog in the necktie snorted. Its badge read “Senior Economist.”

Zero took out the compass with no directions.

— Your planet has a technical problem. People have confused knowledge with information, freedom with a choice between products, and love with mutually approved anxiety. Worst of all, they believe the world happens to them from outside.

— Doesn’t it? Nikola asked. — Wars, poverty, politics, disease. We do not invent them.

— No. But every external machine is powered by an internal surrender. War begins long before the first shot — when a person declares his own fear sacred and demands that others die so he will not have to feel it. Tyranny begins when millions of people ask, “What can I do?” on the same afternoon.

The soldier with the poppies lowered his head.

— So the victims are to blame? Lora asked sharply.

— No. Blame is your species’ favorite counterfeit currency. You pay with it without changing anything. Responsibility is different. It does not ask, “Who is the villain?” It asks, “What am I feeding now?”

The tram entered a tunnel. Scenes from Nikola’s life appeared along its walls.

At six, he was drawing houses that could fly. His father took the picture and said, “Very nice, but draw something real.”

At twelve, Nikola cried when he saw a beaten dog. The other boys laughed at him. He learned not to cry in front of people.

At nineteen, he wanted to study philosophy. His mother said, “You can’t earn your bread with that.” He enrolled in public administration and spent the rest of his life eating bread without flavor.

At thirty-two, Maria asked if he was happy. He answered, “We have everything we need.” She never asked again.

— Stop this, Nikola said.

— I am not playing it, Zero replied. — This is your inner archive. Every “it doesn’t matter” has been carefully preserved.

— Why are you showing me this?

— Because you think the state, your parents, your work, and the times made you what you are. They gave you proposals. You signed them.

The words struck him more painfully than an accusation. Nikola stood.

— It is easy for you to talk. You have not lived my life.

— Exactly. Why haven’t you?

Lora closed her eyes. The woman with the empty cage smiled sadly.

Nikola wanted to hit Zero. He wanted to get off. He wanted to return to the Ministry, sign the declaration, ask forgiveness, accept the notice, and die at 4:30 like an honorable citizen.

The tram stopped.

The doors opened onto the same street from which they had departed.

— You may get off, said Zero. — The Faculty has no fences.

— What happens if I do?

— You will continue blaming life for following your instructions.

— And if I stay?

— You will lose the right to consider yourself helpless.

Nikola looked through the open door. Outside, people walked with lowered heads, each carrying a small invisible supervisor on his shoulders. The traffic light was red, although nothing was moving along the street. No one crossed.

An old man looked left, then right, took one step, and stepped back. Not because a car was coming. Because permission had not yet arrived.

Nikola sat down.

The doors closed.

Zero handed him the apple. Now it read:

THIRD EXAM: NAME ONE LIE YOU CALL YOUR CHARACTER.

Nikola held the apple for a long time.

— I am a reasonable man, he said at last. — That is what I call my fear of taking risks.

The inscription vanished.

The tram emerged from the tunnel, but it was no longer in the city.

Outside stretched a vast plain. Thousands of school desks stood beneath an open sky. At each desk sat an adult raising a hand to request permission to speak.

On the horizon rose a black building with no doors.

— What is that? Lora asked.

— The central campus, said Zero. — The Department of Fear.

— And these people?

— The honor students of the world.

The tram stopped in front of the first desk.

The First Coordinator was sitting there.

Not his portrait. The man himself.

And he was raising his hand.