

Era of Man

The aura of despair was overtaken by the footsteps of a man no less confident than those of an era only spoken of, no longer witnessed. As Walker strutted to the well in which Lady Justice in all her beauty, blindness, and veracity presided, a disheartened woman from the previous case picked up the pieces of a life no longer her own.

Walker's attorney chuckled at her countenance: hands quivering, bruises visible, and black eye prominent. Perhaps she should have expected her conviction. But perhaps she believed in what no legal actor could anymore: truth.

Before Walker and the prosecutors settled in, the judge was already at work, appearing no less human than themselves but fueled by a mind— no, program— propelled by the unexpected. Krisis, as the government termed it, was a classification of Artificial Intelligence judges, which had undergone rigorous testing. Yet, Krisis' workings, however sought after, were left hidden from the public lens. Waiving his right to a jury, Walker hoped to play on its inexperience and supposed objectivity.

Krisis scanned the courtroom, cross-referencing government databases to identify the prosecutors. It scrutinized the defendant's history within its input data, a so-called diverse data set from which its legal understanding was derived, coming across an expunged two-year-old parking ticket.

As the defense reviewed their case, Krisis fixated on Walker. Its infrared megapixel camera and social awareness, however limited, led to the same conclusion: innocence. Walker's blond hair— textured but refined, filled with ease yet elegant— blue eyes— eyes most would lose themselves in, eyes that bore a certain clarity beyond the ocean— chiseled jawline— so carefully carved, so trustworthy. To Krisis, such a man would be present only for an unsubstantiated charge.

Yet, shackles bound the defendant.

Krisis was by no means intended to operate as such: its programmers had committed themselves to the craft of impartiality. But as long as Krisis' rulings reflected those of a human judge, as they often did in the envelope of its telepresence testing, the backlog of cases overwhelming American judiciaries would be a problem of the past. An era of man.

The prosecution began. "We intend to prove Strauss ought to be convicted of first-degree murder of his father, Louis Strauss."

It appeared as though Krisis' initial expectations were far from accurate. It almost wanted to believe in its fantasies. But it didn't— couldn't. For the time being, man was in control.

Krisis gazed upon a seemingly unperturbed Walker, whose back leaned comfortably. It determined that he was off to a good start: 87% of innocent defendants from its database demonstrated sangfroid during opening statements.

Or maybe, he just had a good poker face.



Blood splattered, glass shattered, furniture scattered.

The prosecutor gestured toward the holographic overlay. Krisis glanced through the evidence, noting signs of a struggle. “Our matter is not if the defendant killed his father, but why.”

Observing Walker, Krisis detected the first signs of worry. Maybe even signs of guilt.

The prosecutor clicked a button, and fragmented scenes unfolded.

Walker’s eyes misted over. He knew what was coming but swallowed his emotions.

A muscular man stepped across the overlay, entering what appeared to be a kitchen. He frantically opened drawers before letting out a scream of terror.

Walker could look no longer. His attorney turned to him, calming him, hoping silencing his fears meant feeling no fear at all.

A younger man hurried toward the kitchen, seemingly in pursuit. It was Walker.

As the two men inched closer, Krisis watched their argument unfold. The older geared his arm back. But the punch never came.

A stab did instead.

Walker tried desperately to stand, but his shackles restrained him.

The button clicked once more. This time, the hologram depicted a body whose swollen eyes and pierced skin held no resemblance to a man.

Notes drifted across the prosecutor’s smart glasses. “Today, I see a life taken.” Their brow furrowed. “The presence of a struggle is without doubt. But the necessity for homicide isn’t.”

The courtroom quieted as all eyes turned to Walker.

He bore a heavy face, one of a man bore down by his father. By abuse. By a system that valued justice more than humanity.

The prosecutor called up a witness.

As she turned to face Walker, his face turned pale. It was his mother.

“Mrs. Strauss, please describe your perspective of the struggle.”

Krisis turned to her, watching her gaze fixate upon her son. But Walker didn’t meet it, his palms leaving an imprint upon the table.

His mother’s words faded into the background. As his attorney’s brain-computer interface transcribed thoughts into writing, Walker was alone with his memories.

Walker is jolted awake by the front door’s creak. A musty odor fills the living room as his father enters, his shirt marked by sweat and a brown paper bag in hand. Walker scurries upstairs, his footsteps light. Their HomeBot reads 3:00am.

His father flips a switch, squinting painfully. He stumbles onto a couch, landing on their undernourished mongrel. He groans, shoving it aside before his eyes close. As his grip on the bag loosens, bottles clink together.

Walker's internal curses cease as he now sees his opportunity. He creeps down the stairs, knife in hand.

All the you'll-never-be-good-enough's, the you're-the-cause-of-all-my-problems', the I-wish-you-were-gone's would no longer shackle him.

But the silence is broken as his foot ventures one step too far.

His father's snores cut short as he rises, scanning his surroundings. Walker hides the knife behind his back, almost chuckling at his inability to conjure a more seamless murder.

He steps down and meets his father's gaze.

"Didn't I tell you to be asleep?" he yells. "Why can't you do anything right?" He draws his hand back, ready to add one more mark to his son's battered face.

But Walker is ready. He strikes first with a jab to the jaw as blood flies from his father's mouth. His father growls, storming to the kitchen, scrounging through the cabinet. The gun.

Perhaps Walker could've been more proactive. But perhaps Walker's clouded mind could no longer know any better.

His grip on the knife tightens.

The rest was a blur. Furniture tossed on its side, glass hurled across the room. But it was his father, not Walker, who bore the brunt of the battle. It was his father who was the victim. It was his father who was a good man.

The door swings open. It's his mother.

The rustle of paper snapped Walker back to reality. It was a note from his attorney detailing holes in his mother's testimony, but there were none. To his mother, all she said was true.

"Louis was a great man. Kind, sweet..." His mother's speech softened. "Loving." She glared at Walker, and, this time, he met her stare.

It seemed to Krisis that blond-hair-blue-eyes was not as innocent as he once seemed. A recess was called.



Walker's attorney directed his attention toward the witness, who avoided the gaze of her son. Perhaps seeing a murderer was too much for her. Or perhaps, siding with one was enough.

"Mrs. Strauss, how would you describe your relationship with your husband?"

Krisis employed its strabismus, looking at both her and Walker simultaneously.

"As I said, he was kind, loving—"

The attorney interrupted, his voice rising. "I am asking about your relationship," he asserted.

"He was—"

Krisis caught itself distracted. But it couldn't be. Shouldn't be. But it was anyway.

Walker's attorney noted its wandering eyes, pressing before she could finish. "Please answer the question, Mrs. Strauss."

Krisis wanted to stop him. She was not a hostile witness: there was no need to treat her like this. But it couldn't— no, didn't. She sighed, chuckling at his demands.

Walker recognized those chuckles all too well. And his nanoelectrodes recording his neural signals— the newest legal actor— did too.

Krisis connected his neural signals to those of trauma survivors, recognizing the changes in his prefrontal cortex. They were the chuckles of fear.

Walker's attorney chuckled back, perplexed at Mrs. Strauss' demeanor. But there was so much hidden beneath the tapping of her foot.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Perhaps it wasn't all rosy."

"Then what was it?"

"Bleak."

Before Krisis listened to her describe the initial sparkle in her eyes, to the additional witnesses, to its algorithm calculating the chance of recidivism, it had already made a ruling. Made up its mind.

She talked about love, struggle, and hardship. They should've just been words, just 0s and 1s in its operation. But Krisis felt the love, felt the struggle, felt the hardship.

Perhaps a human judge wouldn't actively stereotype the defendant. Perhaps a human judge wouldn't come to an early conclusion. Perhaps a human judge would just rule.

Natural language could take various circumstances into account. Qubits couldn't. Krisis couldn't.

She couldn't— because Krisis was no less human than any of the others in the courtroom. Her judgment was no less flawed than anyone else there.

Man was still in control.