

# *Manumission*

and other short stories

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# *Manumission*

*One point is rewarded to the human team every time the computer answers incorrectly.* I've repeated this phrase in my head since the beginning of the Gameshow, when the intermediary was reading the rules to me and my teammates. Since I've researched the Gameshow since I was old enough to count, I have all the rules memorized, so when this year's gameshow started I focused on that one phrase and drowned out the rest. That phrase is the most important thing to remember, if I want to pull off what I plan to pull off.

The game began with twenty-one players: twenty humans, one computer. Now it's down to six humans: me and five others; and the computer which, of course, cannot be eliminated. The only way to beat it is for the remaining human player to answer the final question or problem accurately.

I feel like I'm sitting on pins and needles, watching my teammates eliminated one by one, not answering any of the questions myself yet. Patience is not one of my strengths, but I know it's not the right time for me to answer any questions, so I force myself to wait. It's not easy—my teammates are skeptical about whether I can make any contribution to winning, and I want so badly to prove them wrong. But I can't. Not yet, at least. If I reach my goal, my almost unreachable goal, my teammates will be sorry they ever doubted Katie Hancock.

As the computer answers yet another problem correctly and \$10,000 is taken from our team's account, I glance at the cameras at the side of the stage. The camerapeople can barely remember to work their equipment; everyone is so engrossed in the game. The game, as always, is broadcast throughout the world. I can imagine the old-timers watching, reminiscing about the days when the game was created. Ever since then it's been an annual event. But there's always the unspoken hope: can the humans beat the computer?

My whole life I've trained for the Gameshow. I studied my way to the top of my classes, sometimes fighting tooth and nail to get my teachers' notice. The days that I didn't have to go to school were spent in the hayloft, the only place I could escape the chaos of my family. Sometimes my flashlight burned out and my only source of light would be the moon. I read everything I could get my hands on so I could be ready for any type of question. I guess you could say I'm partly in it for the money, because \$10,000 dollars could really help my family, but that's not the main reason I put my heart and soul into preparing for this day.

Now there are only four players left besides me. The next question is asked, and the four huddle for the thirty seconds they're allowed before either they or the computer have to answer. One clean-cut player named Josh suggests something, and another player, an Asian man named Chang, shakes his head and retorts. Josh and Chang begin to argue while the third player, a college student named Grayson who has a tattoo on his wrist, clenches his hands and jaw, and the fourth player, a small, red-haired woman named Layla, breaks down into sobs.

I, as usual, say and do nothing. I just lean back in my chair, fold my arms with my notepad in one hand, and pretend that I don't care. After all, how can someone like me contribute to this contest, right?

Inside, however, I'm boiling over with anxiety. I've gone over my notes so many times I have them all memorized, but will they be enough?

By the time thirty seconds are over, Josh and Chong have been eliminated from the game and are escorted off the stage. Chong is rubbing his cheek, where Josh struck him. Layla voluntarily eliminates herself. Grayson and I are left.

Grayson trudges to the podium and glances back at me in desperation. I meet his gaze for only a second before looking away. He's the only person in the group who actually thought I might have a chance at winning this thing. I wish he could see that I don't want to do this, that I want to help, but I can't—he's on his own.

He turns and tells the intermediary with a touch of anger in his voice that he's ready to continue.

"What is the name of the author of *Atlas Shrugged*?" the intermediary asks.

"Ayn Rand," the computer says immediately. I guess *says* isn't the right word—buzzed is more like it. The same buzz that has annoyed and frightened human beings for decades.

The buzz that now shoots a chill up my spine.

Grayson turns to leave, then stops. Suddenly his hand grabs something from his pocket and hurls it at the computer. Coincidentally, the path of the projectile is just over the seat next to me. Apprehension has made my reflexes sharp; I reach out and block the object with my notepad. It drops to the floor, and I pick it up. It's a magnet; heavy enough to break the computer if thrown hard enough, and its magnetic power would then mess up the computer inside.

The people on the stage are silent while the audience members shout exclamations as I toss the magnet back to a surprised and enraged Grayson. The guards seize his arms before he can launch the magnet at me, which I'm sure he's aching to do.

"That's not the way to settle this," I say, and though I'm sure he can't hear me above the din, I can tell he understands my meaning. As the guards drag him out, his curses are swallowed by the the audience's screams of bloody murder. People begin throwing wads of paper and pens. The former I ignore, but the latter hurts. "Hey!" I lift my arms to shield my face.

The intermediary shouts into the microphone for everyone to be quiet. After several tries he finally gets the audience to calm down, then he explains that if Grayson had succeeded in damaging the computer, the game would have been postponed until a new computer could be found, then the game would have restarted with new players. This silences further insults.

My turn for the questions. I rise to shaky legs and drag my feet towards the podium. With each step my doubts jump a notch. I can't do this. How could I have ever thought that I could do something like outsmart a computer?

I have to try.

As I take hold of both sides of the podium to steady myself, I stare at the computer. So small, yet so dangerous. Thanks to my research, I know enough about computers to build one myself, but they still scare me. Every year the best computer in the world is chosen to compete in the Gameshow, and now I'm facing it.

So hard. Emotionless. Intelligent, but in a lifeless way.

I'm not going to win.

"Katie Hancock," the intermediary says, "you have a balance of \$60,000. Do you want to forfeit it in favor of a Question-Question Session?"

"I do."

The hundreds of people in the room gasp. Very rarely does the final human player in a Gameshow give up so much money.

"Number of questions?" the intermediary asks.

"Forty-eight."

"And do you want the first or second round?"

"First."

"Very well. Katie, in Round One you are permitted to ask the computer twenty-four questions. No opinion questions allowed. The computer has thirty seconds to answer. For every question the computer answers correctly, \$10,000 is taken from Katie's account. For every question the computer answers wrong, Katie earns one point. Computer, in Round Two you are permitted to ask Katie twenty-four questions. Again, no opinion questions allowed. Katie has thirty seconds to answer. For every question Katie answers correctly, \$10,000 is transferred to Katie's account. For every question Katie answers wrong, \$10,000 is taken from her account. Round One will now begin. Katie, are you ready?"