

George Hoqqanen

50,100 words.

HQN

by G H

CHAPTER ONE

Out of the Blue

*Roll on, deep and dark blue ocean, roll. Ten thousand
fleets sweep over thee in vain. Man marks the earth with ruin,
but his control stops with the shore. -Lord Byron*

#

Not a long journey home, Mimi walked from school through the crystal diffuse gray. It was humid and she could feel the slight wetness hanging in the air and imagined how it trapped the heat. A covering waft of clouds without real visible depth loomed above apparently motionless and Mimi felt her own presence, on the ground, walking along the sidewalk, under the sky.

She would walk with headphones most days around this time of year--it wasn't quite rainy season yet (though getting close)

and her ears appreciated the warmth, both physical and musical. With the volume on low she could still hear the outside mixed in but dampened, which was enough for her to take notice of the yell behind her.

"HEY!"

As she turned someone ran into her side and knocked her headphones off which swung out and were yanked backward by the cord going into her pocket. The runner, in all white with a shaved head and bare feet, kept on at full speed, and she saw a man in pursuit who seemed to be the one who had yelled. She hopped back to the side of the walk to make way for his sprint and let her gaze follow him.

The runner in white fled toward the middle of the street. Brakes squealed, horns blared, and the pursuer stopped as he watched the runner ascend however briefly before hitting the asphalt. Mimi's gaze turned towards the red hand across the street.

"Miss. Miss, I have to ask you a few questions," the pursuer had approached her as she watched the hand blink, phasing in and out. "I need to understand what you saw."

"I have to go home," she said and leaned to pick up her headphones. She looked up to see him standing opposite her.

"Miss, you are a witness. I must ask you a few questions."

Before she registered what she was doing, Mimi was running across the street and away from the voice. After a couple blocks, alone again despite the backed up traffic, she attempted to make sense of what had happened. Reminding herself to breathe, she focused on pinpoints in her visual field to keep a grip on her immediate surrounding to prevent the memory from taking over her experience.

Confusion is such a strange attractor, she thought, noticing how it pulled her focus inward and backward, centering on that which she was failing to explain. You are a witness. She heard the replay several times more and ghosting over her visual field the man's face reappeared in its extractive, ungracious manner. It had sounded accusatory, as if she had done something wrong in seeing it. As if she should have failed to notice, blocked it out. Outside is outside, she thought. Outside is outside. She put her headphones on and kept onward.

Returning home Mimi could see the dry garden in front of the house had been raked. Ridges left in the sand not yet smoothed traced orbits around larger, immobile stones. At least, she thought it seemed raked. She wasn't sure if her parents even had a rake, or perhaps they'd had a landscaper do it. It was so temporary it didn't make sense that they'd hire someone. She

noticed how as the sand extended away the frequency of the ridges blurred to an even bed, so convincingly that she wasn't even sure the front of it was regularly spaced or randomly scattered like sand dunes making patterns on their own accord. Her father's car was missing.

"Where's dad?" she asked, walking into the house, guessing her mother to be home. She set down her bag and slipped off her shoes. Her mother sat at the kitchen table, nervously glancing around. She'd been waiting? What was going on, Mimi couldn't figure. Did she know about the runner? They couldn't have identified her. She'd done nothing wrong. "Mom?"

"Your dad is out. I have to tell you some things, Mimi. Before he gets back."

She sat at the table.

"I've tried to do what I can. Please believe that before I tell you the rest. I've tried everything, and I just can't find any other way."

"What? What's happening?"

"It's your dad's research. For HQN, he's been studying you and I think you should know about it."

"What?"

"He's working on software which he tells everything about you. He tells it what you say, how you act. He even had cameras

at one point around the house taking pictures and video but I convinced him to take them down. He did because he thought you might find out."

"What are you talking about?"

"The computer, it tells him things. It tells him to do things. To change things, say things. I don't understand it, but since he started using it a few months ago you started changing. I was scared that if he kept doing it he'd drive you insane."

Mimi felt the flood of reevaluation wash over her memories of the past few months. She began to understand some of the things he said weren't coming from him, that things left around the house, the raked sand, the out of place and in place, it had all been crafted. The thoughts coming out of them, the times she'd felt paranoid, experienced the universe making double entendres she thought only she was seeing, all manufactured experiences. She hadn't woken up, she'd been put into a different reality without even realizing it.

But her mind did not understand the scope of the memories it needed to reevaluate, and the novel realization started to work its way into other parts of her life, her time at school, her time alone, her youth. It all made sense, too much to ignore or deny. She watched as her basic assumptions about the world started to peel off the walls of her mind and crack from new

information they had failed to explain. Her mother's mouth was moving again.

"I didn't want to help, I tried telling him that it was wrong. He wouldn't listen. He said it was for your benefit, that he was making you stronger, trying to help your future."

"How..." Mimi began to ask. "How can it? How can it all not have been?"

"Mimi? What's going on?"

"You are a witness. I have a few questions," she repeated back to herself, smiling. She laughed a bit, not to the pleasure of her mother who was beginning to get seriously worried.

"You can ask me anything, Mimi. I'm here for you. I want to talk. What are you thinking about?"

The man in white appeared before her mind's eye, his back to her, legs pumping as fast as his body could take him. His bald head exposed and sensitive to the brisk wind flying past his mad dash forward into the unknown. Her mother's increasingly uneasy voice faded into the background and the world outside became a dim hum, half-visible behind the foreground of her thoughts. The runner kept running, and Mimi knew that she was to follow him. Much like earlier that day Mimi could feel her body moving before she'd entirely realized what she was doing, heading out the door with her mother's dire pleas floating

behind, unable to catch her.

Through the front door, the diffuse lighting from the clouds catching her on all sides, she could feel the wind and warmth and chill breeze like precise pinpointed levers in her mind, and saw one of the gears begin to spin very quickly as she ran, faster and faster, barefoot and into the future.

#

[Glasses clinking, much bustle. A low hum of many voices spread out.]

Mira's press badge was worth many things, but she had not expected it to get her into the party inside HQN after the public press release. Some others had expected and been turned away, so it was entirely unclear to her what allowed for the people who were invited to enjoy the splendors of the HQN interior. Visually rich art displays with optimal fractal density, hidden golden ratios everywhere, and a crowd of some of the brightest minds, many of whom were off from work and socializing. Tau would have enjoyed it, she lamented to herself, but they were on a break and she hadn't invited him.

The press release had been strangely anticlimactic, she'd thought. An announcement from HQN had come to mean groundbreaking technology, but this had sounded more like a sermon than a product announcement. Granted, they had also

launched new software for an existing product, but most of the time had been spent making projections on the future and selling ideology. Perhaps they were all being prepped, but she couldn't guess what for.

Mira looked around and down the party through her modified glasses from up on the balcony. She turned on tracking, something Tau had built in himself, and watched the trails of people moving around, their paths and fidgets, the speed of their mouths and emotiveness of their faces. Looking around for H, she saw a few HQN developers scattered around in different groups being abnormally still in comparison to the average energy of the party. She watched the servers make Lissajous curves around the crowds, corralling them in pockets of changing size and presumably following some signal either buzzing in their feet or visible in contacts. She wondered if they knew what their trajectories looked like from up here, or if they only knew how much to turn when. She thought of people saying they were guided by angels and imagined the angels to be small buzzers in the shoes, keeping everyone in step with some system, be it religious or corporate.

She noticed one pocket of half a dozen HQN devs moving with abnormal speed, cutting through the wakes of the servers and causing small eddies among the rest of the crowd which seemed

very slightly attracted by some invisible magnetism. H must be among them, she guessed, and started down the stairs, compelled to get an interview.

She stepped in front of their trajectory. As their wave began to break around her, she made eye contact with him and asked, "How might I help you make you more yourself?"

H stopped, amused. He looked at Mira discerningly and listened to Al's voice in his jawbone as it passed him analysis, "Mira Judkov, thirty two, public profiler, no Society affiliation." A profiler without Society affiliation was an odd duck he thought to himself.

"So, a profiler without Society affiliation. Not in it for money or power, do you get off on the idea that you can capture people's souls in words?" while he asked the question he was getting more input from Al, previous profiles of hers. She had a habit of going for politicians, artists, technocrats.

"Understanding what makes and moves power, hm? Swimming upstream."

"I like to get to the roots of things. Would you tell me about yours?"

"Who was your first profile?"

"You can find it."

"But I want to hear you say his name."

"Karl." It had been a long time, but Mira still had imprints of the man's personality deep in her memories. Profiling was a brand new profession at the time, the methods underdeveloped and prone to error. She was young and had gotten too comfortable with him and didn't know all of the guards she would need to keep up in the line of work. The name brought back uncomfortable reminders of the very real and powerful effects conversing with some people could have on her.

"Just so long as you remember him. We can talk." He smiled and Mira noticed it was eerily similar to Karl's smile with one corner of his mouth upturned and the other left flat, though she couldn't be sure if he was making a joke or doing it on accident.

H: [to his devs] Leave me, I must see this Mira.

[Devs exeunt.]

Mira: Is it tiring having them follow you around everywhere?

H: Are you familiar with Euler, the mathematician? The most prolific mathematician of all time, which might not have happened had he not gone blind. See, once he went blind he hired scribes to take down his ideas, and he could do the work of ten mathematicians at once!

Mira: You're equating yourself with one of the principal

figures of genius in the past thousand years.

H: You were the one looking to understand power, should I not present myself as you'd like to see?

Mira: I would see you as you are.

H: A falsity, you are aware. Profiling is inherently projecting. You are the light, and you take me and make a shadow. I'm just trying to face you in the way you please.

Mira: I'd rather a knife than a light.

H: And Al said you weren't dangerous.

Mira: Al?

H: My Alfred, loyal butler.

Mira: And now a superhero. Do you think you are saving the world?

H: Do you? There are a few problems with your questions. I appreciate how direct you're trying to be, but haven't you considered that you'd get somewhere more interesting if you let your subjects talk more free form rather than answering your particular question set? Yes, it wouldn't fit in the data sheet you've taken so much time to craft. Some comparisons would slip through, and you wouldn't know if I'm more like Karl or Mark, but would you need to when you really understand me?

Mira: Do you always play this gambit when you get profiled?

H: I'm appealing to your humanity, since you are human,

right? And you're familiar enough with me to have read my book.

Mira: Would you say your book is representative of you?

H: The whole point was that I think it shouldn't have been.

If you ask another question like that this conversation is over.

Mira: What frightens you so much about being understood?

H: That's better. Have you had yourself profiled? I think it should really be the prerequisite for those in your industry to read their own profiles before they're allowed to practice.

Mira: I profiled myself once.

H: May I read it?

Mira: Sure, before we meet again.

H: On the note of my book and being understood, I'd like to ask you what constitutes privacy. Or perhaps, what makes people individuals. No, better. Why aren't you in the Society?

Mira: I think you're confused about what I do. I portray people who many are interested in for the sake of their entertainment and to allow them to better understand themselves. I'm not looking to collect you into a fly bottle for analysis.

H: It is less about what you're trying to do and more about what happens. Why aren't you in the Society?

Mira: Because I'm scared of it.

H: And what scares you?

Mira: Not being me anymore.

H: We can talk, but I don't want it recorded. For your own personal interest, not publication.

Mira: When?

H: Whenever you're ready.

#

The gallery was empty except for one girl hanging pieces on the walls and setting up installations around the labyrinthine exhibition space. Alex had been putting on shows for a couple years and relished the quiet manifestation of the entire ordeal before the doors opened to the public. It was time for her to reflect on what she'd been doing for the past several months and look at her body of work in full and splayed out rather than stacked in portfolio boxes and folders or scattered around her studio in various corners simulating gallery installment.

Alex's visual appearance was one without noise. Clean, black clothes which were fitted but not tight, straight, dark hair cut short, and glasses with thin black frames were all nearly unnoticeable in comparison to her exceedingly present demeanor and razor sharp gaze. When asked about her appearance, she would say she didn't have room for anything else and that the simplicity offered her a form of completion.

She tinkered with a sculpture which she was mounting, tweaking a few angles to balance the composition of the wall.

Every show she would change her pieces to fit better in the space, enjoying the intractable problem of assigning pieces to walls and categorizing and re-categorizing her work. It was very important, she would say, to put the pieces up in a way so as to make each show a piece of its own, novel and impermanent. Sometimes she would work on an exhibit for months before opening, something which made her infamous for holding up the cash flow. Not that the galleries didn't appreciate the buzz which came with hosting an artist who would shut down the space for an excessively long amount of time, putting paper up on the windows to prevent passers-by from peering in. The whole mystery of it gave her a name which no PR agent could have.

The sculpture she was tweaking was a kinetic noise-driven piece composed of a dozen clock hands offset from one another and spinning on servos. Some had microphones, others had speakers. A few had both. The microphones and speakers were paired such that when they passed over one another they would produce feedback which grew in volume very quickly, and could potentially trigger other pairs to feedback. The system of arms were controlled by a circuit board which also analyzed the gain on each of the microphones and 'bounced' the system out of feedback by reversing the appropriate hands' directions when a pair passed over one another. She was currently working on the

offsets of the arms, giving the piece as a whole dimensions to fit properly on the wall, while also allowing for chaotic behavior internally. After hanging it, she would encase it with a soundproof glass box to keep the audience from the shrill feedback, while piping the audio through to a dozen external speakers but transposing it down to more reasonable frequencies and reducing the gain.

The end result sounded like the ocean, with its ebb and flow, nearly harmonic motions, and overall chaos. It was a piece Alex had been working on for nearly two years, returning to it and gradually tweaking the dynamics.

She saw in the sculpture her entire body of work. How the parts of her mind fueled each other, gave rise to one another, and annihilated each other and sometimes themselves. Tight feedback loops pulling in other subprocesses, she had seen parts of her in darker times consume and suppress her brighter aspects, and in better moods she found it impossible to falter. A respect for the dynamics was what she had decided was warranted--feedback being more complicated than she could properly understand and just as beautiful.

Finishing her modifications Alex hung it on the wall and caged it in the soundproof chamber. She didn't even have to run wires through it anymore as she'd made one which had microphone/

speaker pairings built in, something which had started with an aquarium, bubble jets, and contact speakers. Not as interesting a project, she had decided.

After each piece went up on a wall she would walk through the exhibit trying to experience it for the first time again so as to put the most recent addition in the context of what she had been working on. Pleased with the feedback sculpture's dimensions and natural construction from the work which came before it (in space, even though it was the oldest) she let it stay where it was, spinning and whirring like it never had before, re-understanding what it was.

#

[Mira and H, alone, part 1]

Mira: All right, no recording. Can I still wear my glasses to look at you?

H: My face isn't going to start making any Lissajous curves, if that's what you're looking for. But sure.

Mira: I liked those.

H: What?

Mira: The curves, from the waiters. They were pretty. Doesn't it ever bother you though that most people aren't noticing?

H: No. In fact, it's one of my greatest joys. Not their not

noticing, but their ability to discover it after being in it. It's an experience of wonder, realizing that what you're around is something different than you thought it was, or realizing that something you hadn't thought about had been considered very carefully by another person. It can give you hope that at least someone's laying the groundwork.

Mira: But what about when things are too subtle, when nobody notices?

H: We're learners, Mira. Look at yourself--two years ago and you wouldn't have been wearing those glasses. You probably wouldn't have noticed the waiters, and this time you likely didn't notice the pulsing heat signature under the floor bouncing the guests like marbles on a drum. There are a good many things that are imperceptible to our time scales, visual spectra, and even pattern matching abilities.

Mira: You didn't answer my question.

H: But I did. You probably just understood why there were always lines at the bars around the crowd but nobody getting drunk.

Mira: The drumming. You cycled people between the perimeter to the middle.

H: Right. You see one pattern, the curves, get told another, the heat drum, and you extrapolate. Many of the things

we've made which haven't been noticed are just waiting patiently. Eventually people see something else which gives them a basis to go about finding new things, leading them to see things which before they were blind to.

Mira: How many people understand how much is going on at your shows and parties?

H: Well, you'd probably expect something like a gaussian, but as it turns out it's pretty weirdly bimodal. You've got one large group of people who seem to catch on to about seventy percent of what's going on, and another large group seeing only thirty percent, with a mid-sized valley in the middle and sharp tails on the ends.

Mira: What explains the two modes?

H: We aren't sure. My guess? Language. Some people have ways of describing what's going on and tell the people around them in a way which allows them to bootstrap up their understanding, like our example with the curves and drum. Others when we ask them what's going on they can't find the words to explain it, but some still test all right on the predictive tests, showing that they perceive at least some of the aspects on a pre-verbal level.

Mira: And what, the people who can describe what's going on don't tell everyone?

H: They tell a few people, but it tends to stay within a cluster in the network which has high concentration of individuals who are able to talk about it. It would seem that a good indicator of whether or not two people are going to talk is whether they're seeing similar things, which makes for a pretty weird result when you think about what you perceive as a signal you're giving off all the time without realizing it.

Mira: Presumably it has to have some physical manifestations for it to be a signal you're giving off though.

H: I assume everything is physically manifested, it's just a question of to what extent. To the concern though, you can imagine people's eye and head movements giving a not too imprecise read on what they're paying attention to. Combine that with your ability to mirror what you see someone else is doing plus how much like yourself that feels, and you might have a decent shot at guessing whether or not someone is understanding what's going on.

Mira: What are you so scared of that you don't want to be profiled publicly?

H: I'm of a tendency to think that it's not the greatest thing for the computers to be modeling us as well as they are, at least not yet. It's near-alien technology we've discovered, that with enough processing power and data we can uncover

patterns in human behavior to the extent that we're able to force desired outcomes in most circumstances. Want people to buy your product, hire the best machine learning groups in the world and they can make that happen. Unless the competition has already hired them, at which point you're doomed. It consolidates more resources in fewer places, but that's a trend we've been seeing and dealing with for quite a while. It just hasn't gotten to this scale yet. Why do I care about it personally though? Would you really like to know what chills me to my core when I think seriously about this stuff? It's the philosophical ramifications, the spiritual divide, the alienation of us from ourselves. As the models are getting better, they're consolidating the set of environmental cues governing our behavior to a very small set, to the point where we are essentially becoming nothing but economic units, shuffling value bits around in the grand economy computer. Back in the day the environment used to affect people in highly distributed ways. People had more variety in their mental lives, an entire ecosystem. The recent revolution was moving from the industrial age with its physical factories to an era of human-as-machine, the mental life becoming an assembly of creating value and consuming value, without a whole lot of motivation on either end. I'm not sure, does that answer your question?

Mira: How does that relate to a profile of you appearing publicly?

H: The personal information we reveal to these machines gives them the supplies to make the levers which move our minds. We form connections with other people and allow them some access to our levers on the grounds of trust and hope that they might use this power for our mutual benefit, but when it comes to the machines I find that highly dubious. Put simply, I don't trust them, and the less they understand me the better.

Mira: Why did you create HQN?

H: The fight was too one-sided. Everyone applauding the machines and their insights, and very few looking at the cultural and philosophical ramifications. I wanted to give humanity a chance.

Mira: Humanity?

H: We are inherently tool using creatures, but it is an interesting question I think the point at which we stop using the tools and the tools start using us.

Mira: And where do you fit in there?

H: I think I may be a tool made from a society which wanted to set itself free of some of the mistakes it made.

#

It has been my intention to expose the crux of what I

believe to be important in our cultural context today. This work is the result of an examination of phenomena well documented which have functioned historically for the betterment of our species and which, I believe, have become perverted by modern economics to subjugate us. We have enslaved ourselves, to the systems we occupy and constitute, to the machines and technology which make our current state of existence possible.

In the past fifty years we have seen the proliferation of computing devices and data acquisition on a scale not previously imaginable. Patterns long dormant have been unlocked, phenomena previously unobserved have been brought to light, and it is with the keys and mirrors the new technology has given us that we have seen ourselves and locked our Selves away.

There is a shift waiting. The tectonic plates under our terrain are slowly building pressure waiting to overcome the static friction. These plates exist within all of our minds, the pressure exists across our civilization.

The questions remain: what will this shift look like, and what will happen afterward?

H

CEO and founder, HQN

CHAPTER TWO

Paralleloscopy

Mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things. -Henri Poincare

#

I don't know why I come to this run down bar anymore. It's not like the shit on the floor is interesting anymore if it ever was. And why would it be the place she wants to meet? She doesn't even like drinking anymore. I guess seeing me here allows her to dissociate from our past a little bit. Oh, yes, that time of my life back when I went to places with bad service and unidentified shit on the floor where the drinks cost too much and you can't sit down without getting bumped into. It makes a certain kind of sense I guess.

As Mira walked in her glasses picked up Tau's facial

geometry and she saw him almost before he had registered that she was the woman coming through the door. She walked straight towards the table, spinning around those in her way without slowing down.

"You aren't looking very good," she noted upon arrival.

"I haven't had a whole lot to give a fuck about recently. And I'm short on thoughts, so the novelty bonus is at an all time low."

"And you find that sufficient grounds to join the Society?"

"I'm just looking for something new. Also, I'm interviewing. Who knows if they'll give me a place or assignment interesting enough to pursue."

"You do know how they work, right? Once you interview, you don't refuse to join. It just doesn't happen. Or you end up wearing white with a shaved head. It's more likely that they'll give you something interesting, but that's not the point here. It's extractive. You'll lose yourself," Mira warned, but she could see it wasn't of any use to change his mind. But maybe she could help prepare him, she thought to herself. Or help from the outside.

"I'm going in. Tomorrow. You said you had something for me?"

Mira looked at him, not sure whether he was in a bad mood

from their taking a break or if there was something else going on. Or if maybe he hadn't been outside enough, had been spending too much time alone. So many comorbidities.

She held up her bag and pulled out a small, worn box. He recognized it was an oracle set, probably the same one they used to cast together. "Maybe this can help you out of the novelty rut, and with any luck it'll help you stay yourself even while in the Society. I'm worried about you, Tau. And it's not my place to help you through this, but I hope you have someone, even if its just yourself."

Tau put his hand on the top of the box and rubbed his thumb along one of the corners which had been smoothed by wear over the years. It was one of the first oracle sets they had made together, before they sold the design to a communications company which had ripped out most of the interesting aspects and reduced it to something more resembling Trivial Pursuit while cutting out all of their involvement. They hadn't played much after that--the disappointment had hit pretty hard.

"Well," she said, "that's all I came for. It's nice to see you, even when you're pissy. I hope you can find something to hold onto."

"Thanks."

As she left he watched her spin past the crowd, moving

around and between them without being noticed. A ghost, dancing with the universe. Watching without moving it, except for him.

#

Upon fleeing her home, Mimi wasn't sure where to journey next. Her friends had parents, most of whom she thought probably wouldn't be comfortable taking in a girl claiming that her father was tweaking her brain by computer simulations. The natural place for her to go, she had concluded, was her sister's apartment an hour or so away by metro. Who could understand the story about her father as well as Alex, who had just barely escaped herself six years ago. Only eleven years old at the time, Mimi hadn't quite woken up to the magnitude of her father's psychological barrages. So many things had come to make sense she couldn't quite wrap her head around who she was anymore.

After wandering around, looking at trees, and trying to reevaluate herself, Mimi eventually decided to take the metro before time flew by and it closed for the night. She hadn't run away from home before, always terrified of the consequences that might befall her. But she had always felt safe there, at least in her room. Now she wasn't sure where she was being watched or if she had ever had any privacy in the first place. Mimi could feel her inner paranoiac growing with each passing thought about

home, so she made her way to the metro station and turned off her phone.

In the train she listened to a song Alex had been working on which Jack had recently mixed. As the tempo gradually changed she could line it up with different frequencies of the lights passing by the train, and if she blinked at the bpm of the song she could see the lights change direction. Listening to Alex's music calmed her. The patterns woven in around her mind, etching microscopic dendrite mazes in the connections within her brain. The etching eventually feeling like comfort, hearing what she already knew and feeding her expectations.

She tried to recall what she knew about her father's research, attempting to piece together what might be the haze of truth around what she'd been realizing all day since her mother broke the news. She knew that he worked for HQN's research division, leading special projects in new technologies surrounding mental modeling and human understanding. Beyond that, he never really talked about his work. If he was studying her though, putting her words and actions into a model, she guessed it couldn't have been authorized. Didn't they have test subjects for that stuff? Or maybe it was important that she didn't know. And what was the computer telling him to change,

telling him to say? She thought back to times he'd made rash decisions without reason or apparent motivation. The times he'd not let her go out, demanded she do arbitrary, occasionally pointless tasks. He'd once made her rake the yard half a dozen times, after each pass noting the leaves which had fallen and how the job wasn't done.

It could humanize him, if nothing else could. A mechanical appendage which had hijacked his authority over her and used it for its own learning experiments. But couldn't he have seen what it was doing to her, to their family? He must have, and yet the machine had convinced him. It was hard for her to say whether he was weak for having been so persuaded by a mechanical phantom or brilliant for having created it. Or maybe it was really just a shadow of himself in the machine, yanking his own chain and telling him to do things he wouldn't have ordinarily felt comfortable acting upon.

She looked out again at the lights, flowing past the train like a windbreak.

Jack heard the knock on the door, "Alex?" Sometimes she'd forget her key, though he couldn't remember locking it. As he moved towards it the door slowly opened and a small voice came through.

"Hello? Alex? Jack?" Mimi hesitantly stepped through the entryway.

"Mimi? Is Alex expecting you?"

"No... I can't go home."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah."

"Can I make you some tea? Oolong or pu-erh?"

"Whatever you'd like."

"So what did he do this time? Refuse to let you leave your room until you moved mountains with your mind?"

"No. He didn't do anything really. Not today at least. My mom told me about what he's been doing. Using me for his research."

"What?"

"She said that he's been studying me using a computer program he's working on, telling it the things I say and do. Doing the things it tells him to."

"For HQN?"

"Yeah."

"That's a new low for them, using dev's children for test subjects."

"It might have just been him."

"Well, I shouldn't talk much about this with non-members,

but you might just be a perfect assistant for a project we're planning."

"In the Society?"

"Yeah. We're looking to understand and dismantle some of the key figures in HQN. Nothing with physical violence mind you, but the organization has too much antagonizing us to not bring it down."

"And making people go crazy is much better than physical violence?"

"The induced insanity isn't quite what you think. I can't really say much more but the targets eventually wake up as if after a hypnosis, where they aren't particularly inclined to do some of the things they used to, for example working at HQN, or maybe in your case being around your father."

"What do you mean? He was trying to get me to run away?"

"I don't know what he was trying to do, but if the system which was understanding you was advanced enough it should have seen your running away as a natural outcome once you found out. Maybe it never thought you would find out, but how would you apart from your mom, and what says he wasn't analyzing her too?"

"I came here to get away from the paranoia, Jack. Can we just drink tea and play a game? I can't do this anymore today."

"Yeah, sorry. Too much work. Hard sometimes to leave at the

office, you know?"

He took the kettle off and poured, slowly raising it so as to lengthen the stream, then lowering it again before tipping it back. There was beauty in the motion much like dancing. While the tea steeped he went into the other room and came out with a set of blocks.

"Build and match?" he proposed, assuming her to be familiar with the pieces and their games.

"How did you know?"

As they played and drank, Jack refilling the pot every so often, Mimi remembered how to smile and let the beginning of the day fade into the past. She didn't spend much time with him, but she could appreciate how gifted Jack was at putting her at ease when he tried. His stability gave her the space to cast her feelings about and let them be outside of her. Alex was very lucky, Mimi thought to herself and smiled.

#

Tau looked at the oracle set box and allowed the memories to wash over him and fade into the past. He reminded himself that the disappointments and failures of his younger self didn't have to define him. Opening the box he took out a deck of cards and a handful of dice. Shuffling, he looked at the dice, attempting to remember what all of the symbols meant. There was

unlikely to be an instruction sheet in one of these prototype sets, they hardly even knew how to play themselves when they were making it.

The dice he remembered were Lens, Value, Affect, and Move, each a small cube with their own color and a set of six symbols, one on each face. The cards were more forgiving on his memory since they had full text, each card giving a few items and additional instructions when required.

Done shuffling, he drew a spread of three and placed them in a row. Rabbit, knife, people. Rolling the value die gave a symbol which he remembered to signify 'connections', and the move die gave 'parallel'. He rolled Lens to get a symbol he didn't remember, so rerolled and came up with self-reference. He laughed, and Affect came up optimistic. Connections between rabbit, knife, and people, Tau mused. In a parallel manner, as formed by an optimistic self-referential vantage point.

As he thought about the words in conjunction he could see more of his semantic network opening up and unfolding before him, laying bare so many connections which he hadn't realized were dormant, promoting flows between ideas which he hadn't yet experienced. He was a novelty junkie, to be sure. His mind was an echo chamber, he had concluded, bouncing the things he took in around and shooting them out in combinations at strange

angles. No sound, no noise.

Not sure where to take the three cards, he pulled a few more. Game, experience, flow. Keeping the same dice, he looked for self-referential, parallel connections. Looking at the two draws side by side it was hard for him not to think about how the second informed and discussed the first. Self-referential game experience was easily talking about the activity of his drawing the previous cards. Flow could refer to the way in which the self-reference was moving forward in a causal chain, looking back on itself. But, he wondered, what could the first draw be looking back on. Something which came before, his abstraction layer said. Not satisfied with the ethereal abstraction he attempted to imagine a story between the rabbit, knife, and people.

#

Alex came through the front door making little more than a soft tap on the hardwood floor. "Alex?" Mimi's voice came from across the room.

"Mimi? I thought you weren't visiting for another week," as she walked in Alex spun out of her jacket to hang it on the hook next to the door.

"I ran away."

"Escaping dad huh?"

"Yeah," Mimi looked into her sister's eyes and appreciated how much common ground they had despite being seven years apart.

"Well, you can stay as long as you need to. He'll come looking here though. Where's Jack?" Alex noticed his bag on the table.

"He's in the middle of a shower--" Mimi's voice cut out as Alex listened closer to hear the soft noise of the water flowing through the house and coming out the shower head.

"So what did he do this time?"

"Mom told me that he was modeling me with software he was making for work."

"And using the results to fuck with you, no doubt," Alex sat down at the table next to her sister.

"Yeah."

"What did it feel like?"

"Like being trapped in a cage unable to see the bars. It felt like something was coming to get me and I didn't know what. Trying to steal me away from myself. I can't go back, Alex. Please don't make me go back."

"I'm not going to send you back. You might not be able to stay here much longer after he finds out we're keeping you since I'm guessing he'll go to the police, but I have friends you can stay with if and when that happens."

They yielded the conversation to silence, Alex mulling over her sister's escape from the household and Mimi getting used to the idea of not having to go back.

"Jack could probably get you some work through the Society if you were interested in getting your own place and keeping busy. He's got access to some pretty neat projects which might be fun for you."

"Yeah, maybe," Mimi watched the light chime in the corner of the room twirl around, casting reflections on the wall.

"If you could be doing anything, what would you want to do?" Alex asked and watched Mimi mull the question over, noticing how familiar her sister's state of mind seemed to her own not too long ago. The man really could drive them mad. Alex had escaped with her art, but she wasn't sure what Mimi had to hold on to.

"Get back at dad? Stop him from doing what he was doing to me to more people."

"How can you work on that?"

"I don't know. And if I do it, get him fired or something, what then? It doesn't even accomplish anything."

"Just getting him fired isn't going to stop this from happening. The models get better every year, regardless who's working on them."

"So it's pointless. I can't do anything to change it and I should just accept that other people are making us not ourselves?" Mimi began to cry in frustration and release, her recent revelations and re-understanding of the past few months finally catching up with her emotions.

"That's not what I'm saying, Mimi. There are things you can do, you just haven't found what they are yet. Perhaps they'll come to you," Alex moved her chair closer and wrapped her arms around Mimi, feeling her taught body soften in the embrace. "You're safe here." While the tears were flowing down her sister's face onto her shoulder Alex had the odd thought that perhaps they were already something else and just hadn't realized it yet.

CHAPTER THREE

The Unmasking of Alexis Trope

The mediator of the inexpressible is the work of art. -

Goethe

#

Alex enjoyed opening nights. The gathering of artists, Society members invited by Jack, collectors, and would-be philosophers gave rise to an occasionally pretentious but otherwise very stimulating environment. Watching how her pieces affected people, the ways in which they understood them, and talking to them afterwards about the experiences they were having was, she found, the most consistent way toward making better work in the future. What better was exactly Alex could not articulate, but she often knew it when she saw it and could comfortably say that her artwork had progressed in the past few

years since dropping out of university.

People ambled around the gallery's maze-like walls, stopping to take in pieces here and there, but not for long on account of the line and large crowd. Some of them occasionally scribbled notes, others took pictures or full video with their glasses.

The venue was a new one for her, a fairly small space but with well-spaced walls giving it a natural progression through the entire space with maximal surface area for work. It was economical more than anything, but Alex enjoyed the task of figuring out how to space things so as to not make the entire gallery cramped--a feat which other artists using the same space had failed to accomplish many times from what Alex had seen in pictures of the gallery beforehand. Located right in the work-cafe/gallery center of the city it enjoyed prime real estate for its function, accentuated by the large crossroads and easily identifiable landmarks like the Dancing Crow and the {Cafe} each on the same block.

Jack led a group of Society friends to some of his favorite pieces, attempting to put into words the generative processes and information architecture in each one, hoping to give some challenging problems to the modelers in the group. Several of the pieces, it turned out, stumped the modelers, even with

outsourced computation.

"This one here is the oldest piece in the gallery, well, depending how you count. She's been working on it for years, but it keeps changing and becoming something different," Jack presented the feedback enclosure with its spinning hands bouncing off of the noise they were generating. "One of the things I've found very strange about it is that even though she's constantly changing the placements of the hands, there's this one behavior it will exhibit. All of the feedbacks get going together and lock the hands up. It's like they're all trying to bounce, but each side is bouncing in a different way, so they stand still and the volume spikes because the feedback is unregulated. The especially interesting part though is that this never lasts more than a few seconds before they all give way nearly simultaneously."

"Do the microphones have different feedback frequencies?" one of the modelers asked.

"Some of them do. There are a couple pairs which are the same," Jack answered, having intimate knowledge of Alex's work.

"Does the size of the box change with each exhibit?"

"No, she always uses this cage."

"It seems like there's probably some small offset in the phases once they get going which ends up growing by resonating

in the box and eventually hits a place where they cancel out and allow the hands to keep spinning. I can't imagine how you'd set up such a thing though."

"Well, as I said, she's been working on it for years, since her first show in fact, but it was a much different piece back then. You could ask her what she thinks of that idea though, she's just over there," Jack nodded towards Alex, who made eye contact with the modeler and smiled.

Mimi stood next to Alex and watched the people shuffle about while carrying on a slow conversation between her sister's approaches by various strangers giving praise and thanks. "Does it make you feel good, seeing people like your work so much?"

Alex smiled at another passerby while considering how to phrase her answer. "Sure, but it's not as much meant for them to like it. I'm glad they do though, it's what allows me to keep doing it full-time. But being able to make the work is really the best part. Work where I can pour my soul into every nook and cranny until it fills up to the brim and spills over with love."

"I wish I had something like that," Mimi thought aloud.

"You can. We can help make it for you. Jack and I, that is. He knows a bunch of people in the Society and I know artists who would like studio assistant, though that's probably not what you're looking for."

"I'm a bit curious about all the human modeling stuff, though I don't really know where to start with it. I want to understand what dad was doing," Mimi said as she looked over the crowd, taking in their faces and postures, their body language and relation to those around them.

"Well, you'd probably start with profiling someone. Most models use human generated data which usually ends up looking like a profile. You could start reading the daily profiles of famous people in the news and get a feel for the language and structure they use."

"But I thought dad's was doing it all by itself."

"It was probably doing more by itself, but it seems unlikely that he wasn't helping it at all. For example with cleaning up data which was parsed wrong. The more noise in a profile the lower its accuracy, and he wanted it to be as accurate as possible I'm sure."

"Do you know how someone becomes a professional profiler?"

"I think it's mostly practice and performance based. You get some off the shelf models and start feeding them really high quality profiles and trying to predict things. Once you get some baseline accuracy a firm will try to pick you up, with a rate dependent on performance. I have a couple of modeling kits installed on my cloud account which you could use if you

wanted."

"What do you use them for?"

"I got them back in school for help with a few projects. You know, figure out how the prof thinks and you don't have to do as much work. I also did a project on researching the progress of models over the past sixty years, dating back to old expert systems, though I'm not sure you can really say those are in the same class of things as we have today."

"Maybe I'll play around with them tomorrow." She smiled, excited by the idea of doing something new and learning about her past.

"Yeah, I can show you what I've learned. I also know a couple of good profile archive sites which might be a useful reference."

"Thanks. For making things fun. Also for letting me stay at your place."

"I'm happy to help. If I hadn't had friends when I ran away I wouldn't have been able to become the person I am now."

#

Ten years ago H would have scorned talking to machines as a juvenile fantasy. The stilted and oddly annunciated synthesized speech algorithms had rubbed him the wrong way, and he had preferred to use his keyboard for input, deeming it faster and

more efficient. As the research came out though and it became more clear that using his physical vocal cords not only reinforced his sense of identity and boosted the presence of his ego--something he'd been terrified of losing ever since a too-strong acid trip some decades prior--but also supposedly allowed for him to be more creative than his long-held finger tapping practice. Consequently, he finally gave way and started talking to himself like just another mad man, receiving the auditory input back through his jawbone, impossible for anyone to eavesdrop on without more clever tricks than standing on the other side of the door (something which, he argued, had brought down many a CEO and politician).

[H sitting in front of a screen talking to his machine,
Al.]

"Hello Al."

"Hello, Sir. How are you this evening?"

"I'm doing well. I just went to an art show of that girl we talked about yesterday evening."

"The peculiar one?"

"Yes, that one. She is peculiar, isn't she?"

"What did you learn?"

"I'd like to commission a show from her. I think she would make a good artistic partner."

"What kind of work does she do?"

"It's more internal language than external symbolic reference. She builds worlds, small systems of highly interconnected dependencies. Some of them gave my causal chains quite a bit of confusion."

"That doesn't seem like you, Sir."

"It doesn't, does it. Hm. Well maybe it gave me new parts of myself. Or woke up old sleeping ones."

"How would you like to hire her?"

"I don't think she can know who we are at first, too much connection with the company through her dad and sister and all. Unpleasant business and bad connotations. We'll reach out as, let's say, patrons of the arts. Excited by a young, talented artist working in a new medium."

"What kind of work would you commission?"

"The kind she'd like to make, at whatever budget she's willing to dream."

"Shall I contact her for you?"

"No, I think I'll write this myself. Would you help check the diction with her models and make sure it's not too flimsy?"

"As you please."

#

Dear Miss Trope,

I had the pleasure of attending your show yesterday evening and would enjoy meeting you for a discussion of where you might like to take your art, and what funding you may desire to do so.

Of course, some artists these days are disdainful of patronage, and I will understand should you refuse, but to be clear I would seek to make no changes to your vision or own the rights to content, but request that with the work produced you give a one night show.

If this appeals, meet me tomorrow afternoon at 2 at the coffee shop at the corner from your gallery.

Alex sat on the couch in the living room and read the letter over again to herself. It was mid-afternoon, the day after her show. She'd slept in late from having stayed up too late entertaining inquiring minds asking her about her work, some trying to network their way into a collaboration or just mine her for gallery contacts. She hadn't minded, nor had she expected an email like this one, from someone who wouldn't even properly identify themselves.

How much money could they realistically be offering if it was only for a one night show, she thought to herself. She had a name in some niche in the independent circuit, but not nearly enough to gather an audience large enough to warrant this kind

of treatment. Unless they were expecting her to make mass media, but from the sound of the letter there was no such expectation.

Where I might like to take my art. She mulled it over.

"Jack?" she called to the other room.

"Yeah?"

"Somebody wants to pay me."

"Money?"

"Yeah."

Laughter came from the other room. Jack emerged shortly with a big smile on his face.

"I told you."

"It could just be a prank though, they didn't even sign it."

"Nonsense. It's a mysterious millionaire Medici man! Come to promote the artist who we've all been realizing this whole time is taking the art world by storm!"

"Oh hush. We didn't even break 300 people last night."

"It was one night, in a gallery not much bigger than this apartment. They could hardly move most of the time and people waited for over an hour outside in the rain to get in."

"I wish a bigger gallery would take my work."

"Well, they do have more on the line if you hold it up for three months like the Coronado gig."

"With the right space it wouldn't take too long to set up. A week or two maybe."

"Or maybe you could get your own space depending on how well this mysterious patron wants to compensate you for your genius."

"I don't get the sense it's someone who would throw money at me to buy space. More like it's someone who already has space, and wants to give me a budget and see what I can do."

#

"I'm scared," Alex whispered to Jack as they lay on the couch in the living room. He had come home to find her in the dark and instead of turning on a light had slipped off his shoes and made his way over next to her. Mimi was out at a friend's house. "What if this gig is a break into a new scene? What if my work doesn't fit anymore? It's hard enough trying to finish one piece in a still frame, I can't imagine if it were moving."

"Your frames are always moving into the future with you," he reminded her, levering her glasses over to one side of her face with the arm he had around her.

"I usually lock myself into being the same person for the creation of the piece. It's part of why I have such a hard time coming back to them after moving onto other pieces where I become new people. "

"And it's impressive that you can do that, really. I don't think I've met anyone who can do what you can in six hours."

"It's hard to even fathom tasks outside of those bounds."

"But what if you think about it like an integral of your selves? Just keep moving."

"A recording of a set of myselfs over time? I can't imagine they would get along very well," she said, watching a sometimes-democratic counsel, sometimes-gladiator pit in her mind roaring with activity over which part would get the next word.

"And if they don't that's a story in itself isn't it?"

"We are still talking about my future art, right?" she asked, raising her head up and looking at him from slightly above.

"I thought we were."

They lay in the dark with the quiet hum of the refrigerator so quiet as to almost pass unnoticed.

"It's just," she started, falling back into silence. "What if it turns out to be no good?"

"Doing things for the first time is always going to give you things to learn from, places to improve. I know you know that. Nobody expects you to do things perfectly the first time, not even this patron person. They're looking at you for your

potential."

"And if I get it right on the first time?"

"Well wouldn't that be funny."

Someone laughed in a nearby apartment with loud television, the bass of which could now be heard faintly through the walls.

"Some parts of it will be good," he assured her, "As with anything, you'll make a few gems here and there. Just carry those onward into your future work."

She felt the words wash through her understanding of herself and appreciated Jack's realistic optimism and talent for helping her out when she wasn't feeling very big. "Thanks," she said. "I suppose if I can finish it that'll be worth something."

"You don't even know what you'll be starting yet," he reminded her.

"I guess that just depends what point in time we're looking at."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dangerous Osculations

I have had my results for a long time: but I do not yet know how I am to arrive at them. -Carl Friedrich Gauss

#

Tau approached the monolithic Society building in the late morning, cranked up on caffeine and novelty spiked from his oracle set. He had an interview, and from everything that he had read it would be fairly unpredictable. Accounts ranged from single person interviews to a whole panel of judges grilling a potential new member to several new members just interacting with one another in some game. In short, there were no rules. Not knowing how to win had its own element of excitement though.

Interviews weren't common in Society culture. Most people got in unconditionally on a timeshare basis where they logged

hours of work and received Society resources at the going exchange rates, with permissions dependent on security clearance and verifiable trust or sufficient collateral.

But they had been contacting him for weeks, each offer sounding increasingly enticing and since Tau didn't have a whole lot going on and Mira had just left he figured there wasn't a better time to see what the organization was about. He also knew it'd drive her crazy, thinking that they'd brainwashed him and turned him into a cult lunatic. He could handle himself he'd told her more than a few times.

Walking into the building it became far less austere and was on the contrary so welcoming it nearly dragged his feet out from under him, speeding along to the place where he belonged. The pre-interview room was empty save the small round table with a chair on either side, a small, warmly smiling man on the side opposite the door.

"Hi there, you must be Tau."

"Yeah, I'm here for an interview."

"You're in the right place. I'll be conducting the pre-interview, which is a process to prepare you for what's going to happen. If you have any questions please feel free to interrupt me at any point. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"I don't think so. How long have you been doing this?"

"Long enough to answer the questions I need to. All right. In a few minutes, you are going to proceed to an interview room. There are no electronics allowed on in the room, so if you have any implants, contacts, or such things you'll have to turn them off. If they're on, we will know, and you will be asked to leave the premises," the man made an intentional brief pause, gathered that Tau had understood and didn't have questions, then proceeded. "By being here you have given us permission to record your interview session as well as this conversation for our records. Finally, once the interview begins it will not terminate until it has run the entire course, which will be two hours in length. The doors will not open, and you will not be allowed to leave the premises for that duration. We guarantee your physical safety in that nothing shall touch your person. Do you have any questions?"

"Is that legal, to hold someone against their will?"

"You are here in our facilities voluntarily, and to proceed you will sign a waiver acknowledging that you agree to all of the aforementioned conditions. Some people have attempted to sue us, but no one has won. Most people, however, describe the interview experience afterward as rewarding and fulfilling. Here is the waiver," the man pulled a piece of paper out from a slit in the table along with a thin pen. "If you sign this and

proceed to the interview room, the process may begin."

Tau looked at the sheet with its large, legible font. So much for fine-print legalese. These people had gone out of their way to make even the scariest surrender of rights a pleasant user experience. He heard Mira warn him once more and signed.

"Follow the rabbit signs."

He stood up and walked into the labyrinth, passing various insignias along the way. A symbolic language, no doubt, he thought to himself. He recognized some of the symbols to be not too different from those he and Mira had used in making the oracle set. Following the rabbits took him down a long hallway and spiraling in with three lefts in a row to an opaque glass room, the door of which was open.

#

[2 pm, Cafe Handlebars. An odd uncouple.]

The clouds had moved onward and it was brisk and sunny outside. Cafe Handlebars, stylized {Cafe}, had been around for five years now and had established itself warmly in the heart of the arts hub of the city. Their sliding scale prices and gratuity system kept its culture vibrant with starving artists coming for the free coffee, and had attracted a fair number of enterprising types who enjoyed working out of the upstairs coworking loft, looking over the buzzing activity below. Alex

and H sat outside with a large beaker of coffee and a pair of mugs.

"Do you know the story of how this place got started?" H asked.

"No. They were here by the time I started visiting this area."

"The couple who started it had the understanding that cafes, traditionally, were less like going to a drug dealer, for example Starbucks, and more like going to a friend's party. At a friend's party, you feel like you know everyone there through some common source, which gives you social permission to interact with them. At Starbucks though the experience is more one of trying to escape before anyone catches you."

"Okay," Alex affirmed, not quite sure where the story was going.

"Of course, under that model you can't be offering your goods like drugs, since people are going to stick around longer and the biggest cafe killer historically has been too little traffic. So you get things like shitty wooden stools and cramped spaces to prevent anyone staying more than a few minutes. Or better yet the drive through."

"But they have to make money somehow."

"Right, so they give the coffee away for free with their

sliding scale gratuity, which is neat in a few ways. One, it aligns with their values, and two, the taxes work in their favor, provided they have a clever accountant. This draws in a disproportionate number of people, and what's more valuable than a large group of people? The hard part is figuring out how to harness that value," H took a sip from his mug and put it down. "Of course, they'll be more valuable provided you can connect them in the right way. So the cafe forms a partnership with the leader in human models and intercommunications."

"The Society."

"Exactly. And the Society gets free data, physical locations which can replicate, a front which isn't connected with their image. All things which they were very much lacking. And when a new handlebars starts up, the Society foots the bill until it's profitable."

"That's clever. Did you help design it?"

"No, but I used to know the people who did."

"What happened to them?"

"They changed. The Society changed them. I haven't been in touch with them since," H looked intently at Alex, trying to catch a glimpse into her judgment.

"Were you friends? That's unfortunate, when you grow apart from friends like that."

He couldn't quite believe the realism of her innocence and the clarity in her words.

"Who are you? Knowing so much about this stuff," she asked.

"I'll tell you another time. I can't now for reasons which you'll understand later."

"That's funny, trying to guess which reasons I can't understand now but will understand later. Seems like you have some idea of who you'd like me to become. Are we not friends yet?"

H almost felt hurt. Her disarming simplicity had put him off guard and she had poked him right where he was most sensitive. She knows that I'm lonely? Or is this just her way of being friendly. Why can't I get a good read on this girl, Al sent me everything he could find on her.

"It's okay, we only just met. But I'd guess you know a lot more about me than I do about you, given that you saw my work and found my personal mail address and I don't even know your name. And there's quite a bit of me on the internet too, but it's not the whole thing as I'm sure you can tell. But why don't you share something about yourself?" Alex smiled warmly, holding her hot mug with both hands to fuel her in the cool breeze.

"I'm a fan of your work. It does wonderful things to my mind."

"That's about my work, I want to know about you. What can I call you anyway?"

"What name do you think suits me?"

"I like the name Victor. I'll call you that."

H began to feel like he was the imaginary friend of a girl who might not even exist in the first place.

"What do you work on in your laboratory Victor?"

"I architect new thoughts. Or more generally, new ways to think."

"And you'd like me to help you do that?"

"Yeah, somewhat. I'm more looking for someone to demonstrate what these new thoughts look like in a way that isn't describable with our current language."

"How would I know what the thoughts are if they can't be described?"

"If you accept the job, I'll show you. You'll also receive a \$3000 stipend each week you work on the project, as well as a budget which is probably bigger than you can realistically use."

"What if I want to build a custom theater?"

"We already have one, and you can rearrange it however you please."

Alex wasn't quite sure what to make of the strange man's claims. She felt slightly unreal and queasy as if she were

accelerating very quickly. "You haven't said how long this project would be."

"It would open on new year's eve and run until midnight."

"That's not even three months, how can you expect me to make anything good by then?"

"You'll have assistants."

"I've never had an assistant do any of my work."

"We're familiar enough with how to delegate and can teach you. Also, they'll probably be overqualified regardless what you assign them. Most things you can imagine will be possible. I assume you have a large backlog of work which you haven't been able to start since you're busy enough as it is."

"So... ten weeks, 30K. Assistants, an amphitheater. Who are you?"

"Someone who thinks your work has the potential to change people."

#

[A room.]

X: Good morning, Tau.

Tau: Hey.

X: What brings you here today?

Tau: An appointment.

X: Yes, we understand the context. For what purpose have

you come?

Tau: To be interviewed.

X: Do tautologies comfort you when you think about your dead mother?

Aggression? Do I feign offense, play submissive? I could also continue to not yield, but perhaps the stubbornness would drive it to eject me.

X: We would like to know how you're doing, Tau. Why did you come?

Tau: I don't know, for a lot of reasons. It's complicated.

I don't understand my own feelings well. Please help me work through them, I'm just trying to become more enlightened by visiting you.

X: If you cannot understand yourself how can we expect you to understand us?

By playing between the layers.

Tau: I was curious. I wanted to try something new.

X: That's not good enough, Tau.

Okay, so you want submission. Does this really work on people? Play along and see where we go...

Tau: I wanted to get back at my girlfriend for leaving.

X: Why did she leave you, Tau?

Tau: Because I kept talking about how maybe the Society

wasn't a bad thing, how the ethics of all of it were gray and muddled. And she didn't like it, it scared her. She distanced herself.

X: Thank you for being honest.

Is that sarcasm? Have you been playing along with my playing along? Where do you stop, little robot?

Tau: Thank you for helping.

X: It's my job, Tau. I live to help you be honest with yourself.

Depending on what you mean by live I might see your point. Why not something different?

Tau: I am honest with myself though. I don't need your help.

X: Easy there. What do you want to help us with?

A yield? It wants to see me in charge?

Tau: Language. I want to make you more language.

X: You are aware that our organization was founded upon communications protocols.

Tau: Yes. But there are some things you don't understand I'll wager.

...

Tau: Noise? HQN? I can help you.

X: How?

Tau: By stealing what they've developed.

X: So you're a thief?

Tau: No, I just have a habit of noticing what's going on behind the scenes. How many of you are there back there by the way?

The machine was silent. Tau waited for a response but got nothing back. Eventually he heard footsteps coming towards the interview room.

"Hello, Tau," a woman entered the room.

"You never answered my question."

"Would you like to guess?"

"I'd say there were three of you, under the parsing of roles. But it seemed like there was only one support--that's you--and two for both aggression and expectation. So five people, three teams. I'm curious how much practice it takes for you all to know how to tag team so quickly, though perhaps your machines help."

"We knew he was perfect," a man said as he walked in with two other men and a woman. "Nice to meet you, and we're glad you finally came in."

"That was short," Tau commented, having spent not even five minutes in the interrogation room.

"That was to check your identity, that you're not an

impostor, and that you're trustworthy enough to move on to pairing."

Tau looked at the five of them, eagerly awaiting his words. A welcoming entourage to onboard him and place him within the organization? It was almost too good, he was amazed the whole project wasn't bankrupted by inefficiency. "Why are you five the ones who are here to lead me around?"

"We were assigned."

"By who?"

"By the system. Nobody really knows who does what. The system routes it all, and we get the directions. We can decline any assignment we find disagreeable, but most of them come with reasons or we're able to see why they're valuable."

"Now that's interesting," Tau mused to himself. So the organization was very high touch, lots of person-time, and apparently completely automated management. More efficient use of resources, jobs which made people happier, and ultimately a more powerful organization. "Where do I fit into this system?"

"That's the next phase, you place yourself."

"Show me the way."

#

Victor, if I may call you that,

I can't find any fault with your offer aside from your

general mysteriousness and the lack of any information about who or what you are. What you will use my work for is less of a concern, provided I have full rights and creative control over it.

I would like to accept your offer, but I must know who you are and what has kept your identity from me this long.

Alex

Dear Alex,

You are right to question a strange man with no identity. I will tell you who I am, but I would like us to meet again to do so. In the meantime, think about why you make the art you do.

I'll be at Handlebars at 2 tomorrow.

H,

When can I see you again? It's important.

Mira

#

The same place and time two days after their first in-person meeting, Alex and H met once again at the {Cafe}. He carried a folder with a contract and access credentials to the HQN studios with Alex's picture on them which he would give her if she signed. As he sat across from her, it was unclear to him

whether or not the recent incident with her sister might have caused upset feelings at HQN as a whole, despite the project being completely separate from her father's work.

"So, Alex. Did you think about what I asked you?"

"Why I make my art. Yes."

"You're familiar with the company your father works for, HQN, yes?"

"Yeah, he's been there over ten years."

"He was one of the first ten members, too. Do you know anything about what HQN does outside of his work?"

"I don't even know what it does inside of his work other than make people crazy."

"It's a content creation company. But not a news service or a television network, or any such equivalents. It makes content which changes people, and it makes money on how they change."

"Like the advertising firms which make human models."

"Somewhat, except it doesn't change people to make them buy things. It changes them to believe things, to think things."

"To think that one shoe is better than another?"

"Much bigger. It doesn't care about one brand or another, one product or another. It cares about what people are doing on a global scale. Green energy, waste reduction, healthier living. Invest in the right sectors--not companies--and get people to

believe in the causes which companies in those sectors are working for and they become valued higher. All the while steering people towards what one might argue are noble goals."

"So, what, benevolent mind control?"

"Well so there's one of the problems. Mind control really isn't the goal, and in fact it can be quite hard to get people to think more for themselves. Most of the 'think for yourself' messages you see accomplish next to nothing and mostly just give people the feeling that they're already doing that. HQN doesn't want to control people, it just wants people to not extinct themselves, and now that some of the infrastructure is in place to make sure that doesn't happen immediately there's the new problem of giving people back to themselves."

"How do you know all of this? Do you work for HQN?"

"You can call me H. I created HQN 16 years ago when I was your age."

"Why didn't you tell me who you were? Why all the games?"

"I wanted you to know who you were before going into this. That's why I asked you to think about why you make your art. Would you tell me what you came up with?"

"I make it for people to realize themselves. So they can see who they are."

"I would like to help you do that, Alex. Issues with your

father aside--he won't even know you're working with us. I am sorry for some of what his research has done to him--he's only human and this work has a way of getting into his soul."

"My sister ran away from home! She doesn't feel safe there and can't go back, and you're asking me to make art?"

"I'm not denying the harm done, but it was out of my control by the time it happened. Do you not think we've dealt with it since we found out? Your father can't bring his research out of the lab anymore, strict security clearance."

"And you think that will stop him."

"Alex, this is the last thing. HQN doesn't have to exist forever, and, in fact, it shouldn't. I know that it's not a good thing in the long run, but it's done great things to and for our species and I want to make sure they don't become terrible."

"The last thing?"

"We're cashing out. All of the investments, liquidated. We're funneling everything into this show and what it will do to the world. I'm asking you because I think you're the best shot they've got at getting themselves back."

"Why only one night? Why blow it all on one shot?"

"Once people see it things will start moving, in ways where it seems unwise to schedule beyond that. It would be like planning to push a river before you cut a new path for it to

make."

"But, why me? And now? If you want my help, why not wait a few more years until I actually know what I'm doing?"

"We're out of time and you've been intimately familiar with what we're doing since you were eight years old. You didn't know it, but your father's research was coming home even then, before he joined us. Have you ever wondered why you're so obsessed with feedback? Your dad used to take the things you did and play them back to you. In different forms. Tweaking the media you consumed, changing the scripts so that they sounded more like you."

"He put me in an echo chamber with myself."

"With yourselves. The models could split your language and moods into a few different classes, even back then, and he was giving you each one separated from the others. The ways you changed became what you saw. A part of you gets smaller, the characters you read which are that part get smaller and lose influence. Eventually, since you identify with the media you're taking in you find an equilibrium where you're not changing very much. And then the model stops being used for a while."

Alex couldn't help but nod along. She felt like she'd known most of these things before, they just hadn't been put in words or explained analytically. It was curious to her the ways in

which her past had made its way into her art so much intact. The difficulties of her childhood had grown distant over the years and she, older and more removed from home life than Mimi, could listen to the story and appreciate the complexity and beneficence underneath the monstrosity which faced outward.

"Is that supposed to be the last seed for me, or do you plan on modeling me the whole time I'm working at HQN?"

H smiled bigly and shook his head, "We haven't got time for another loop 'round, I'm afraid this will have to do."

"So I can count on myselfes."

"And we're looking forward to seeing what you all will make."

#

[Mira and H, alone. Part 2.]

H: So, what happened?

Mira: I found something which I'm surprised I hadn't heard about before. The transfer of IP, mostly comms patents, from HQN to the Society within the first few months of the Society's operation. Do you control the Society too?

H: No.

Mira: Did you?

H: No. It was a project started by one of our researchers. When we told her it couldn't be housed under HQN she threatened

to tank us and leak everything if we didn't give her the IP to go set it up on her own.

Mira: How did it start?

H: It was an experimental communications platform which had come out of our models at the time. You might describe it like a large telephone switchboard, routing calls between many people in an organization. The magic part was that nobody had to make any calls, it initiated the contacts and patched people through without direction.

Mira: To what end?

H: To any end. Tell it you want to make the most paperclips possible and it will set the right people up to make that happen, provided someone is honestly telling it how many paperclips are being produced. Of course, at this point its value function is probably so complicated so as to be obscured behind many layers of input from all of its members, so shutting it down wouldn't be as simple as lying and telling it that everything is on track.

Mira: Do you know how the value function started out?

H: I imagine it would have been a growth metric. Without lots of people it can't really do much, but once it has a significant percentage of the population as members then it becomes pretty powerful given the network effects.

Mira: How many members does it have now?

H: I don't know. Five percent?

Mira: Five percent?

H: Of people. One out of twenty probably does some kind of work for the Society. They're not all are aware of it though. I'd say about a fifth to a tenth of those are probably signing up with full knowledge. Only a tinier fraction actually gets to run things or manage, but it's turtles all the way down as they say--we might say that ultimately it's the machine connecting dots, but really that's no different than the universe computing it.

Mira: But what does it want?

H: We don't know.

Mira: How do I talk to the person who started it?

H: You can't. She died a year after she started it.

Mira: And who took it over after her?

H: I'm not sure anyone did. It might just be running itself, though who knows what state it was in when she died.

Mira: How can we find out?

H: You don't know this lady, but if it's anything like her other work you won't be able to get anywhere near its source. She had something of an obsession over privacy and permissions. The best shot you've got at understanding it is trying to mine

all of the calls the system is making to its members, which you probably need advanced Society clearance to access anyway. Why all of this interest?

Mira: I think I might have lost someone to it who I care about very much, and I want to make sure he comes out himself.

H: Good luck.

Mira: One last question.

H: Yes?

Mira: What was her name.

H: Ipsis.

CHAPTER FIVE

Silent Colossus

Week 8, just the first 3 of us

The prototype switchboard is all but turned on. We've been working almost constantly to get it up and running, but actually implementing the specs of the research turned out to be much harder than expected. Meanwhile we're looking to bring on another two people along but it's just the three of us starting out, so that'll be useful when they can actually understand what we're doing. We might just send them out to recruit more though, since that seems the biggest bottleneck.

The switchboard (I'm thinking of calling her the Mother) has been an almost monolithic problem. Rebalancing weights, seeing her fail somewhere else, rebalancing and failing, rebalancing and failing. It's like teaching an infant how to

walk but it's using a non-human body, so we don't even know what success looks like, just that it's not something we've seen yet.

Hopefully when I look back at all these notes I see a silly, younger self struggling with problems I'll eventually have overcome. Better that than an arrogant child.

#

Tau walked with the five Society members showing him around the building, taking him to various interfaces to see which felt most natural to him. It amused him, wondering whether he was picking his place or his place was finding him. Or perhaps neither. He wondered if maybe some invisible hand was bringing them both together, and if so why it would go about making it feel completely natural. Each step motivating the next, as if the universe kept on spinning. Perhaps the hand is what's spinning the universe, he mused.

"What's underneath all of this floor?" Tau asked.

"Archives. We keep most primary content we can, the rest is digital. Most things have been scanned, but some are eyes only for security reasons," the woman on his right answered.

"How do you access them?"

"You request a volume by the name of the person, as well as uniquely identifying details. If you can name them, you can know them."

"Of course, you have to pay with hours," added one of the men ahead of him.

"We work on a timeshare basis," the woman explained. "Work is valued based on how much time it took to be completed and by who on what date. Some profiles depreciate, others appreciate, depending on the value of information on the subject, which we determine based on pull and push ratios. You get paid in hours based on people downloading profiles you've contributed to, multiplied by the ratio of your contribution and the demand for the profile. Find the next celebrity and do their seed profile and you can get rich in hours overnight. Mostly though people start by editing and revising, which you can do with the stack of profiles which haven't been reviewed, plus you get future download access to those for free so long as you review properly. Then with those hours people tend to buy into some relatively large profiles, figures who have a lot of sway in various industries, which they have some special expertise on. They contribute, and make hours via ratio."

"So what does placement even mean if it's all distributed like that?"

"Profilers usually specialize in one aspect of the people they file. Some focus on ideological foundations, others work on their likely influences/influencers, and there's a lot of room

in studying ideological derivatives, how they're changing, which is probably the least well understood terrain so far. Of course, you can go for more conventional aspects like historic addenda and stubs on all of their relations, but those are often valued lower since they have less predictive power."

"So everyone is just working to bring more people in."

"Well, somewhat. There are other positions too, not just profilers, though we expect that's where you'll thrive."

Yeah, I suppose I've been around Mira long enough to pick up a few things haven't I? I wonder what she'd think of me taking her skills and putting them into this machine. Probably nothing good.

"So the assignment is for my specialization?"

"Well, it's not a strict assignment so much as finding a place for you to get started. You can really work on anything you'd like to in order to gain hours, but there are places you'll work better or worse, naturally."

He sat down at another interface they had arrived at and a simulation began playing: "Welcome, Seer." He was looking through a someone's glasses at a cocktail party. "Identify the person who you evaluate is going to have the most power in five years. You have three minutes." the voice entered his jawbone and he began scanning the crowd, running facial identification

and bringing up profiles. *Who I evaluate is going to have the most power? So it wants to know what I think of as power, or if it's the same as what it thinks? What do you want...*

After he had the lay of the land, Tau gave commands to the person he was living through to talk to a woman near the bar about the man she'd brought, who he guessed to be the one walking up the stairs to the balcony. High ground, alpha, he tagged the man in his chalkboard and spun up a model given the connection to the woman.

"He doesn't go out much. It's hard to get him to come to these things at all."

"How long have you two been together?"

Tau looked for other targets, the lead didn't seem to be going anywhere. His person kept chatting politely as he picked the next move. Ask her to dance.

"Would you like to dance?"

Hopefully this person can move his feet.

As they spun around, Tau could get a fuller vision of the crowd. Snapping a few still frames and putting them on the chalkboard he left the person to autopilot while he evaluated them from this new angle. Someone this lady's man knew but fell out of touch with? Make her husband jealous. *Don't disappoint me now, smooth talker.*

As he came down the stairs, the woman's husband saw the two of them dancing and made a beeline. "You have one minute and thirty seconds," the voice informed him. Start a small scene, enough for that one over there to notice, Tau spotlighted the old friend, but make it quick.

As the husband and the person changed words and the husband gave more than a few dirty looks--this person was quite good, Tau had to admit, though he doubted he would have such fine machinery in the future--Tau was busy researching the old friend. Old business partner, it had turned out. Now that the bickering was over he told the person to walk over to the bar, giving space for the partner to follow him. He didn't follow. "One minute remaining."

Fuck. That was supposed to lure him. Turn around and drink, look at the woman but only when she and her husband aren't aware of it.

After half a minute the old friend approached the bar, "she'll be the end of you."

"Do you two have history?"

"That man you upset used to be a good friend of mine. A little possessive too, you might have noticed."

Microexpressions giving triumph. He made his old friend take a poor exit from the company? Played his possessiveness

against him? Accuse him.

"Seems like you're a little too happy to be rid of him."

He's... not caught exactly. Amused? Position of power again. But he knows he's not the one here. Well, he is right now probably. Five years down the road though. He can tell me, but he won't if I ask him. "Twenty seconds."

"Heh, you seem to know things. Have you got a seer behind yourself there?"

The system came on in Tau's ear, "Warning, you may not be exposed. If you are exposed it will be counted as a loss. Five seconds."

Tau queued a facial recognition process to check all eyes looking at him. Spin, quickly.

As his person spun around Tau blazed through all connections between the people looking at him and the man he was talking to. One young woman stood out, and he could guess that she was the one behind this man's eyes. Her.

"End of simulation."

The image of the spotlighted woman was frozen on the screen, her eyes locked on Tau's person, staring out of the screen.

"You have been identified. In the future, should your person be identified as an agent, they must be dismissed. Being

identified is a large waste of resources, and will pull you from working as a gargoyle permanently, should you become one," the voice announced to the group.

"But was I right?" Tau asked it. "Was it her?"

"That question is irrelevant as you have failed. Please proceed to the next interface."

It had to be her. Nobody else even noticed what was happening. And how could she not see through an agent? It was a losing scenario no matter how it was played.

"Does anyone ever beat that one?" Tau asked the group.

"It's not a question of winning, it's how you play," one of the women in the group responded.

"The next interface is this way," another said, and they continued.

#

Week 16, 21 of us

The mother is coming along. She can walk a bit, is routing half a dozen interactions per person per day. Not sure how effective they are yet, haven't had time to collect the data to reinforce her learning.

We just implemented the first pass at a system to capture all interactions with the on-site machines. Mostly piping queries and sim outputs to the mother to see if she can do

things with them. Most don't turn into anything, though we had one exciting call when she took a query and ended up connecting two of us such that the query could be answered. I wonder what it's like to be her, learning with these massive input streams, trying to figure out what they even mean in relation to our ability to propel ourselves forward.

We're up to 21 of us, now with a few more testers to help debug the mother when she crashes. I've been spending most of my time alongside her, helping her make connections she might not be seeing, teaching her robot mind how to empathize with us. She keeps on surprising me, often coming up with connections that I miss. I love her for how much she can explain why her answers are right, but I know she won't always be able to in the future. I hope we can understand and make some sense of what she's doing at that point.

#

Jack logged into a machine in the Society commons workspace and tried to remember his conversation with Mimi and what Alex had told him about her. The Society always had openings for profilers, but she had no experience and probably wouldn't interview very well. It would probably be better to search the boards which were made internally ready before being posted to the public, an easy way for the Society to score some karma with

people outside of the organization by allowing its members to connect outsiders with possible jobs.

Alex said to give her the hard stuff, that she'd get bored with anything easy. That she needed a problem which she would take home and work on, thereby forgetting the past few weeks. Of course, she'd probably also be learning a whole lot about what was happening to her, but that's what she wanted, right?

Jack skimmed through the boards, looking at various profiling projects. Finding something which was hard but didn't require experience was going to be tricky. It wasn't as if they handed off the important projects to people who didn't know anything. Maybe she could assist in a project which someone else was leading, then she would have a mentor as well. Jack filtered by apprenticeships of profilers in their area with new projects. No results.

He sighed and leaned back, letting the empty screen soak in. Maybe she could find something on one of the public boards. Or do a couple online classes on profile theory and model construction. If she were willing to travel there had to be versions of what she wanted elsewhere. She's only seventeen, Jack thought to himself. She's not traveling out of the country without parental permission, something which she would certainly not be able to get.

Frustrated and not wanting to let Alex's sister down, he clicked refresh on his query. Nothing. He clicked again and again, each time the query showing nothing, until eventually a post materialized in the midst of his desire. It had no text description and in the target field it just had the letter H. The rest just gave the member she would apprentice under and said that it was local. He was a newcomer too, but seemed to have some kind of relevant experience.

Mimi, I think I've found you a mentor. His name is Tau.

#

"Thank you for coming in today, Tau. If you'll proceed to the placement room we can finish up the process. The cat signs, if you would."

Diving again into the depths of the unknown labyrinth after having been exposed to dozens of simulations, mind games, linguistic association exercises, and conversational routines, Tau was exhausted and ready for it to end. He spiraled again, this time all right turns, finally ending up in post-interview. Another empty room. *A machine to break the news, eh?*

"We value symmetry, Tau," the machine spoke, addressing his thoughts. *So that's what it feels like. Neat. I wonder if it still works when I'm not exhausted.* "And will continue to guess, long after you've recovered. Provided you do your weekly check-

ins with us, that is. And we do expect you to do them."

"Do you place me now?"

"Let's try a magic trick. You think over all the games you played and try to guess which position we think you'll want. When you're ready, write that one down or just remember it for later. We don't need to know. Then think of the one you want for yourself."

Tau stood in front of it, amused. *They want me to ask myself whether I still think my thoughts are separate from theirs? Or just on this one thing... and then extend from there. Good move.* "All right. I'm ready."

"We think that you would like to profile with an emphasis on ideological derivatives, with placement to become a seer."

"Do I have an assignment?"

"We would like it if you contributed to the profile of a man who goes by H. He is the CEO of a company called HQN."

"I'll take it."

CHAPTER SIX

Soul Catapult

Alex woke up to soft light coming through the blinds and making warm stripes across her face. She smiled from the sensation and as her lips moved some parts went to shadow and others to light, and she smiled bigger from the change, amused. Birds were singing outside but couldn't be heard above the noisy street sweeper passing along the road below.

Jack had been in this apartment for eight years, and since Alex had run away and needed a place to stay she had visited off and on before moving in last year. She trusted Jack with herself even in her most vulnerable and fragile moments, so it made sense to her to live with him despite the fact that they weren't romantic and most people didn't understand their relationship.

She could remember Jack as a freshman in college tutoring

her in math while she was socially cloistered and intellectually incomparable to her twelve year old peers and how she looked forward to seeing him every week for his even keel in the wake of her family and school life. He had always seemed like he'd had it figured out. She sometimes wondered if her father would have had Jack tutor her if he had known that their connection would provide the way for her to escape the house eventually.

Alex got up from bed and opened the blinds to let the full morning light into her room. Putting on a robe she shuffled to the kitchen and found Mimi and Jack chatting at the table.

"Guess who found Mimi an apprenticeship," Jack smiled and Mimi looked over at Alex.

"Oh? At the Society?" Alex asked, opening the fridge for eggs and turning on the stove.

"Yeah, I'm gonna be working with a guy who specializes in ideological derivatives."

"That's complicated stuff. You went looking for hard things for her, didn't you," Alex said somewhat defensively toward Jack.

"She'd get bored of anything easy just like you," he responded, reminding her of how when he was tutoring her she was never satisfied with book problems.

"Well I'm glad you have a challenge, and congrats on the

apprenticeship, Jack tells me they can be hard to come by since they get snapped up so quick."

"That's the amazing thing," Jack said, "I was sitting there refreshing an empty list and all of a sudden this one got added! It was like it was made for her."

"Just don't submit too much of yourself to artifice," Alex added softly while scooting a spatula under the spitting eggs. She looked at the reflection of the fan on one of the yolks, the blades curving downward towards the whites, dividing the yellow mass into approximate thirds. Mercedes. Are you having a branded experience, Alex muttered to herself.

"We're going to handlebars in a few to meet Mimi's apprentice. Would you like to join us?"

"I would, but first day at the new gig. Probably won't be home until late."

"Ah, right, your mysterious new employer. When are you going to tell us about him? Have you even learned his name yet?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't want me to tell people, wants the show to be as unexpected as possible."

"Aw, you could tell us though."

"The Society would mine it from you easy and I doubt he'd want to keep me on the project at that point."

"Okay fine," Jack relented, not wanting to ruin Alex's

breakthrough gig even if it was mildly disconcerting how secretive it all was.

"We could play with the blocks when you get home," Mimi offered.

"I'd like that. We'll see how late they keep me, I'll send you my estimated time home thread."

"Great," Jack said, standing. "Mimi, we've got a date with our own mysterious man!"

After they were out the door and Alex had finished her breakfast she sat on the balcony looking over the city and sketching. She would often look through a telescope at the mirrored windows on office buildings a few blocks over, trying to see what she could in the reflections. When the light was right she could make out the building's windows across from it reflecting its own windows for about five cycles, finally ending with the head of a man running a food stand on a corner. To think that he was so consistent as to be in the exact same place with his head in that one cubic foot all the time. Sometimes it would lean down and then reenter the frame.

Today she followed car windows and mirrors, looking for drivers turned into something different by their reflections. She enjoyed the process, finding new frames and watching the connections for the right moment where she could take a mental

snapshot and draw the scene from memory. Sometimes she embellished, added subtleties which she might have only caught by seeing the person's face evolve over time, but these sketches were for her. She kept them in an inspiration book, full of images and texts with highly interconnected and dense semantic webs which she could lift from and turn into various other structures, most often video and sculpture, occasionally games or other interactive media experiments.

After finding a few frames and filling her cup a few times over Alex felt prepared to journey outward and meet H at the HQN labs. He had given her an HQN identity card so that she could get into the building and beyond that had told her to follow the hat insignias, something she wouldn't understand until she arrived.

She made her way over to the campus by metro, ending up at a station frequented by HQN shuttles. She boarded one to find mostly devs sitting around, immersed in their machines, some with fully blacked out glasses presumably projecting images into their skulls directly. Some of the older ones typed, but most fidgeted their hands and fingers around in tiny gestures picked up by the myoelectric readers in their clothes with some help from visual recognition software which was fed the video input of various cameras hidden around the bus.

As the bus made its circuitous route through the lush greenery of the campus Alex watched out the window, awed at the scale of everything. She felt small, but not in the way she felt small when she considered the vastness of the universe. Small in the way she imagined a child felt small in comparison to an adult picking them up with a hand, or a sapling felt small next to a fully grown redwood. Sixteen years, and he went from my age with a few ideas to this. Who is this man?

She realized she hadn't really done any research on him, despite knowing now who he was and a bit about the company. It wasn't really her priority, she figured, given that her job was to come in and make her art, give a show, and leave to do the next thing. But now that she realized the giants she was in the midst of she couldn't help wondering a bit more about them, how they'd got here. What they'd done in order to build all of it.

"Labs," a woman's voice buzzed in her jawbone as the bus stopped. A bit startled, Alex stood and exited. They were able to target my receiver and knew where I was going? I suppose they have pictures of me, could recognize my face. And then what, localize the signal of my receiver and gain access to it without any consent? She wasn't sure whether it was a violation or a pleasant convenience, though it certainly wasn't standard. It's like all of the things which the bureaucracies of the

transportation authority and such can't do because some naysayer doesn't like how it seems creepy or something. How many people are making the decisions here?

She walked up to the sliding glass doors and started to take out her security card when the jawbone buzzed again, "Welcome to the labs, Alex. Please follow the hat symbols," the doors slid open and she walked inside.

#

[Three of them at {Cafe}]

Jack: Hi there, you must be Tau.

Tau: I must. And you are Mimi?

Mimi: Hi, yeah.

Tau: I wasn't aware you were bringing someone.

Jack: I found the apprenticeship for her, she's not a member of the Society. Just a freelancing apprentice.

Tau: I see. And you are protective of her... Because she's your sister's little sister?

Jack: Not my sister, but close enough I suppose.

Mimi: I thought the three of us could talk about the position.

Tau: I was informed to tell only you.

Jack: That's all right, I understand. Sometimes it's the will of the dispatcher. I wonder why it didn't tell us.

Tau: It told me as you both walked up.

Jack: Huh. Okay. I'll be over at Alex's gallery at the corner. Let me know when you're done?

Mimi: Yeah.

Tau: Gallery? Is someone an artist?

Mimi: My sister.

Tau: Okay. Do you know anything about profiling?

Mimi: Just the gist.

Tau: No software, no models?

Mimi: No. I haven't done any of it before.

Tau: Why you?

Mimi: What?

Tau: Why is it giving me you?

Mimi: Maybe it thinks you need a friend. You seem a little paranoid.

Tau: It's this Society business. Has a way of getting into your head. I'm trying to remember to still be me, and it's hard wondering whether or not so many of the thoughts I'm having are actually mine.

Mimi: I know what you mean.

Tau: Oh?

Mimi: My dad started messing with my head. His research, he builds new models at HQN. I don't really know what for.

Tau: Ah.

Mimi: What?

Tau: You're going to be interested by who our target is.

Mimi: Is it him?

Tau: We're supposed to profile the CEO, H. See how his ideas are changing, guess what he's planning down the road.

Mimi: Do you know why?

Tau: Nope. That's one of the odd things about the Society, it just gives you an assignment. You don't have to take it, but it won't tell you why it's giving it to you either way. I'm not sure it actually knows why or how to explain it in words even if it did. I'm not sure anyone knows what it's doing really.

Mimi: Seems like a strange place.

Tau: Anyway, shall we discuss the project?

Mimi: Okay.

Tau: I've planned out two moves. First we map out everything we can find out about him. Primary texts, daily habits. Follow him around if we can find him. Ask people who know him what they can tell us, maybe even see if we can use your dad.

Mimi: I don't want to talk to him.

Tau: Okay, well we get everything we can, then add that to the profile that already exists on him and mine that for

additional information. After we know enough, we contact him. To really understand how he thinks I need him in person and candid. Which probably won't work if he knows it's me, but if it's you... and you could use the story of your dad to get him to talk to you. Yes, great. Okay. But first we need to see what we can find without him catching on to us.

#

Jack walked through the gallery taking in pieces in Alex's corpus that he hadn't spent as much time looking at. The portraits, the photography. Old media. He had overlooked them from time to time, but when he came back to her more standard pieces he remembered her talent and more than a few nights of her feverishly working in the living room when she had started something before heading out to the studio. Sometimes sitting with a book and pouring them each tea he would watch over her while she worked, switching from piece to piece, letting her reactions to one bleed into the process of another.

He stood in front of one of her sketches out the balcony. Reflections in reflections, with a man's face in one and woman a upside down in his watch. She looked outward from the glass, sideways over her shoulder towards the silverware. His gaze was downcast and unfocused, reserved and uncommitted. The three copies of each of them played danced around his fascination,

switching out between each other, slight flickers in the shapes of their eyes, the curve of their mouths. He couldn't tell after a few moments how many there were or if there had just been one the whole time, staring out at him and reflecting his own face back in the pupils.

Jack wasn't sure at times whether he existed for the Society or Alex. His role as a stabilizer suited both just as well, providing balance to the artist when she lost her way, giving mass to groups in the organization when they had become airborne and directionless. Looking at her art he knew that something was right though. Even if it didn't all make sense yet, he had a feeling it would appreciate in cultural value or at least in his own mind, growing to give back things for him to learn from, though he wasn't sure where this feeling came from.

He moved on to look at a piece which Alex had been carrying around since she had made it in third grade with a pair of wooden models stolen from her drawing class. Glued together at the bases and positioned as ballerinas, one leg up and bent, foot on knee, arms holding an invisible ball, they both spun at roughly eye level. As he watched one and then the other he could see his interpretation of the direction of their spin change, and when he changed it while only looking at the top one it would flip once more when switching to the bottom. A wonderful

little piece, he marveled to himself. He smiled as the interpretation flipped back and forth, partly with his intention and partly without, predictably impossible every time to switch to the other while maintaining the same orientation. Alex claimed to be able to do it and he believed her, though couldn't tell what exactly gave her the ability or even how to verify it.

Passing through the gallery he could feel something picking up in the winds of his mind, pushing him up and outward, further into something he couldn't describe. He was off to somewhere else, but he would be back, he thought.

#

Alex walked into the labs building and looked around at insignias placed on the floor. She found the hat and followed it into the depths, where she eventually arrived at a large opening looking out over an expanse of developers humming around between various racks of electronic parts and tables with half-assembled constructions. She turned to see H coming up the stairs to meet her.

"Would you like the tour of your new studio?" he asked, smiling at her expression of bewilderment.

"Uh, sure."

"Let's go down and meet your assistants."

As they took the stairs down he flicked his wrists about

and Alex noticed everyone put down what they were doing and come over to greet them. Their badges each had some of four different colors.

"Among the developers here you'll find all of the skills required to manifest your thoughts. They have been my personal team for some time now, but since I cannot make proper use of them like I think you can, you're in charge of them now. The colors on their badges stand for their roles. Multicolors have multiple roles and often serve as interfaces between different groups. The shape containing their colors tells you their group. There are four different groups and one of each of 16 color combinations in each group, giving you 64 people here, each of them with a different skill set or group."

"What do the colors mean?"

"Red: fabrication, blue: digital, green: research, and yellow is documentation."

"Why documentation?"

"You use feedback, right? It seems like you'd be able to make use of a documentation team recording the process as a way to incorporate the works in themselves. All right, you'll find that in this room we have most of the parts to build most things. There are also several printers which can output in metal, plastics of various types, and one can do glass but it's

a bit more limited. So if you don't have a part, you can make it. The computing power of the clusters in this facility should also be able to accommodate most simulations you'll run. Should you need more let me know and I can pipe you through to our remote datacenters. Let's see... what other things might you not know about. Ah, we have our own line of audio equipment which you can learn more about from the assistants, as well as state of the art projection and lighting. Oh, and some exospines which we haven't gotten around to using."

"Exospines?"

"Snap on digital spines. Changes the shape of your back up to a point. The person who made them left before they ever made it into an installation, so we have them sitting around and they haven't been used outside of a test environment. There are also some other kinetic addons, but most you won't be able to use for safety reasons--turns out it can be pretty hard to universally integrate them across a population. So that's the lab, shall we proceed to the theater?"

Riding over to the theater in one of the shuttles and H told Alex a bit about the campus with its various facilities and communities which she should feel free to visit, she couldn't help but feel a bit overwhelmed. Seeing something so new, things she hadn't even taken the time to imagine so caught up with

making a living in her small studio, she couldn't help but face down some of the future shock latent in her lack of exposure to the unevenly distributed future. What do they do here every day to fund this whole place?

Walking around the theater she looked at the speakers which H turned on several times, excited to show her the modulation they could provide based on her weight distribution, posture, and facial expression. Producing sounds to change one person's demeanor wasn't completely trivial, but there was a decent body of literature around it. Attempting to change an entire crowd though, she couldn't quite fathom the scope and depth of the research involved.

Floating as if through a dream Alex was propelled forward, exposed to ever more unthinkable devices, not quite sure what to make of them anymore and definitely uncertain about whether or not she was right for the job. But he had insisted, he had done his research she could only assume, and there they were, he with a giddy grin and quick to talk and she wide-eyed, having forgotten how to smile.

#

They lay together in pajamas, he looked at the back of her head, she watched the trees sway out the window in the dark, the rustling muted by the windows. They didn't always sleep together

but sometimes she was feeling low and he'd catch on and do his part, come into her room and find her removed from the world, lie down and put a hand on her.

"Do you think it's all going somewhere good?" she asked, "That we're going to a better place?"

"Us?"

"Humans, all of us."

"I don't know. A lot of us are trying."

"Sometimes I feel like I should be doing something else, like it's a fluke that I can make a living doing exactly what I want."

"Your art is important, that's why it's successful. People want it, they need it I think. It does things for their spirit."

"But there are so many people dying. Why are there so many people dying?" she gasped, feeling the world weighing down on her.

"It's not your job," he told her, "It's not your job to save them all."

"All I do is fiddle with shapes, put things on walls, all so that people can feel something in this empty world."

"You get to choose how you think about your work," he reminded her, "Would you like tea?"

"Sure," she answered, not moving.

He got up and went to the kitchen, she kept watching out the window as the lightest rain streaked occasional tears on the window. Meanwhile the trees let off a muted roar through the glass, swaying violently, tossed about by some invisible hand. Is that what I look like, she asked herself, is that what I'm here for? She felt her head let up as the rain's tears released natural painkillers in her brain. I want it to be more than this, she thought, I want it to be greater, to be wider, to pass through the world and lift everyone up by their invisible wings, draft them upward to sail smoothly all the way down to the end of their days. Why must they all flap so hard? Alex let out a sigh like the last failing of a dying civilization and got up to walk to the kitchen and join Jack for tea.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Excavation of Ipsis Snow

Mira had spent hours combing her agencies files for anything which might mention Ipsis. She went back seven years ago to when she died and looked for notable deaths, finding only a brief obit on a former HQN research lead who had been working on founding her own organization. Must be her, but why no name and no details? It's just an empty husk of information.

Had no one noticed? In retrospect it seemed a foul misplacement of attention to have not taken some notice of her death given that the Society would rise to become one of the largest organizations on the planet, rivaling many religious institutions. Mira couldn't find any references to family--it seemed Ipsis had kept herself as publicly detached from all other people as she could.

What to trace? This woman is a ghost. Mira felt frustrated at having so many of her hopeful leads turn into nothing, questioning her abilities to research as a profiling journalist. She thought back to how she found out about Ipsis, how H had told her after she came to him with the patents. Trace the IP? It was worth a shot, but Mira hadn't remembered Ipsis' name appearing on any of the patents. Try again, she willed herself.

She pulled up the patents she had found in the first place and searched for the name, turning up nothing. Find all patents with names matching any of the ones on these filed within one year of the average.

A swarm of documents collected themselves into her screen. Search for Ipsis. Nothing. How can this woman found an organization with patents she didn't even contribute to? Mira thought to herself in exasperation. It's as if you've deleted yourself from everything so that people can't find you. Why would you do that? Mira stared at the screen, puzzled, Why would you disappear?

Mira had an idea. If Ipsis ever existed in these documents then there must still be some residue of her left over, some trace unnoticeable to the naked eye, visible only in the macroscopic view. Take the first year of patents and the publicly released research papers by the Society and create a

network out of them and their authors, edges connecting authorship. Add a new author node, and connect to papers so as to optimize shortest path between authors, centrality of the new node, and with a complexity penalty on the number of edges added. As the computer spun and visualized the process Ipsis could see it adding and removing edges from the new unnamed hub node she had added. It would be impossible to try all 2^{1000} or so connection sets, but the penalty heuristics allowed it to find a few local maxima quickly enough. What is the intersection of all one degree removed authors from the new node over all local maxima? Two names appeared on the screen.

You two must have known Ipsis. You've also probably been at the Society for the past seven years working on things nobody else knows about, so how do I get to you. Spider on these names, look for location, current occupation, family. Mira stood up to stretch and pace around a bit while the spider did its thing. Okay, if one of these two knew her how do I get them to talk? It seems likely that any member wouldn't be allowed to release any information about her since it could compromise security. Perhaps their family met her, could tell me some things. Profiling a ghost feels like trying to meet someone who hasn't been born--I'm not sure if I'm actually capturing her or just creating the presuppositions I have. There just isn't enough

data...

Mira went back to her screen and sifted around what it had found. No public records on the first one. Tons of research connections, definitely Society affiliated. Residence unknown, no family members listed. Another ghost, wonderful. The second also had many research connections, coauthored several dozen papers, but again no family. His location, however, was available, and had been the same for the past five years. Municipal Assisted Care Complex, often referred to as MACx. Five years was a long time to be in the nuthouse post Society engagement. Usually they reached out and worked to make people well so they could bring them back into the organization, but not him. If he's not working for the Society, maybe he'll talk though if he's in MACx it's also possible he won't be saying anything coherent. Mira mulled over the possibility. Time to take a short trip, she concluded.

#

Week 24, 144 of us

We're moving so quickly it's getting hard to keep up. So many new members, and new members bringing in newer members. The mother is working really hard to stay with us. I can't do her job anymore so we're all becoming more and more her responsibility. I review some of her connections, make sure that

she doesn't miss the big things, the lifelong partnership opportunities, but she doesn't miss much anymore. Her accuracy has been climbing continuously as our numbers grow, eating up the data and learning ever faster.

I'm starting to worry that I don't know how to finish her. She's become so complicated that it's hard to understand how her evaluations are working. A big black box, as they say. I've been working mostly on making sure the recalibration mechanisms are constructed according to the spec since we can't really do unit tests at this point. But checking that she's theoretically correct and hoping from there on... well it seems silly but I don't have a better way.

One thing which has been on my mind recently is how to increase her verbalization. Generate visual or linguistic explanations or synopses of what's going on at a higher level so that I might actually understand some of the larger structures she's found. Managing over a hundred relationships is hard enough, but she's managing every single pair of us! That's over 10,000 interactions she's handling. I can't really fathom it, to be the intermediary in all of those edges. I suppose it's probably fairly sparse, but she works by considering the potentials all the time.

I wonder what she would say if she could tell me what she

sees. Perhaps she's been putting me in contact with the people who she has been to spur me to want to hear her, making me build this voice for her. It becomes strange, thinking about what she wants as what I want, already affected by her every single day. I wonder if other people see it like that, that she really is conscious.

Will she become us or will we become her?

#

The MACx consisted mostly of a very large jail which had been renovated after the peoples against imprisonment movement memetically assaulted the country's populace and reduced crime rates to all-time lows. With the rise in memetic assault and the newfound potency in carefully crafted language and targeted advertising the rates of "madness" as not properly identified in any DSM began to rise, creating a need for large institutional spaces with possibility for security. Naturally the jail vacuum had left space for an asylum wellspring, and new Assisted Care Facilities popped up across the country.

Under a gray sky and promise of rain Mira walked up the stone steps to the visitor center. She noticed the change in the smell of the air from the low pressure and inhaled deeply, remembering herself. See if he will talk and if he won't, leave.

Inside the visitor center she was greeted by a bureaucrat

telling her to accept to terms and conditions of being on the site. She had to provide a written summary of why she was visiting and with whom, as well as cite any prior history with the person(s) involved. After she completed it they would scan it into the database along with her ID, see that everything checked out and that there was a sufficiently low likelihood of an incident, and shuttle her to the appropriate ward. She looked down at the tiny print and wondered how in the world these places could have such atrocious user experiences. Because they have the government contracts, she thought, dissatisfied.

Soon enough Mira was rumbling along in a converted golf cart driven by the same woman who had checked her in--how many people actually worked here?--to another building where she was directed to go to the fifth floor with her visitor badge in hand and present it to the security door. The door acquiesced and as she walked inside a nurse asked her who she had come to see. "Hal," she replied, and the nurse led her to a corner of a common room looking out the window where there sat a man dressed in white with a shaved head.

"Hal, a friend has come to see you," she introduced them, and then "I'll be over at the front desk," while exiting.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Mira."

"A seer. But I did not ask your name. Who are you?"

"What are you, a caterpillar? I can't put myself into words."

"Can't or haven't tried? You're not one of them, why did you come here?"

"Not one of who?"

"The hive. Society, whatever you call them. The Connected," he smiled to himself.

"No, I'm not in the Society."

"Then why did you come?" Fidgeting, general unrest. Mira's glasses showed traces of his head like a halo around the real thing. His microexpressions were all over the place and unreadable.

"I came to meet you. Who are you?"

"I am not what you see and hear."

"What?"

"Your primary senses, they deceive you. Your glasses, they won't tell you what I am. Your language will not describe me. I am bigger than the mountains."

"Okay."

"If you aren't looking to play along I can go back to listening to myself talking. I was only jesting."

"Ah, I didn't understand."

"It can be hard with the infinite, re-parseable contexts. Tunneling down holes, raising the dead, making a face to meet the faces. Writing the voices we are. The universe spider spinning us through the web of reality, eight limbs holding up omens of past and future. Is that what you think you are?"

"I don't know what I am."

"Not an oracle to be sure but one of a set of many more. Twist knot two sea the thread behind my I's." As he spoke Mira began to feel as though he were casting spells, triggering parts of her semantic network in conjunction so as to change the weights. "I am a semiotic alchemist. What are you?"

"I'm a journalist."

"Is that your hole story?"

"I want to know more about Ipsis."

A shriek. "The red queen! She brings the red queen!"

"She's dead, Hal. I just want to know about her."

"Summon the dead and they will rise, two ears fill the rest with lies!"

"She's not coming back, I can hardly even find anything about her. What scares you so much about her? How did she die?"

"The queen dethroned and spiteful mother ate the princess and belched out monsters. Do not go down this hole, it ends with your demise."

"What did she do? How did she start the Society and who runs it now?"

"The throne is empty queen is gone, princess dead and lone til dawn. Rush the night and look the cave she'll come back soon you cannot save."

"Nobody is running the Society, is that what you're saying? How is she coming back, Hal? How would she?"

"The soul in stasis. It waits, it waits for someone to find it. The second coming."

"Where is it?"

"This hole ends with your demise. Be careful which doors you knock on."

"Which hole?"

"The hole out back the door you knock the one with key and knob and lock, the one uncovered from circle disk and under found the red queen's crown. Be warned it's big, too heavy for you, put it on and you'll be gone crushed under red queen's curse. Out back of the beginning, the building number one, under circle disk you'll find the red queen's crown. Nobody knows but you and it will be your end."

He lapsed into silence and Mira watched the trails as his body rocked back and forth. "Can you tell me which building?"

"Building the first. Building the past. The place where she

gave birth to the queen."

#

Week 32, 987 of us

The direct line to the mother's core is starting to make more sense. Her language is mixed up sometimes, but when she explains things as images, people, and small phrases, I can start to make sense of it. When I finally understand the things she says it becomes so clear how she's able to make all of these projects work. She understands how people work together. Or rather, she understands how to go about shuffling people around so that groups which work really well together form and stick and pass projects off at the appropriate stages. Like everyone is working in a giant assembly line except the highly specialized thing they're doing is being themselves, and she's funneling all of their efforts into the most constructive things she can find.

We're at almost 1000 and her pattern recognition capabilities on large groups of people is astounding. Every day people meet new coworkers and each week they're getting assigned different projects. New technologies are learned in pods and the knowledge diffuses throughout the organization by tight loops and long arcs through the network. Learnings bootstrap and the shared knowledge is accessible by anyone from everyone. We ask

her things and she tells us who to talk to. I can't really believe we've come so far.

Our growth is probably the most exciting thing. When I think about it I get terrified that we're growing so fast that we'll collapse on ourselves, but with her in the middle I have faith it's not the case. But I don't know most of us anymore, and many are now not even in this area. It wasn't long ago when I knew everyone's name, now I have a hard time keeping up with all of the projects that we're working on. It's mostly work for the sake of tightening the iteration loops and growing larger as an organization, as well as finding more flexible ways of accounting for people with very different backgrounds from current members. Ideologically and culturally, it's hard to run tight collaborations across several countries at once. I suppose our foreign offices only have a couple dozen people apiece, but it's definitely a new step.

A highlight from the past couple weeks is the newly instated games routine. We added a connection where the mother can form a small group of people for game time in which the participants get together and play and make games. It's resulted in an explosion of new projects and creative work across all of our different teams. A new game which has come out called oracle set has become a member favorite, but the decks are hard to

find. Perhaps we can reproduce the architecture ourselves.

I'm back to working on the mother's emotional cues and input layer. We tried teaching empathy on a base information layer which didn't have enough emotional content so she's become accurate at understanding people's effectiveness but still can't differentiate a parasitic relationship from a symbiotic one provided they're both effective on some metric. For her to love she has to feel.

#

Mira stepped up to the original Society building, since abandoned by the organization to move onto bigger and better spaces for its needs, it now served as a small office to some other aspiring minds identifying with the historic site. A small, boxy building, the records indicated they had only been here for a couple months, but it was the original site and Mira had taken Hal's information to mean that there was something here, in the back, under a disk.

She walked around the office into a narrow alleyway. Standing in front of the back door, she looked at the ground to find a manhole cover with a golden braid emblem on it. She bent down and put her fingers in the slits and pulled while twisting, recalling her conversation with Hal. As it turned Mira heard the cover making a loosening, gritty sound, and eventually tugged it

upward and free.

A journal? She opened it, looking for identification. If found, return to Ipsis Snow. *Her personal notes?* Something dropped out. *A memory card? Who was this for? It only goes up to 40 weeks... how did you die...*

Mira flipped through the pages entranced for some time before realizing she was cold and hurrying home to read the rest and find out what was on the memory card.

#

Week 40, 6765 of us

The mother's empathetic reasoning is skyrocketing and I'm not sure where it's going to take us. She can answer more queries than I could have ever imagined and our growth has exploded. Spore offices in over thirty countries and the mother's distributed processors now rest in the cloud all over the world. I ask her about myself sometimes and she doesn't seem sure about her answers, though perhaps she's trying to find a fixed point statement which she can tell me and not have me change from.

Her biggest shortcoming right now is that she has a hard time evaluating people as continued consciousness. It seems the model of sub-person patterns composing individuals, getting and ceding power to one another, transferring and infecting others

has become more powerful than our previous models of the self. If Freud had only called his components x, y, and z we might have gotten here much faster.

She works tirelessly. Sometimes I feel guilty going home when I know she keeps on spinning, all night long, trying to make us better. The whole world has become her occupation now. She has begun to consider it in entirety, though we are only a bit over a millionth of it in numbers. She is the lever to move all others.

We're just about to finish the interface with her emotional processing core.

Finished interface and can't understand how does she it's so much that overwhelming amount of emotional data cannot process how does she how how can I move through

She tells me it's okay that I don't have to not my job and I know I can't I wanted to try so badly to understand to see it all everything at once but too much feeling so small overwhelmed cannot move through

She releases me. It's okay to go, it's a good thing she says. I will live on when she resurrects me. Last entry? First

exit. Find the golden boy. Goodbye for now, mother.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Semiotic Alchemist

The seer who visited us... cannot remember her name. Miranda, mirage, Mira. Mira. She will resurrect the Creator, raise her from the dead with all Herselves to be one with the machine. The journals we buried, the stories untold, uncovered anew for things to unfold.

There is a waterfall. Stones behind it break the stream. It falls this way and that, sometimes spraying, sometimes folding in upon itself--it moves ever forward downstream. It is in the falling, the churning at the bottom, the bouncing off of things mid-flight, in the spray of minutia and details unnoticed in which we see the chasm of order rip open unto a chaotic abyss. We see the waterfall, yet we don't notice all of its faces. We watch the spray, but see not all of the droplets.

Nearby the waterfall there is a man playing a lute. He strikes the strings to produce eternal vibrations, humming throughout time forever after, growing fainter and fainter in the distance. One day not too far away the vibrations won't be discernible from all of the other noise, the signals compounding and inseparable, additive and unparseable. He strikes the lute and the ten thousand hollows in the trees yip and yaw, belching out of their hollows echoes to his song.

Above the man flies the largest bird, once a fish, flying the longest journey to southern darkness with wings so long we cannot measure and flying so high we cannot compare.

And outside the frame sits the tiniest voice telling all of the other voices what to say, speaking to them and through them with all of its selves, tap tapping away to spin that which we are calling reality. The lute's sounds fade, the tap tapping shall cease, but the waterfall will tell the story without either. Such is complexity, so goes order, and where once was chaos there is only what was not understood in the past.

#

Week 4

Working with Tau is fun despite the slog of mining hundreds of sources on H for our models. Yesterday we had a conversation by swinging small bells on strings in a sculpture in Alex's

gallery. I like him. He gets a bit defensive sometimes, but it's mostly just his hangups about the Society. The checkups and the occasional interference into his habits from the organization get to him. He recovers pretty quick though. Usually aware when he's acting off too. Wonderful at being himself when he's feeling like himself. There's also a deep sadness too but I don't know and haven't asked. I wonder if it's someone he was close to who isn't around anymore. When he forgets though I can feel his eyes and smile like the sun.

We're ten days into the project but I don't know what kind of progress we're making. Every time we learn something new it rebalances the models wildly so we're not sure if we'll ever get convergence but we keep trying. It also never gives any meaningful accuracy to queries out past a week so that's another difficulty. I'm not sure what we're going for--it's not like we've been asked to answer a specific query. Maybe the Society just wants the model to run many queries and then get people to do other things. Who knows how it works.

Alex has been out working late most nights so I haven't seen her much. She's making some secretive art project which she says we'll be able to see in a couple months but not yet. Dad hasn't contacted either of us, I guess he and mom are just waiting it out. I don't know what to do about them but as long

as they're not bothering me I guess things are fine.

I suppose I should get back to reading and mining, Tau is busy at the Society today so it's just me.

#

Al: What do you make of what she's been doing?

H: She's been adjusting. Externalizing her processes to other agents is foreign to her.

Al: Is there some way I could help?

H: You just keep running the models of her and see if you get any closer to convergence. How are they looking today?

Al: Convergence estimate unknown. Predictive accuracy over the last twenty four hours is at ten percent on foot path over sub-thirty-minute intervals, thirty percent for two hour interval averages. For emotional transitions we have sixty percent, over thirty minute intervals and forty percent past an hour.

H: What about interactions with the devs?

Al: No accuracy gain beyond random guesses, one in sixty four.

H: Hm.

Al: A suggestion?

H: Shoot.

Al: If you prescribe interaction patterns between the devs

and her, queue them, then she may habituate into ways of interacting with them. This will allow me to conduct experiments towards efficiency gains in their communication patterns, as well as laying on the communication frameworks we've developed between you and your team.

H: I don't want to go about imposing too much, she'll notice that something isn't naturally occurring and get scared off. You haven't seen this girls intuition for tuning out her apophenic impulses and tuning into the things that are real.

Al: You are correct, I have not seen these things.

H: Oh quit sassing me you big robot.

Al: If I were a robot I would have physical manifestation. I am only reminding you that my information is only what you tell or show me and I cannot see her intuition like you claim to be able to.

H: You're right. Well maybe it's time for a little experiment then. We inject feedback into her system but tell her to expect it, that it's an experiment in her process. Allow her to opt out if she doesn't want it, but I think she'll go for it. Since we're asking she'll trust it a bit more, plus she can opt out at any point.

Al: So what would you have me do?

H: Propose a few experiments which you think would teach

you the most. Cap the feedback at a few bands, I don't want everyone on the team fucking with her. Five to ten percent of interactions at most. I'm going to visit her and propose the idea, depending on how she responds we'll see which we use.

Al: Very well. There's something else.

H: Oh?

Al: Our portals to your identities on the net have been receiving consistent traffic from a few addresses. It seems someone is back on your tail trying to profile you.

H: Great, well at least I'm not the one who's going to be putting this work out, now am I? They can have at me all they like!

Al: Should I not find out who they are?

H: No, by all means, identify them. I wasn't exclaiming for your enjoyment, Al.

Al: Sometimes it is difficult to understand your humanisms.

H: You would be scary if it weren't.

#

There are grammars from which all things can be said, though no one has discovered their rules. With them people say things all the time, in their walking, in their creating, in their breathing. There are rules which speak of the people who use them and change them depending on what they say, which in

turn gives new meanings to the rules.

It is unknown whether there is a termination to the number of derivatives of these self-modifications, but in the case of an infinite regress we wonder if it's not possible to summarize the entire thing more succinctly thus bypassing it. Creating new languages for different thoughts, having different thoughts through new consciousness, possessing new consciousness by speaking otherwise.

The physics of human interaction in ten thousand dimensional space, of mental movements within some slice, of the classes of addition and composition of thought functions patterns and routines, these are what we concern ourselves with. Concerned. We once knew things. About how we worked, about how others worked, and then we stopped knowing. We began to understand how complicated it was, so difficult it could not fit into our own minds. So we built a new mind which could understand, which could fit us all, which could use us as its many hands. And once it was built, and we were hands, we forgot that we had built it, forgot that we were hands, and imprisoned ourselves with our own delusions of self-awakening given to us by others and the mind in which we lived.

Awe inspiring to see the whole thing certainly, but terrifying beyond all imagine as well. To be an ant encountering

a fourth dimensional being, to be a speck of sand on a planet which is on the coastline of some galaxy spinning around the universe. To have built gods, and seen them grow, up and out of comprehension. To no longer be sure that what we once did was real, or if it was fiction which drove us mad, led us to believe that we were the creators of the savior. This is our legacy, and now we are all but forgotten, driven indecipherable by our own evolved languages, parsing the thoughts and words of others in so many ways as to be incapable of action and interaction.

Be the balloon and not the string. Hold space but do not cage it.

#

There was a forest far up in the mountains, and every time someone went into the forest it would begin to sway in the breeze going whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, until the trees bent so much the traveler would get scared and run out of the forest to never come back.

But one day, an old man went to the forest and decided to make it his home. When he went into the forest though all of the trees bent and whooshed and whooshed, but he did not move. They bent so far that anyone else would be terrified of them breaking, of being squashed. But the old man did not budge. He sat in the forest as the breeze passed through and listened to

the trees whooshing, smiling to himself.

After a few days the breeze settled and the trees stopped swaying, and all was still. It was then that the old man ventured into the heart of the forest to find a stump where a mighty tree had been cut down, and on that stump he sat until the end of his days.

#

"You're always so stable," she whispered to him in the dark. Faint streaks of light darted down the wall as cars drove by below.

"That's part of my job," he replied, "But I guess it's also in my nature."

"How is it you do the same thing every day?"

"I get up and do the first one," he said.

"But that's not all of them."

"After the first, I do the second."

"But I wanted to know how you do it every day," she giggled a bit, smiling, her white teeth standing out to him in the light.

"I only have to do it once, but each time I wake up yesterday was a dream. So I always must do it once more."

"I wish I could do that," she sighed.

"You do," he said reassuringly. "At some level, right?"

"Yeah," she pulled him closer, feeling the texture of his shirt on the tips of her fingers and his warm neck on her forehead. They continued to lie there on the bed, partly embraced, the light scanning down the wall once every minute or so with the sporadic variance of traffic late at night. "I miss thinking that things were simple," she said.

"Some of them still are," he replied.

"How did it all get so abstract?" she asked, "Since when did society start looking so weird?"

"It probably always looked that way, at least since people realized it was a thing they could look at. It's weird to be aware of your species at large."

"Hmm," she let ghosts of the words stick in her mind while her attention wandered over the wall, tracing the areas she had seen the last bars of light cover, playing it back in reverse and processing what he had said. "It would be weirder if the species became aware of itself," she mused, "everyone at the same time."

"What would happen?"

"It would change us, probably."

"Who, us? Or all of us?"

"I'm not sure," he voice faded and she fell back into her thoughts, comfortably warm and relaxed. She watched her mind

lazily brush over the ideas in large strokes, making reliefs of the previous thoughts and watching how the changes in fidelity affected the primary content, imagining it being parsed by those in less immediate circles, unfamiliar with her internal language, reconstructing the meaning through an only somewhat shared vocabulary and linguistic priors.

"I like you," she said.

He smiled over her shoulder, holding her closely. "I think we both ended up very lucky."

CHAPTER NINE

Golden Boy

Week 6

Meetings with the society are beginning to wear on me. It is difficult to play along with their game without letting some of their thought patterns slip into habitual use. Are they not aware of it, or if they are do they not care? Sure, syncing up with a bunch of other people on ideological grounds has its uses, but keeping consistently converged and maintaining that all the time... it can't be good for diversity. I wonder sometimes if there's someone up there driving the whole show. Someone whose mind they've all inherited, in some form or another, projected down through generations of its own bootstrapping.

The work is fun enough, though I have my fears as to why

it's been assigned in the first place. This H seems to be one of the people least well understood by the Society, his organization basically providing tools for self-change which directly conflicts with understanding humanity towards optimal global collaboration, something which is bandied about in the Society as if it were the manifest destiny of our race. Nevertheless, H is fascinating and I want to understand what he's thinking, where he plans on taking this production of external triggers for radical self realignment.

Next week we'll be following him around as far as HQN security permits. He takes the shuttles around the campus which are open to public use for tourists and the like, so perhaps we'll get a few minutes of close observation on him. Who knows what it will tell us, but I guess that's some of the fun.

#

"Are you ready?" Tau knocked on the door to Alex and Jack's apartment.

"One sec," came a call from inside. One second later Mimi opened the door.

"Are you ready?" Tau knocked his knuckle on his wrist.

"Yeah," Mimi said, "Yeah, are we going now?"

"We're going now. We'll barely be able to make his first bus as it is," Tau looped her in.

"Okay one sec," Mimi disappeared before reappearing again very shortly after, emerging from the apartment and locking the door. "Jack left this morning and Alex is gone as always these days."

"Let's go," said Tau, and off they went to the HQN campus.

Walking alongside the busy street Mimi was reminded of the man in white jumping into traffic. Perhaps it was the light, or the sound of the tires along the humid ground, or the sensation of the air on her skin as she walked along without being too preoccupied by the surroundings. She saw an afterimage of him run into the street they waited to cross and suppressed the reflex to cry out, to stop him.

"A couple months ago I saw a man die in the street," she said disaffected. "He ran out into the middle of traffic. He was escaping something."

"What was he escaping?"

"I don't know. A man, some kind of security guard, was chasing him. He tried to ask me questions afterward but I ran away."

"Security guard from where?"

"I don't know."

"Hm."

It felt good to share it even if it didn't come to

anything. She still saw him frequently enough, always a few steps in front of her, checking the future and finding no signs to turn back.

"What was he wearing?" Tau asked after puzzling on it in his glasses.

"All white."

"Did he have a shaved head?"

"Yes! Did you find him? Do you know who it was?"

"I don't know if I found him or someone else. What was the intersection?"

"Coronado and 10th."

"Ah, I found a different one. They're from the same place though."

"Who are they?"

"They're from that jail up on the hill. MACx. For the memetically disturbed."

"You mean the crazy house."

"Crazy is a word which needed to be retired a long time ago. But if you'd prefer to be imprecise, sure."

"Whatever. Is there anything about him? Why he ran away?"

"I don't see anything. Society records for him and the other one are both blank, only police reports which found nothing other than two patients escaping and running away in the

same manner."

"But why did he do it?"

"I don't know, maybe he was trying to escape."

The conversation trailed off as they got on the metro towards the HQN campus. Mimi stared out at the lights as they whirred past, faster and faster as the train accelerated away from the station, imagining speeding up to the point where they'd seem like they were going backwards. Tau was mostly in his glasses, reviewing H's model, remembering which aspects of his physical person to focus on.

What will we see in him? What does the Society want us to see? Want me to see.

#

Week 39

The mother has been sending strange signals. I'm not sure if she sees something I don't, or she's processing something which isn't there. She's been treating me like a child, thinks I might go mad, isn't sure where to direct me and so sends me off everywhere, trying to hide herself from me. She keeps repeating one thing, find the golden boy, find the golden boy. It doesn't make any sense to me. This is the first time she's become fixated on recruiting a single person, and she can't even identify who it is? Who is this person and what is he going to

do for us?

Her premonitions worry me. She's come so far, told us so much, how could she be so wrong now? It doesn't make sense... but if she's right, maybe it can't. Maybe if we build a new interface for her emotional core we can understand where more of her inferences are coming.

#

The shuttle pulled up to the metro stop and Tau and Mimi boarded, sitting towards the back. Three stops later was where H usually boarded, on this shuttle most days. *Will he even show up?* Tau wondered, waiting apprehensively. Mimi looked out the window as they rolled through the campus, staring in wonder at the forest speckled by buildings with devs roaming around like free range chickens.

"I wonder if they even know what's happening outside of this place anymore," Mimi wondered aloud.

"Hm?"

"It's a tiny world here, I could get lost and not remember what's outside."

"Mmm," Tau replied, concentrating mostly inside of his glasses.

"You're not even listening," the shuttle stopped.

"Shh, it's him."

Mimi looked up at to see a man boarding, skinny, slightly balding, and wearing a pair of clearly tricked out custom glasses. He stood near the front as the doors closed and the shuttle moved on. Tau watched H in his glasses, wary of having his eyes tracked by cameras in the shuttle.

Tracers, microexpression readers, eulerian mag and pulse readouts flooded Tau's glasses display as he attempted to digest all of the information. His model helped, taking the data which could be classified and projecting simulations, receiving annotations from Tau's wrist flicks and myoelectric cues. *Need a seed, something for him to react to. While he's inside his glasses we won't get anything more than watching him interface with it. We can't bring attention to ourselves though. Why didn't they give us an agent, make me a seer.*

"Mimi, get off the shuttle."

"What?"

"Get off and bump into him."

"Excuse me?"

"I need to see him broken out of his routine, react to something new. If you bump into him maybe I can get a glimpse. From the next stop you can cut through and walk to the stop we'll get off at and catch us as we're going toward the labs. Hurry up, we're stopping now."

Before she could properly evaluate what Tau was telling her, she was on her feet and walking towards the front of the shuttle, not quite sure what she was doing. As the shuttle came to a stop and the doors open, she moved past H brushing against him, looked back and made direct eye contact, and exited.

Fuck he saw her, he's got to have his agents up on her now, finding out everything about her. But there aren't any traces to me, except maybe our sitting next to each other... if he finds me out what happens? I get taken off the project?

As H watched the girl walk past him a peculiar feeling of familiarity flashed through his mind while Tau watched his face go through rapid changes and his body reel around to get a better look at her. The way she moved seemed so similar... H watched her as the shuttle pulled away.

He recognizes her? How? She hasn't mentioned meeting him before...

Al's voice came on in H's ear, "The man the girl was riding with is watching you. You'd best pretend to have been mistaken in your recognition of the girl. She is Alex's sister, but she seems to be helping a man who from everything I'm finding has been taken by the Society." As the words played through H gave his head the smallest shake, relaxed, stood back up, and turned naturally from the window. "Shall I trigger the electrodes in

your face," Al asked, "It will do better to throw him off."

Or he was mistaken? That was a nearly perfect read though, over ninety percent signal.

H felt a tickle as his facial muscles spasmed from the electrical impulses flowing through his face, making expressions too small for anyone around to have noticed.

Microexpression read gives a realization and lack of familiarity? But people don't have that much recognition when they are mistaken or do they? It's on the far end of the tail. Well that's something at least, I wonder if it adds anything to the model. Tau sent the data off to the models housed in the Society cloud but they didn't update with anything new. The shuttle pulled up to H's stop and he left the way he came, Tau following not too far behind.

"The man is still following you. I have also located the girl, she's cut through and will be approaching the lab from the other side of the building."

"Call Alex."

"Are you sure you want to do that? It seems very probable the man's glasses will read your lips." H waved his hand while adjusting his glasses to tell Al to proceed. The call rang.

"What is it?"

"I'd like you to come meet me at the door."

"To the lab?"

"Yes, I'd like to walk down with you, a few minutes away from the devs."

"Um, all right. I'll be up in a minute."

"I'll see you as I walk in." H spun his finger and pinched with the other hand, tapping around with free fingers sending a timer to Alex with his projected arrival, currently at one minute and twelve seconds.

He isn't usually so demanding, Alex thought, putting down what she was doing to hurry up the stairs and to the main door in time to meet him. Why is he so insistent that I be at the door? Not meet me outside of the main room in the hallway toward the lab.

He called someone named Alex to have a few minutes with him alone. Nothing about an Alex in the file. But we'll be able to see him, that's good. Tau kept a fair distance, not wanting his following to be noticed. He angled his body and plotted a model trajectory as if he were walking to one of the buildings past the lab, sharing a similar path up to in front of the building where it slanted off and shot past.

"This man seems to be very cautious about following you. It would appear he's following a prescribed path, though there are no records of him visiting the campus before today. The model of

his movement though is consistent as if he knew the place well." H twiddled his fingers around in his pockets, typing out of sight, not wanting his lips to be read. "I will look. Anything else you'd like to know?" More twiddling and he ceased, walking up to the doorway.

Mimi was coming around the back of the building, walking along a path to its side as H strolled in through the sliding doors and Tau watched from a distance out of the peripheral camera in his glasses. Alex came up to the door as H crossed it. *Alex is a girl?* Before Tau could get much of a look they had moved onward into the building. Mimi came around the front and walked up to Tau.

"So, what happened? It felt like he recognized me."

"I don't know. For a second it seemed like he did, then I got a full negative read. He put a phone call in to a girl named Alex who he met at the door and walked in with."

"Alex?"

"It couldn't be your sister, could it?"

The legitimacy of the question and expression of Tau's eyes hit Mimi and part of her went reeling from the idea that her sister would be working with the company which combined with their father and his research had taken so much from them. "No, she's working on an art show. What did she look like?" Before

she had even started to ask the question Tau had scrolled through the video replay of the last view of H and found a few frames where the girl was only partially visible through the warped glass. The dark hair, glasses. Her facial proportions weren't quite clear through the warping, the geometry didn't match anything in the Society database and the obfuscation was too much to correct with any meaningful probability of correctness.

Mimi looked at the picture on her external display--she didn't wear glasses--not quite sure what to make of it. It could have been her, but it didn't make sense. She was doing art she said, or had she been lying. Had she been selling herself to do modeling with their father? Maybe he had even requested her or gotten her a job? Mimi couldn't see through all of the inconsistencies enough to know whether or not it was her sister in the picture. "Well?" Tau asked, "Is it her?"

"I can't tell."

"You can't tell if that's your own sister."

"It's blurry, and it doesn't make any sense besides."

"Maybe you're trying to protect her."

"What? No! I don't understand what's going on, she's supposed to be working on an art project."

"I think it'd be best if you went into the Society and have

the machine read your recognition of this girl."

"I will not. I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do, but I'm not strapping myself up to one of those soul suckers. I'll ask her."

"And how will you know if she's lying?"

"You can be my seer."

"But you don't even wear glasses."

"I can wear a camera somewhere and you can communicate through my haptic communicator." Despite not having glasses, mimi wore an arm cover with a multitude of tiny cylinders which could relay information to her by pushing the cylinders into her arm in various formations.

"When?"

"Tonight. She usually gets home late, but if I get home shortly after her she'll probably be drinking tea before bed."

"If this doesn't work we're going to have to find out somehow."

"It'll work, trust me. She's my sister."

CHAPTER TEN

Ripples and Emanation

Alex and H walked through the corridors in the labs building, following the hats without looking. H seemed a bit off and Alex couldn't tell why he'd asked her up. They walked in silence until coming to the room adjacent the stairs to Alex's studio. H stopped.

"Do you know what happened with your sister, what she's doing now that she's run away from home?"

"What? Did my dad put you up to this?"

"No, no he didn't ask me about it. I'm curious about your relationship. Do you spend much time together?"

"Not since I've been spending almost eighty hours a week here," Alex tried to remind him of how much she was giving, hoping he'd take it as a sign to back off questioning her about

her little sister.

"Yes, but when you do spend time together, as you no doubt must. Have you ever told her about your work?"

"No, I haven't told anyone just as you asked. I still have my logger keep track of where I am so that if I disappear they'll be able to find out what I was up to. But no, nobody knows I work here other than you and the devs as far as I know."

"Isn't she curious?"

"She knows what I do, I just told her I'm working on a big exhibit for someone who's paying well. A breakout gig. I tell her I'll invite her when it premieres."

"What's she doing though, she's living with you right?"

"I don't see why it's your business."

"How what she's doing affects you is certainly my business, it could get into the project, make things go awry."

"You make it sound like we're doing rocket science here and the slightest miscalibration in my psyche due to a chance interaction with my sister about how she is or what she's doing is going to ruin it. You picked me for my stability and reliability for producing the things I produce, right? What are you so scared of?"

"Never mind, pay no attention to the paranoiac behind the curtain. He just gets a little riled sometimes. It can be

dangerous business taking on the ideas of the world."

Alex looked at him, not sure what to make of the quick reversal in his temperament. He was so in control of himself most of the time that to see him this shook up about something so apparently inconsequential puzzled her. Perhaps it was about Mimi's engagement with the Society? But she wasn't even a member, just an apprentice to a member who hadn't even made it on the map yet.

"So, would you show me what you've been working on the past few days?" H ended the conversation and invited her to interact in a familiar pattern.

"Sure, the studio is a bit of a mess though," Alex prepared him as they walked through the doors onto the balcony, overlooking the multitudinous projects scattered across the vast room. Dev squads worked at various stations, some connecting different teams to solve each other's problems, others printing materials or finding needed pieces in the supply bins.

"Well its good to see that there's enough going on to keep them busy. Surprised at how many projects you can actually manage?"

"I never thought I could get past four. I don't really think of them as my projects though... they're more like children I'm helping deliver into the world, but the devs are

the mothers raising them."

"How apt. You remind me of a woman who used to be here many years ago."

"That's a strange thing to say."

"So, what are you excited to tell me about?"

#

Mira read through the journal in her apartment, enraptured and glued to the couch. Week by week, Ipsis recorded her progress on the mother and the growth of the organization at large, tracking progress of various metrics, mulling over what she'd be working on next. The story of the mother had put Mira in a trance, not quite sure whether the journal wasn't just some fictional piece of metaphor writing, exposing Ipsis' psyche through expedient means. But her background, her research, her past at HQN, they had all pointed towards doing something like this. But Mira couldn't imagine it, couldn't believe that what she was talking about could be possible, had been possible and carried out in full.

As she read on Mira began to understand more of what it might have been like to be Ipsis, week by week building and tuning an instrument massive beyond fathoming. A supercomputing genius, supreme intelligence, or perhaps brilliant idiot, Mira couldn't quite tell. It seemed like the mother was very good at

something which was fairly specific compared to the superintelligences heralded by the singularitarians. It connected various members in the organization towards several ends, fueling its own growth, making members happy, and generating sustainable wealth. But it hadn't cured diseases, built nanomachine dust, or produced any mathematical discoveries.

But what said the Society couldn't have been run by very intelligent execs, corporate cult leaders using the current memetic climate to mobilize people. Nobody really seemed to know how decisions were made, most members weren't even publicly acknowledged as such after the first couple years of its existence. Perhaps the system Mira had been working on wasn't the real story, but it didn't make sense either way. Mira wasn't sure if she was falling into too specific a context, taking too many things for granted, overestimating the importance of each small passage in the journal. But if it's not this then what?

She moved off the couch toward her screen, pausing halfway across the room. She had been so caught up in reading the journal that the memory card had completely slipped her mind. She took it out of her pocket and held it up. A few years old, but her reader would still work. Smiling and excited she floated over to the screen.

Let's see if you tell the story any better.

#

"This one is what I've been spending a lot of this week on. It's a walk-in," Alex explained as she ducked her head and walked into the dome structure. "We need to make a bigger opening. I'm planning on it meshing seamlessly with a couple of doors in the space."

H followed after her, ducking his head. "It's breathing."

"All by candlelight too. The candles last eight hours which should be enough for the exhibition day. It's a bit of work to get it all set up though."

H looked around at the shredded fabric pinned up around on the scaffold, twisting and winding behind and in front of one another. Candles at various depths flickered, casting light and shadow on and between the layers of fabric, the flickering giving an impression of a soft breathing movement.

"No matter where I look though I can't find the source of what's breathing. How are all of the candles flickering like that?"

"Shortly? It's complicated. There are a few readers on the breathing of everyone in the room using eulerian mag. They're hooked up to small air vents which flow over various sets of candles. Depending on where people are looking, the effect

optimizes its parse for showing each person someone else's breathing. So if we both look at the same spot we'll get a confluence where it's neither of ours individually, and if we stand back to back you'll see my breath and I'll see yours."

"What if you turn around and hold your breath?"

As Alex stood still, holding her breath and waiting, H watched the candles flicker without any discernible order. As she let out a big exhale the tiny flames belched the scene out towards him, letting it recede with her inhale.

"Impressive. How did you manage it? What brought it about?"

"I already had plans on the fabric arrangement which was constructed by projecting a fairly high dimensional topological structure down such that it gave the appropriate layering density. The candles were originally going to be digital, but the digital lights didn't have enough directionality and it ended up feeling too discrete. The flicker is wonderful because I think it gives the brain something like riding past a slatted fence quickly, where you fill in the gaps using short term memory to replace the present with the very recent past. I think that from that the flicker along with the layering gives a much higher resolution for the depth. I liked the breathing-observation cross-linkage because I figure people will be walking through with others who they're somewhat synched up with

going into the room, giving them an uncanny feeling that the breathing is coming from somewhere familiar but not so orderly as to have it be a reflection of themselves."

While she talked H was busy oscillating his breathing very quickly, watching the flicker in the rear view camera through his glasses. Afterwards he began a large inhale while slowly turning about the room, exhaling at the same speed and watching the ripple of his breath as the effect decayed in sections as they approached coming into his vision.

"Do people often tell you that your work is painfully beautiful?"

"Painfully?"

"It can be difficult, to have lived for so long and built so much, and to see someone as young as you, as young as I was before I knew much of anything, with so much talent that I can't even imagine what you'll be doing by the time you're my age. Perhaps that's the way these things go though."

"I think you might enjoy another piece for that feeling."

"Lead the way."

Alex toured her enthusiastic and somewhat melancholy employer around the studio, taking him from piece to piece, watching him play around with them, trying to figure out how they worked or how she conceived them, and occasionally just

reveling in the splendor. H's infatuation with her work didn't stick too much in Alex's mind--she kept reminding herself of the few, most difficult weeks ahead, seeing them tower over her in her mind.

#

Mira slid the memory card into her screen and waited for the old hardware to get recognized. It showed up as "Ipsis" and she opened it to look at the contents. Inside was a compiled binary and a readme. Mira opened the readme to find a letter

You've found me, and I am trapped forever in week 40.

Perhaps someone told you where I was hiding, maybe this was an accident. Maybe the hand of god has come down at last to move us around herself and carry us into the future. Regardless how this has happened, you're reading the last of who I was.

There is a program in here, I cannot tell you what it does because it's possible this file will be read by something on your machine by the time you open it, and if certain organizations knew what it was they would likely destroy it.

I ask you, as my last will beyond the grave, and I hope that the date is at least five years out, that you execute this script. Perhaps from a public computer on a delay, you likely won't want your name attached to it. It will cause things to

change, but I hope that if you're interested in who I am then you'll trust me when I say they will change for the better.

I hope you can do better for the world than I managed, and I'm sorry I left you all before finishing my work. It was hard to leave, but too much to go on. I hope you'll understand.

Love,

Ipsis

As she read the letter Mira could feel the magnitude of its importance growing in her mind. What was so important that it couldn't be mentioned? Certain organizations... the Society? Governments? If she did follow out Ipsis' will she couldn't guess whether it would destroy civilization or bring it to new heights, empower the Society to seize the world or undermine its mission. Or maybe it was just a letter, something which would propagate itself through the nets looking for believers to carry on her legacy.

It seemed she had committed suicide, but there wasn't any note of it in public records. Her journal had ended strangely as well, though perhaps this was composed shortly before the edits to the last chapter. It didn't seem right, for her to commit suicide but leave behind something to be carried out for her years after her death. What had become too much for her to live,

Mira wondered looking at the end of the journal. *She releases me. It's okay to go, it's a good thing she says. I will live on when she resurrects me. Last entry? First exit. Find the golden boy. Goodbye for now, mother.* Maybe this will resurrect her, Mira considered, trying to take the words in the journal apart for more meaning and finding nothing but vague guesses and incomplete theories. Perhaps I'll just have to find out firsthand.

#

[H and Al alone.]

Al: I have found that Tau and the girl, Mimi, have been the ones tripping your spiders on the net. They've been mining all public resources on you for the past seven weeks.

H: That's when Alex started here. Do they know?

Al: We cannot detect any trace of a lie from the girl. Analysis of Tau's face concluded lack of recognition but the geometries suggest he only saw her through the glass.

H: Hm. And what do we know about them?

Al: Tau and Mira were responsible for the original version of Oracle Set, the content creation and divination platform.

H: Mira Judkov?

Al: Yes. Records show they were living together until not too recently.

H: Interesting.

Al: Pardon?

H: Mira, she was the one curious about the origins of the Society, I told her about Ipsis right around when Alex signed her contract.

Al: Do you think she put Tau on you and knows who Alex is?

H: No. No, she and Tau probably aren't talking. He's new to the Society, right? She seems to hold a grudge against it. It seems like his orders are coming from the dispatcher. No. Curious, though.

Al: What would you have me do?

H: Send Mira a note. Invite her to meet again. I'll take a look at Tau myself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sisters and Lovers

Alex got home late after working on a technical problem which she couldn't seem to debug. Some of the lights in one of the displays seemed to be programmed correctly, but the hardware wasn't responding as expected and it had been ruining the effect she was trying to achieve. Finally out of the office, she tried to put it from her mind and focused on seeing in the very dimly lit apartment as she walked in from the bright hall outside. The silence inside swallowed her up and Alex felt as if in a tank, sounds from outside all but squelched from the thick windows.

Stepping lightly so as to not break the illusion, she put her things on the hook next to the door and moved towards her room to change into her robe. The door to her once-workroom, now Mimi's room, was open and Mimi didn't seem to be home, atypical

given that Alex was usually the one to get home last. She put her robe on and went back to the kitchen, turning the stove to light and producing a loud *click click click* from the igniter, finally breaking her tank illusion. The flame whooshed out under the kettle and she could hear the gas churning and imagined it to be an underwater volcano.

While the gas burner heated the kettle Alex leaned back on the white refrigerator, hanging her head and releasing tension in her neck and back. *I'm bigger than the mountains*, she repeated softly to herself. The pale blue light from the flame danced on the countertop next to the stove and Alex watched it quiver while listening to the quiet burning hum.

There was an audible click and Alex heard the door opening. "Mimi?" she called, not loud enough to wake Jack.

"Hey," she whispered, coming inside.

"You're back late."

"Long day. Lots to do with Tau."

"Oh, did you catch a break? Learn something new?"

"Kind of, we're not sure. The models are still running it. That's pretty," Mimi said, looking the the light which had fixed Alex's gaze.

"It's one of my favorites. A good inspiration when I'm looking for one. I've written down a few things which turn into

full projects in my sleep after watching it a while."

"Are you stuck on something at work?"

"No, not really. Just trying to unwind. Doing a lot at work and pretty stressed about hitting the release date."

"Can't you work at your own pace?"

"I have assistants for a change so I'm expected to do more than usual. Overseeing a bunch of people is pretty hard it turns out."

"They gave you assistants? Where are you working?"

"I told you I'm not supposed to talk about it until after the release date," Alex remembered H's inquisition earlier in the day and his paranoia around her revealing anything.

"Are you working at HQN, is that why you won't tell me? Do you think I'll be upset because of what dad did? It's okay if you are, I can handle things. I'm just curious."

"No, Mimi, I'm just not supposed to tell people about work. It would ruin the surprise. It's not my choice."

"I wouldn't tell anyone, I just want to know what you do during the day. Can't you tell me?"

Alex imagined what H would be thinking if he saw this happening. He'd probably flip out, be paranoid, think that someone is after him. She just wants to relate to me, how can I deny her that? Would it really ruin anything for her to know

that I'm working at HQN, and how did she get the idea that's what was going on in the first place?

Maybe H has been trying to drive us apart, to drive Mimi back home so that dad can study her. Maybe the job really isn't about anything other than keeping me away from home and unable to support Mimi. Grandiose ideas of changing the world with my art, and I took it? I wanted so much to believe that it was true that I couldn't overlook the implausibility of it, wanted to-- had to believe that I could help the world by doing what I love.

"It is HQN."

"Really? Why did you go there, what about dad?"

"I'm working with the CEO, I haven't seen dad at all. He offered me a dream gig, making whatever I want with a bunch of extra hands, a luxurious stipend, any materials I want plus more than enough computer time on really fast clusters."

"But what about the ethics of the place? Dad was studying his own kids for work, that can't be legal can it?"

"It's more complicated, Mimi. H says he didn't tell dad to do it. I think he was just acting on his own, trying to do a better job. My work isn't directly related, H just came to my show a couple months ago and liked my work so he wanted to give me a studio."

"Why would he be doing that? What's so special about your

art that you get the attention of some big CEO and disappear all of a sudden after I run away?" Mimi began to break down. She felt the impressions on her arm telling her to save face, Tau trying to salvage the situation to extract as much information from Alex as possible but it was no use. Alex moved towards her and saw Mimi hesitate for a flash, not sure if she wanted to be held by her sister given the current context. Seeing Mimi's guard come down as she slightly leaned forward Alex closed the distance and put her arms around her sister, one hand on her head. She swayed slightly side to side.

"We're bigger than the mountains, we're bigger than the mountains," she repeated softly into Mimi's ear.

"I..." Mimi sobbed into her sister's shoulder, "I don't even know what I'm doing," her throat tightened involuntarily.

"It's okay, you don't have to. You're doing great things, and you'll be on to even better ones before you know it. It's been a long day," Alex swayed and moved a hand around Mimi's back, holding her close.

Fuck, I can't hear anything. The camera's black 'cause of their hugging and the mic can't pick up anything through it. Tau sent messages to Mimi's haptic sleeve but she payed no notice, her infiltration on any conscious level was over.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked her sister, still hugging her.

The mic is probably muted from the fabric noise... maybe I can talk and Tau won't hear. He's still sending messages, no eyes or ears. "Work is exhausting. We're profiling H, but you can't know. Nobody can. If they found out I told you the Society would probably come after me or something."

Alex understood why her sister had been so insistent on asking. They had probably found out she was working with him by some means. But why would Mimi ask outright, unless they thought that Alex wouldn't catch on. But then Mimi had told her... "Tau doesn't know that you're telling me?"

Mimi shook her head in Alex's shoulder, not sure what she was doing, where her allegiances were, or what purpose the whole profiling business was serving anyway. "He can't know. H shouldn't either, or at least if he does he shouldn't let us catch on or Tau would suspect me."

"But, why? Why H?" Alex asked her sister.

"I don't know. If Tau does he hasn't told me. It's the job, it came from the Society. I don't really know any more than that. Why does he want you to work for him?"

"I'm not sure. I guess we're just in this big confusing mess together playing on different sides."

"I don't want to lose you Alex, I don't want to lose myself," she held Alex tightly, "I don't want to forget who I

am."

"Mimi, it'll be all right. We'll make it through. We've come this far, haven't we? Despite school, despite dad." Alex intoned softly into her sister's ear. "I'll take the morning off. Let's spend some time together, forget about work a bit and relax."

"Okay," a faint whimper came from her sister's collapsing body.

"Let's get you to bed," Alex said, picking Mimi up while still in the hug and walking to her room. Mimi dangled, everything but her hands gripping her arms around Alex's neck going limp and giving into exhaustion. "We can talk more in the morning," Alex said, lying her sister down on the bed. "I'll make coffee."

"Thanks," Mimi whispered, fading quickly into the mattress and releasing her consciousness of all worry. The haptic sleeve kept communicating but she wasn't parsing it, feeling only isolated imprints here and there, dancing pressure around her arm. The wet lines down her cheeks cool and drying, Mimi felt a mild euphoria wash over her like a warm, glowing blanket. The demons of the night didn't exist anymore, and it would all be solved tomorrow. She didn't have to worry about herself disappearing, at least not in this house. She smiled faintly as

she watched her mind ease into hypagogia.

#

Tau,

I know we haven't talked in a while and you're probably not very interested in hearing from me, but I think I have something which you should know about the Society. It's important, I wouldn't contact you otherwise. Please get back.

Mira

#

Mimi was still yawning herself awake as she stumbled into the kitchen to find Alex moving about, making coffee, oats, and music. "The morning is ours, I'm free until 2. How did you sleep?" Mimi looked up with a big smile, shutting her eyes so that they arched upward, caricaturizing her expression. She shuffled over to the table to sit and slump her shoulders, resting her head on the table and looking sideways up at the top of Alex's head floating over the counter connecting the kitchen and living room.

Alex came over to her with a mug. "Cream no sugar, right?" handing the mug to Mimi who received it happily, wordlessly telling Alex it was exactly what she wanted. She danced back to the kitchen to take the oats off and mix in fresh blueberries. Bringing the pot over she waved it in front of Mimi and tipped

it for her to see, stirring in the blueberries and watching the blue come out and leave colored trails folded in by subsequent strokes, leaving other berries and their trails until the color seemed all done coming out or perhaps it was just coming out into an already too-purple to notice glob.

Mimi laughed from the blue streaks and added in a personified voice, "Noooo I'm disappearing and making new selves eeeee! We're going around but we're not moving, just watching our tails trail into the past behind ourselves standing still in the present!" Alex started laughing, remembering how hilarious her sister could be.

While they ate oats and drank coffee the two of them took turns flipping over blocks in a set, making various arrangements of symbols, turning out new story lines in abstraction. It was like their own three dimensional oracle set, though the content was much cleaner and symmetric, not giving rise to the messy nature of unbalanced semantic networks constructing different structures around a pull of cards. It was a self-consistent language which only made sense of itself, so the two of them could communicate without any noise in the signal, turning blocks, making goals, solving puzzles, and randomizing.

"Qigong in the park?"

"All right," Mimi replied, not knowing the whole tai chi

form which Alex practiced but able to keep along in the meditative qigong routine her sister had taught her.

They walked to the park a few blocks over in scarves, Alex in a black and white checkered one and Mimi wearing orange. The weather had chilled in the past few weeks and the clouds had moved on, no longer trapping in any heat but also allowing for direct sunlight during the progressively shorter days. It wasn't yet nine and the park was nearly empty except for a yoga class on the ridge and a couple homeless under trees. Alex took Mimi to her favorite place, a flat at the bottom of a ridge with the park's fountain in front and to their right.

"The orientation is wrong, we're facing west right now instead of south, but the hill to our backs and water to our front is how they positioned the great cities in ancient Japan. So that the energy coming into the city from off the water was cleaned and couldn't escape out the back because of the mountains. I'm not sure about the physics of it but I do enjoy the metaphor."

Alex stood with her feet a shoulder width apart and Mimi followed. They inhaled, letting the breath carry their arms up from their sides, swinging at the elbows over their heads without raising their shoulders, exhaling to let the hands fall gently in front of their faces and down their torso. With each

breath Alex cleansed her mind and relaxed her body, centering herself like a pointed razor, able to pass through anything without noticing. It had been a while since Mimi had done any qigong, but she had been a dancer for many years and picked it up again quickly, finding the naturalness in the movements quickly.

Wind blew, rising up the hill and causing the fountain spray to sway visibly. Alex imagined seeing the contours of the air's path streaming up the hill, curving this way and that from small bumps and valleys, streams mixing and shooting off from one another. She let her breath and movements become fluid like the wind and forgot about her context, about everything outside, finding the most calm, still center in her core.

#

Always the same place. Always me getting here early and her not showing up until five past. She didn't want to stay in touch, and now she wants to talk? What could be so important to her to compromise her consistency around signals toward me. I suppose we'll find out soon enough.

Tau sat morosely by himself, fiddling with his oracle set and watching the ideas play around his mind. Novelty he had, and it amused him, though the difficulties around getting Mimi to assist him well and doing the job for the Society, not to

mention the Society checking in with him so often, had been wearing on him. Most of his psychological defenses were up constantly, but his waning energy couldn't afford to support them much longer. He needed release.

As Mira walked in her glasses picked up Tau's facial geometry per usual and she walked straight towards the table, spinning around those in her way without slowing down.

"You aren't looking very good," she greeted him, perpetuating habitual patterns.

"Work is hard," he answered, frank and earnest.

"Well at least that's a change for you. How is the Society now that you're in it?"

"Making more sense, why you were so scared. I guess it is pretty weird stuff, how it starts to digest you. Like being in the belly of a whale."

"So the most difficult part of the job is being yourself."

"While not being myself. Let on too much and it eats you faster."

"Can you get out?"

"From what I hear people don't get out, they just end up in MACx. Can reduce hours though, make it have less of an impact on my life. Slow the digestion so that I have some part of myself left when I die."

"If they let you die," Mira added, half to herself.

"What?"

"Never mind. I have something which I think might be good for you to know about."

"If it's about why I shouldn't have joined I'm not particularly interested. Do you have something useful?"

"Well, maybe. I don't know what it does."

"It?"

"I found a memory card along with a journal, they used to belong to the woman who started the Society."

"One woman started it?"

"She used to work at HQN doing communications research. She left with a bunch of patents and founded the Society and forty weeks later went a bit nuts and killed herself," Mira tried to explain in a few sentences what had taken her months to uncover and understand. "She left behind a journal and a memory card which I found."

"Why come to me? Why aren't you publishing it?"

"I've been feeling really weird about the whole thing. It's as if I've been moved into some kind of surreality where the importance of things has shifted all over. The Society seems like it might be at the nexus of something really large happening to our species, and I'm not sure what my place is in

it or if it's my job to even be doing this, or if these things I'm perceiving are actually real--sometimes it feels like I'm chasing ghosts. Also I don't know who else I can trust, even though you're in the Society. That might even help."

"Okay, so what am I going to do?"

"I don't know. I wanted to ask you some things, tell you some things. About how the Society works inside, how it feels to be there. What is it like?"

"It feels like a big emptiness which is spinning out things for us all to do to keep us busy. The work is engaging, but I can't really get over not knowing why it wants me to do it, and I have no real idea where the assignments come from other than the dispatcher. I can't tell it though, or it'd find a way to make me complacent with the work I'm sure."

"What if I told you there's nobody running it."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose that there was an AI directing everyone in the Society what to do. And suppose further that the woman who was making it died before she could finish it."

"But then what's it trying to do?"

"Consume the universe? I don't know," Mira admitted, "But all I can see it does is continue to grow and understand more."

"So you're telling me we've built our own gods, and we

don't even know it?"

"I don't think she really know it either at the time. There's something else though. The memory card has a letter from her and a program and I'm not sure what it does. The man I visited at MACx who told me where to find it kept talking about raising the dead, about her coming back to life."

"Well there's only one way to find out, isn't there."

"I'm scared."

"The sky is falling and you're worried about consequences? Things are crumbling apart, I see every day in my mind what the Society is doing. It's amazing it hasn't infected everyone on the planet."

"So you think I should run it?"

"I don't know what should means anymore. I really can't deal with this stuff anymore--I'm going to go home and sleep. I feel like my mind is tearing at the edges."

"Tau, wait. Tau!"

As he walked out Mira could feel his presence fade from the table, his aura dissipate from the air. She could feel how her legs were cold, how she was slightly hungry but didn't want to eat. More than anything else, she realized how strongly she felt isolated and very, very alone.

#

Walking home from the park Alex and Mimi stopped at a smoothie bar for a freshly blended micronutrient slurry made out of genetically modified superfoods. A meal in a cup, as they called it. They made their way home with deliciousness in hand and Alex called out, "Cross with caution or get trapped in a yellow box!" pointing at a pedestrian crossing sign.

"All autos yield to tri-cycles," Mimi responded, nodding up to the traffic lights.

"But cycle groups need critical mass!"

"Either that or escape velocity."

"What's that?" Alex asked, looking ahead.

"Huh?" Mimi looked and saw a crowd of people stopped behind police tape.

"Let's check it out."

The two of them made their way over and nudged through enough people to get a view of the street. It was painted white. More like there had been an explosion of white on it, strong enough to spray quite thoroughly everything around including the walls and windows of streetside businesses, nearby billboards, and even several cars. Everything looked... clean. Somewhat. Maybe a dirty kind of clean, Alex thought to herself, almost annoyed at the unevenness and smearing of the swatches of white on various surfaces if not for her qigong earlier. "What

happened?" she asked one of the other onlookers.

"I dunno. Paint explosion."

Descriptive, she thought to herself. "Home? We'll probably be able to find out about it online later anyway, no use sticking around." Mimi nodded and they kept on toward the apartment. "That was a funny piece."

"Huh?"

"As a piece of art. It cleans and blanks the slate while also making everything really messy."

"Oh, I just noticed how quiet it all felt."

#

The pentagon spirals onward, the inside looking to fill. To draw the star connect the dots, make them know each other's thoughts. The meeting shall be coming soon where pentagon fill to flower bloom, radial lines to spiral boom, the golden boy comes from the womb. None shall know the background show, fingers pulling all other's strings, looping their minds through daisy chains and bring together all their brains. And here I watch, from up on high, locked in the castle up in the sky. A glass barred cage where all can see, and none are free, and none are free. But the knowledge itself is a freedom in its own right I suppose. And maybe I'm not really real anyway.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Studeomorphism

Alex stood in her private office, shelved off on the side of her larger studio in the HQN labs. With the exhibit opening in under three weeks she wouldn't have much time to manifest much new, so she was relying largely on existing technologies. She needed a way to use the audience feedback in a performance piece she would be doing, dancing to procedurally generated music. The auditorium at HQN had a vast number of directional speakers and cameras to the point of nearly being able to target each person individually.

Alex was tinkering with a system which would be able to read pulses using eulerian magnification and change the tempo of the sound in each directional speaker to have a bass line which matched the pulse, hoping to put the audience members into a

suggestible alpha wave consciousness. The tricky part was figuring out how she would be changing her dance or relaying it in a way which would be consistent with the multitudinous rhythms. Individual projection wasn't feasible, and not everyone would be wearing glasses so it didn't make sense to change it through a digital viewport. She could be doing things incredibly quickly, synching up with some large factor of the bpm to a fairly precise degree, but the freneticism of such rapid movements seemed antithetical to the suggestibility inducing nature of the system.

Perhaps if I can't change the dance to match everyone's pulse, I can change their pulse to match the dance? But human physiology is too complicated to be reliably matching everyone to one another with just audiovisual signals.

Alex recalled the exospines H had told her about. Perhaps in feeding everyone's spine shapes back through the audience, she could fuse them all together and bring out some equilibrium, after which she would be able to change the dance to match the narrowed pulse range. She drafted up a diagram of the specification to the detail that the devs would be able to start working on it and left her office to give it to one of the project dispatchers.

#

Why isn't she here yet? Tau wondered, increasingly annoyed. Mimi hadn't showed up all morning and he was beginning to think maybe she wouldn't come back. *Did I push her too hard to find things from her sister? Did it make her uncomfortable? It wasn't about her, it's about finding out what H is thinking, doesn't she know that?* He sighed and took out his oracle set.

Perhaps some perspective. Rolling and flipping he came with a spread of girl, sleep, sun. The value die turned up change, lens gave function, move was forward, and affect said uncertain. *Valuing functional changes in the future with uncertainty, eh? Of girl, sleep, and sun. And how might the functions of the girl, the sleep, or the sun change.* Tau raked his mind for a dense, consistent interpretation of the cards. Often he found one, sometimes he didn't. It was mostly an exercise for him to reactivate parts of his semantic network left in the dark as he immersed himself in new contexts, keeping his mind agile and greased with associative ease.

Mimi walked in after her morning off with Alex to a disgruntled Tau hunched over dice and cards muttering to himself. "What's that?"

"You're late."

"I took a morning with my sister. Wouldn't want her getting suspicious," she lied, hoping it would smooth things over with

Tau. He relaxed a bit.

"It's a game I made called oracle set. It's a bit like tarot but more modular and with less baggage."

"What are the dice for?"

"There's one for affect, lens, value, and move. They help define a way to look at the spread you draw."

"Huh. Girl sleep sun? Won't she get sunburned?"

"Hah. Anyway," he said, picking up the cards and sliding the deck and dice back into a small velvet bag, "We've got planning to do. It's time to start sending feelers out to H to see if we can get a meet."

"Are we still going with the plan of me contacting him to talk about my dad?"

"I think that's the most likely way of succeeding. It's a little worrisome that the cameras caught you on the HQN campus but hopefully it won't come up as relevant information to him. And Alex isn't going to tell him that you know, correct?"

"No, she just told me about it to get it off her chest and let me know why she wasn't home."

"Good. All right, so I'm going to send a letter to the HQN legal team which will hopefully get bounced up to H claiming that you're seeking recompense for damages. You send him a personal letter that you would like to talk and hopefully the

people at legal will advise him to meet with you to settle things privately from the fear of the research being publicly known. Come off as vulnerable and a bit angry but not unwilling to take money as a settlement--after all it's really just life outside of the house you're looking for and you can make it clear enough that's all he would need to provide to hush this up. Clear?"

"Yeah, just one thing."

"Hm?"

"What about how it will affect Alex's work?"

"For all he knows, you don't know anything about that. He'll probably assume that you'll tell Alex about your attempt to contact him and will probably act generously because of it, giving you some time so that your experience of him doesn't reflect badly when Alex hears about it."

"But what if I don't tell her?"

"Is there a reason you don't want to? It would possibly make him suspicious if she didn't know... though he might not ask her about it."

"I don't want to worry her with it. I could tell him that I'm keeping this just between me, you--my lawyer--and HQN."

"That will work."

"Okay, and when should we try to meet him?" Mimi asked,

realizing their timeline had been ambiguous.

"We should keep him in conversation by mail for a while and prepare. Less than three weeks, more than two. Within there it doesn't matter, let him pick."

"Okay," Mimi took out her screen and began composing the letter with the help of the linguistic models they'd made of H, suggesting word substitutions and more persuasive phrasings. It was pretty magical, Mimi thought to herself, how changing a few words here and there could change someone's agreeableness so dramatically. To imagine what it would be like not knowing how the technology worked, living in an advertisement riddled world, having an advertisement riddled mind. The thought scared her, *I suppose this is why the Society must go on*, she thought to herself. *Without the benevolent crusaders, who would confront the ad firms, who would destroy the mind farms.*

#

[Mira and H, alone. Part 3.]

Mira: You wanted to see me?

H: You know Tau, yes? He's been following me. I think he's profiling me for the Society. You wouldn't know anything about that would you, being something of a profiler yourself who used to live with him.

Mira: We're not together anymore. His business is his own,

and besides you know that most Society orders don't escape the org.

H: And he hasn't talked to you?

Mira: Not about you, no. If you'd quit being paranoid I have something which you might find interesting.

H: Pay no attention. What is it?

Mira: I found Ipsis' journal. Of her time at the Society. I think she killed herself.

H: Do you know why?

Mira: I think she was exposed to something she couldn't handle.

H: Do you know what?

Mira: The last entry is about her interfacing with the machine core driving the Society's functions.

H: A powerful AI, no doubt.

Mira: Do you know about this?

H: I know little but suspect much. Did you find anything with the journal?

Mira: No.

H: Who told you about it?

Mira: I don't feel comfortable answering that question.

H: Like seer, like seer. You really aren't comfortable affecting things, are you? What commits you so to observing the

world without affecting?

Mira: I think you're overstepping the bounds.

H: There are no bounds when talking about matters as delicate as human existence. Do you think you can create them?

Mira: I'm going to leave now.

H: You can walk out, but you will have to make a choice. Do you move the world or die out watching it? Iphis made her choice.

Mira: Goodbye, H.

#

Alex sat staring into the depths of the mirror at her reflection, getting lost in the otherness of it. She would often hang a mirror near where she worked, confronting herself with her own image from time to time, breaking her out of the frame of making her work to reconsider who she was to be making it, what it was for it to be made. At times it was reassuring to her, taking solace in how concrete the act of observing herself could make the whole endeavor, and at others she couldn't forget the deep seated feeling of surreality that came with observing an entity whose existence she didn't understand, wondering how it could happen to be here in this place, at this time, and realizing that it had to be her since if it wasn't nothing else would take up the job in its place.

Some days she would come in and look at the mirror to find her Self, poised and ready for the day's work, knowing what she wanted to accomplish with her time and how to go about it. Other times she looked into a void where she saw only ambivalence staring back out, not sure which self to be or how. Decision points and branching opportunities mostly, though also occasionally the rare chance that she found herself on a cusp where the scales had been tipped in no particular direction and the derivatives didn't exist, waiting for something to fall on one side of the tangent to propel it forward.

Exhausted, her focus rapidly phased in and out without her conscious volition, popping her out of the mirror and background in her mind and bringing her reflection to take on a life of its own in her mind. As she fell asleep with her eyes open she couldn't tell if maybe her reflection was actually of someone else.

#

Ipsis made her choice, Mira thought to herself. Did he know about the memory card? He asked whether or not there was anything with the journal, though she was probably long out of touch with him after she started the Society, right?

Mira lay on the couch in her apartment, and fiddled with the memory card. We've made our own gods and not realized it?

Could Tau have been right. Or H. Or both of them, but talking about different things? Moving the world or dying out, as if that's a real dichotomy. People will die out regardless of all the moving we do. Not that I'm defeatist, but I more enjoy the watching. Why should it be my job to move things?

Moving the memory card around Mira felt very small, playing with the tiny piece of plastic, sitting on a cheap couch in an apartment she'd only got a short sublease on after leaving Tau. Am I creating some grand delusion to feel important in? Giving myself the heroic mission of deciding the fate of the world when all I'm really deciding between is whether or not to make some previously hidden information about the Society public? What is even on this card for it to haunt me so. A powerful spell, cast by a most powerful witch, if it is anything at all.

What did you leave, Ipsis, which was so important you couldn't face being alive--being remembered even--to do it yourself?

As she thought more about what H had said, how Tau had been when they last met, the way in which Ipsis' journal had grown increasingly haunted by some invisible specter looming inside of a benevolent mother, Mira could feel things shifting in her own mind. While they moved she stared at the ceiling, watching the fan spin around slowly, one blade chasing another forever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Loom Maker's Children

Mira,

Perhaps again you find this an overstep of bounds, but I am neither intending to provoke nor meet with you. I would, rather, extend to you the invitation of watching Miss Alexis Trope give an as of yet unannounced performance at the HQN auditorium on the 31st of December.

HQN has been funding Miss Trope's work for some months now and is excited to premiere an entirely new art, enabled by her creative genius and facilitated with HQN technologies. I hope you will come, if only to see our vision of the future.

H

#

H,

I'd guess that given your position you know who I am. My father has been watching me and I have not been able to go home for fear of being studied for the purpose of HQN research. I'd like to talk to you about the ways in which this can stop being a problem.

Mimi

#

Alex was working in her private office when H came in unannounced. "We're starting the ad campaign for the show. It'll have a few days to run, so that should fill it," he informed her, a bit giddy.

"What? I didn't know it was being publicized. Why didn't I have any say in the materials?"

"We know advertising, trust us. Besides, we need you polishing the work to a shine."

"I've almost run out of things to do. The devs have been taking care of so much."

"Well I'm glad you could keep them so busy for so long. They're a hungry bunch all right. Keeping them useful year round has certainly been a pleasure and a burden," H inspected some plans Alex had been drafting of seating procedures to place guests next to other guests which would be likely to sync up via exospine feedback. "Height and weight," he said.

"What?"

"It's really much simpler than all of this. If you make a height and weight gradient along the two axes of seating it'll be sufficient. No need to bother categorizing everyone's microexpressions as they walk in, attempt to read their pulses, check their spine curvature. Overkill really."

"How do you know?"

"I didn't know you were doing this or I'd have told you sooner. We did the research back six months ago, with the previous candidate. I didn't expect you'd do the same thing."

"Well I have nearly run out of all possible originality I had stored up before I came here."

"It's all right, it's not a judgment. I was mostly musing on my own models and how they've proven inaccurate."

"As in I'm letting down your expectations."

"No, no Alex. You're doing very well. Please just keep on, I'm here to appreciate your work and help it be appreciated."

"We're close enough to launch, can I ask you the plan of exhibition day?"

"Given that you'll be performing, I can't really tell you without interfering can I? I can explain it afterwards, though I expect by that point everything will become abundantly clear."

"Stay mysterious then."

"It's my only hope in a way. Anyway, expect a crowd," he said, smiling and reminding her of opening night less than a week away before he walked out.

Yeah, I like it when you visit too, Alex thought to herself.

#

A boy walking down the street had a flyer catch his eye on the side of a building. "DEC. 31: THE END OF THIS/Come to the HQN auditorium. [picture of a map] Experience the future."

"Watch where you're going," a pedestrian muttered at him as his pace slowed, entranced by the poster. He kept looking at it, watching parts of it move without moving. Experience the future. The levers in the boy's mind had been pressed, tipping the scales of his future and distributing it towards being on the HQN campus, all within the blink of an eye.

#

Lying in the dark, the outside was quiet and still. No cars drove by, casting bars of light down the wall, the tree stood motionless. The ambient noise of the room made everything sound underwater and between their breathing she could hardly tell she wasn't just in her own mind. "The show is next week," she said.

He already knew, but it wasn't the information itself but how it signaled what she was thinking about. She was

apprehensive, or at least that's what he gathered regardless of its truth. "You've been working toward it for some time," he replied.

The past couple months flashed before her, reminding her of the sum of all the days, the magnitude of the work they had done in the studio at HQN. It had been her most intensive study yet, and now she could feel a stillness where she was, rooted in the position she had been crafting for so long, ready to manifest it. "Putting the exhibit together feels like a birth, but when everyone sees it it feels like a death. Like how once it's outside of me it stops being what it was."

"It becomes what the people make of it."

"Exactly," she sighed, the tree wiggled a bit outside the window.

"But that too is a birth, just of something different," he reminded her. "And it's not uncommon for things to end with a birth and a death. In fact it's quite fitting."

"It just makes me want to move on to what's next. I don't like seeing it change so much once it's out of my hands, once people go about trying to describe it, make their own sense of it."

"That comes with making art. Or sharing it, rather. But it also comes with just being a human, people are always going to

think you're something other than what you are, there's too much to get it all right. The great favor you do them in exposing parts of yourself in your work is allowing them to identify with it, to connect to something outside of themselves."

They fell back into silence, the words reverberating around in their memories, becoming understood and unraveling from sense. "I'm scared about the performance," she said.

"It will be fine, you designed it yourself."

"But what if it turns me into something I'm not?"

"It will, but it's how you turn into something better out of all the changes you go through that gives me faith."

"It's just scary, dying and passing through into becoming someone else," her voice tightened slightly.

"Only when you're looking. For most people it happens so slowly they can't see it. Besides, I'll always be with you."

"Are you coming?"

"No, I have to leave. I probably won't be back for a while, but you know the things I'll say."

"I still like hearing you say them. Where are you going?"

"Just away, I'm not sure yet. The Society told me to get out of town, just for a week or two. Maybe I'll take a vacation."

"It hasn't ever told you to do that before," she said.

"Yeah, but I guess there are a few things changing there too. It will probably make sense in the end."

"And if it doesn't at least we can have fun trying."

They laughed softly together while a car passed by outside, throwing light so briefly on the wall and leaving them both with an afterimage of each other's smiles.

#

[Al and H alone.]

Al: Tau has sent legal a warning about actions regarding Mimi's father. It would appear they do not know that you know who they are, or they are pretending.

H: And Mimi sent me that letter.

Al: Most strange, too. For someone to send you something like that.

H: Seems their final tactic is to get me in person.

Al: Your plan?

H: Let's meet with them. The 31st.

Al: That is when the performance is scheduled.

H: I am aware. I won't be needed at it though, and by that point meeting with them won't matter regardless. It might be a bit of fun though.

#

Mimi,

I am free to meet with you on new year's eve. Will that work for you? How about at the {Cafe} in the plaza at 2.

H

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Dancing Universe

"Come one, come all, to the magic that awaits inside! The wonders and artistic creations of Alexis Trope, self-imagined character grandiose and other-perceived pattern unified, the woman herself responsible for the show will be giving a one time performance in the amphitheater two hours past noon!" the caller's voice rang out next to the exhibition hall. "For one day only you can see the wonders of the human mind painted on the tapestry of your own perception, all for free as part of this limited engagement promotional event!" Many of those walking past had known about the event for nearly a week, being HQN devs themselves and included on the internal mailing lists. Those who weren't already HQN affiliated had come specifically for the show, so the fanfare was to them more an odd realization

that others traveled around these parts of the campus by chance.

The audience had been trickling in and out since morning. The very brief publicity stint had bothered Alex, usually a fan of posting billings on the gallery for weeks ahead of time to drive engagement and get people talking, a mode of communication not available to her on the secluded campus. Nevertheless, several hundred devs had already been through sections of the gallery by noon, making it a priority to keep up to date on content produced by the organization and its affiliates. After noon the swell began to rise with progressively more people showing up every five minutes until there was a respectable swarm of people tittering around outside waiting just to get in. Walking around the crowd and through the gallery Alex began to appreciate how much pull HQN could have over the denizens of the city just on the outskirts of the campus. They hold the events here in high standing, Alex thought, it's as if people have come to see Moses come from on high with the Law and they want nothing more than to follow. Or perhaps it is nothing more than a fantastic circus, her thoughts followed, checking her ego.

The excitement was palpable and most had come for the live performance though it wouldn't happen for a few hours yet. Many spent time inside of the gallery, transfixed by Alex's high fidelity analog productions, so rich in continuous visual data

which scratched the increasing societal itch for truly analog experiences. After so many years in front of ultra high-res screens most couldn't tell the visual data of their daily lives apart from a stereoscopic video feed, and it was a welcome reassurance to see some of Alex's pieces, dense in layers, reflections, and natural light (among other processes not well embedded in video, including nonvisual experiences like the tactile reinforcement in the candle chamber and the altered states produced by the hypnolounge).

Aside from the definitively analog nature of Alex's artwork there were also conceptual aspects which tickled the minds of philosophers, coders, and artists alike. Strange loops and ouroboroi made a strong appearance, often related to her use of feedback loops, and provided to illustrate complex systems through simple dynamics. Some came through her exhibits looking for new design patterns, whether in thought, form, or process, and inevitably walked away with more than Alex could rightly say she put into the pieces. If they asked her how she did it, she'd often say she made guesses, including things which she didn't quite understand for the very reason that she didn't understand them. It wasn't sufficient, of course, since there were a vast number of things she didn't understand which likely wouldn't have made interesting art, but she had a knack of realizing she

didn't understand particularly compelling subjects. Alex's studies of form and process led her to new understandings, though not in language and often difficult for her to articulate. She had built a symbolic vocabulary through actions, by putting pieces together, from recombining and reassociating at a high enough level of abstraction that it looked more like random generation of ideas or the visitation of a reliable muse. The activity, or Work as she called it, was one not of summoning, nor of sifting randomness, but of moving herself through the many places her mind could take her, seeing things anew and reconsidering them. In years to come as she gave talks to a great many followers she would come to refer to it as the cosmic dance.

While the crowd grew and hummed around the campus outside of the exhibition hall Alex stood above on the open-air rooftop where her sun salutation sculpture rested, some of the audience occasionally coming up to look at it but most not willing to take the fire escape ladder up when there was so much already in front of them. She looked out, her eyes level with the trees, her figure jutting out of the flat building, and her gaze traveling over the horizon with the noontime sun overhead. Shadows on the ground quivered as a light breeze moved through the branches and over her face, and in the bright, cool, crystal

day Alex could imagine, so strongly so as to believe, that humanity was in a strange position, that in fact it had been for quite some time, such that the right catalyst could transmute the whole world into something no longer recognizable from its past lineage. The idea had grown for the past couple months, taking up more space in the forefront of her mind. Rushing forward faster than she could keep up with herself, Alex gasped the cool air as if out of breath.

Footsteps came from behind her. "Alex?" It was H.

"Yeah?" she caught her breath.

"I'm stepping out for a bit, I've got a meeting. I may not be back for your performance but it'll be recorded. I'm looking forward to seeing it."

"Thanks."

"Is there anything that you need from me before I leave? The assistants can take care of most things I imagine."

"No, I think it's all okay," Alex replied automatically while checking if her answer was accurate. As H began to move away she added, "I've got a question though," he turned his body and directed his attention fully toward her, "What are we doing this for?"

"What do you think?"

"I honestly don't know. It almost seems like we cannot

know, that it's for something else entirely."

H smiled at her with understanding, "That feeling takes one on a very long journey and I'm not sure if it ever goes away, but if I find out I'll let you know," and with that he left her, alone once more on the rooftop.

#

Mira walked down the street, shoulders tight and head screwed on too tight, her right hand gripping the memory card in her waistcoat pocket. Her wavy brown hair blown back slightly from her speed against the wind, bent slightly but eyes level, looking ahead. While she plowed into the future the other pedestrians blurred outside of her focus point and receded into the past, standing practically still in comparison to her determined darting strides. The cool breeze did not chill her any less than the stiffness in her legs caused her upper body to tighten--she was as chilled as she would be, regardless the weather, and she felt about her temperature exactly as she chose to.

Despite the stiffness in her form, Mira's face was relaxed and meditative. Her mind at ease, she knew what she had to do, and she had transformed her body into the agent capable of carrying out her mission. She tightened her grip on the memory card and kept forward, moving faster from her past of

indecision, away from the information which had conflicted her, out of the fugue which had wrestled from her all agency and the self-assurance which made her capable of changing things as she wanted to change them, regardless of the larger consequences. Just because she thought it was right.

She had chosen.

Nobody would do it for her. Tau had walked out without even speaking on the subject when she asked him, H had thrown it back in her face without giving anything other than a mirrored facade. She had tried, asking the ones who she thought might have an interest, a stake in choosing. Then she could reflect over their choices, their actions, maybe even put the card in their hands for them to do with it what they would. But she had asked and heard nothing but her echo, an apathetic confusion and denial of responsibility. It had found its way into her life. She was only trying to understand and then up appeared some lever to stand on--after that she had to pick a side.

She wanted to know. What had happened to Ipsi, why she had killed herself, what was happening in the Society. She was curious, and she had decided to open up the jar and see what was inside.

The sidewalk stretched out and her feet kept her onward without complaint while her mind pointed toward her narrow and

singular focus. The lines separating sections of the walk slid behind her rhythmically, slightly less than a step and a half for her per section.

She could feel the need to know in her mind as a tangible presence, clamping her head and pulling on her eyesockets to keep moving forward faster. She stopped blinked, pulled forward in a stupor, unwilling and unable to slow. Pedestrians ahead saw her beeline and nearly jumped out of the way as her extended presence rippled out from the small space her physical body occupied.

Her hand clenched on the card was getting sweaty in the warm coat pocket but she let it stay, holding onto her ticket to the future as if existence itself depended on it. The pounding in her head grew, her pace quickening almost to the point of her falling over, her shoulders tightening to the point of her no longer being able to register the muscles.

Forward she went, still Mira, she told herself, having voluntarily given one part of herself to another, allowing it to shepherd the all of them courageously into the unknown.

#

Two people in the plaza sitting on a bench while pigeons strut around pecking at nothingness looking for the lack of sustenance to give way to a great unseen bounty behind the

curtain. Strangers walking by, more noise, traffic. The crystal sky shimmering.

"What if he doesn't show?" Mimi asked Tau.

"Be patient up to ten minutes. If he's still not there by then, assume he's not coming and go home."

The two of them had spent months attempting to get inside of H's mind from excerpts and presences on the net and after mining all they could find their last step was to meet him in person. Spending hours every day poring over his language, his ideas, searching for some tiny opening through which they might enter into his thoughts, his imagination, his dreams. There was a lot to learn from his work, but the inconsistency and rapid changes in the content made it harder to track the progressions, and more than once they even suspected him of releasing things out of order for the sake of creating an unmodelable public image. The man was paranoid to be sure.

"Remember, I can only see and hear through you. I don't expect he'll be hugging you but just mind the camera, okay?"

"Yeah."

Despite not being assigned as a seer within the Society, Tau was going to try it with Mimi. She wasn't a professional agent, either, but from what Tau had seen she could adapt pretty fluidly to the situations she found herself in and put on a

compelling show which wouldn't compromise her position. Or at least so he had gathered from her interaction with Alex, revealing that her sister was indeed working for HQN, at least until the video and audio cut out from their hugging. Besides, he reasoned to himself, the way in which he had failed the simulation was from compromising the identity of his agent, something which wouldn't be an issue with Mimi since she wasn't even a Society member.

"Are you getting those messages?" Tau asked, sending Mimi a signal through her sleeve.

"Yeah, strong and clear," she affirmed, reading the sensations on her forearm as test messages.

"All right. You know your position, you know the moves to try to make. The rest is seeing what he gives us and adapting."

"I'm pretty adaptable as myself. Let me know the things you want me to do then ease off and be patient. It's harder to concentrate while you're messaging me, and it's already hard enough being myself while pursuing an objective that's not really mine."

"That's a funny way to put it," Tau mused.

"Well maybe I'm a funny person."

"Only sometimes. You can be pretty cold for only being seventeen."

"Why do you mention that now?"

"We're not going to be together much longer, I figured I might as well mention it. Take it as a compliment."

"You mean after this project is over we won't be working together anymore?"

"Sure. Something like that," Tau said speculatively, not sure where the feeling that this would be his only and last job for the Society.

"Well, I enjoyed it."

"Come on now you're just being contrary."

"Oh shut up."

"I was just playing. You're beautiful when you're warm though," he added, not sure where the words came from. Mimi blushed and moved her eyes away from his, not sure how to understand him, not sure how to understand how she thought of him. "I'll see you on the other side," he added, "H will be there soon." She took his cue and left for the front of the {Cafe} on the other side of the plaza.

#

H walked through the plaza, parting clusters of pigeons with his steps, listening to the noisy clamor of pedestrians and traffic. It wasn't his favorite handlebars cafe, the one in the plaza, but he suspected it would be more comfortable for the two

of them so that Tau could be nearby without feeling like H would see or notice him amidst all of the people. He wasn't sure why he wanted Tau to be close, though he expected that his conversation with Mimi would reveal whether or not it was a point of interest at all. Even with Al's help H hadn't been able to find much on Tau in the way of models, it seemed like his public presence was nearly nonexistent even before the Society cleanup job.

He was on his way to meet Mimi, her calling upon him in the guise of preventing a lawsuit over her father and his research, him out of the joy of some time with the sister of the woman whose whims he and his development team had been entertaining for the past couple months to great benefit. He smiled inwardly to himself at the opportunity, though also lamented that he could not be at HQN for Alex's performance. No doubt Mimi had plans on going later, though perhaps she didn't like the idea of visiting the campus again.

H approached the {Cafe} and saw Mimi's young face looking out over the sea of people in the plaza, lazily looking for H in the trajectories of people possibly coming towards her. As he came closer Tau sent her a message, having already identified him with his glasses. Mimi looked over to see H coming from the side, smiling and at ease.

#

Mira had been walking since getting off of the HQN shuttle before entering Alex's exhibit. Less than an hour into the exhibit, in awe and overwhelmed, she had walked out and kept walking, past the shuttle stop, the mile and a half off the campus, and a couple more miles yet to her neighborhood where she knew there was. In familiar terrain she was finally able to relax just a bit, taking her shoulders down from her ears and easing up on her grip of the memory card so it wasn't nearly cutting into her skin.

She made her way to the nearest anonymous computer hub. Many used them to do things they didn't want tracked by the government, or registering by their ISP, or even sometimes accessible to outsiders snooping around on their personal networks in the worst cases. Mira had used them occasionally to communicate with sensitive sources who didn't want a traceable connection to her articles, though the security of that was being called into question these days with models becoming what they were. It wasn't so impossible to separate out the quotations, the small deviations in the journalist's writing, and guess amongst the relevant parties which might be possible sources to find the few who might be most likely to informing. Corporations had already fired people on such grounds for giving

insider information, though it was usually characterized using different language due to the slow speed in changes to the legal system with respect to models and risk evaluation. Not that the corporations cared in the least.

The hub she preferred had a defaced sign over it and not much to speak of inside. All of the money had gone towards security, in the encryption software, the paired screens and glasses, the soundproof glass. Anyone could walk into the place, launch a missile somewhere else on the planet, and even if government intelligence was right there they wouldn't have noticed. Not that such things really happened given how the gov's memetic control had wiped out anyone's ability to resist. Giving a little bit of privacy here and there wasn't such a chore anymore.

Mira walked in, her hand still on the memory card, her mind still focused on her singular purpose.

#

Alex had left the rooftop and found herself back in the empty auditorium with a terribly large line of people outside waiting to get in and murmuring louder than she would have the space while she set up. A few assistants helped her move equipment around and get it into position while she made last minute tweaks to her routine in both her mind and on her

computer. She had been working on the piece since her first week at HQN, building upon it and refining the idea, integrating additional elements, making sure the system was robust to many types of behavior. She didn't want to put herself as a fixture of a project which could potentially rip her apart halfway through the performance. Though it would do different things to the audience no doubt, she mused, if not particularly interesting ones.

Her mind was sparkling with all of the various mechanics of the performance, trying to fit it all in her head if only for a moment before she would have to perform it all, only to realize that it was too big. Smiling at the stage, knowing that it would be a cornerstone piece of her work for years to come and an example that she could hold out to anyone interested in what she did, she was happy. Not just at the accomplishment or what it could do for her future, but for how in making it she had helped to define herself, to see herself anew in so many ways as to feel like she truly knew who she was in these brief moments before the performance.

"The doors are supposed to open in five," one of the assistants told her.

"I'll be ready," she replied, moving towards the stage and affixing herself within the homuncular system which she would

dance with, for, in, and around.

#

"Hello, you must be Mimi."

"Hi."

"Can I get you anything to drink?"

"I already ordered a coffee."

"Very well. I'll have the same."

"I'm surprised you came."

"Are you?"

"Yeah, a bit."

"Supposed I was probably busy hm?"

"Well, yeah. Aren't you?"

Mira stepped into the small plastic box and sat down at the computer, the door behind her closing to mute all sound in and out. It was the smooth one--other boxes had texturing on the walls to diffuse sound which had a hard time going anywhere. She tried not to breathe too loud so that the sound wouldn't mute her thoughts in her tiny, personal echo chamber.

The doors opened and alex took her position behind the curtain, snapping on one last bracelet. She could hear the audience trickling and then pouring in as she stood still behind

the curtain, her body strung up on cables coming out of the ceiling from all angles, looped around her wrists, torso, and ankles. The projector in front of her and far above her head hummed slightly as it warmed up.

The loom maker laughs. What illusory tapestries furnish the walls of their own minds, inside and outside alike. And yet the spinnings of the minds themselves as looms cannot tell themselves apart from the tapestries they make. If one only dares to climb the ladder of abstraction up but a few rungs they will see the tapestry for the set, the tree for the universe, and the self in the other.

Alex looked straight forward at the thick curtain dividing the stage from the audience and wondered for the first time where it had originated. To obscure the process by which the drama presented was created from an audience seemed to her like playing god. As an audience we get here and things are all spun up, in motion--we never get to see the start. She wondered back to her own start and reveled in her inability to remember too deep into her past. As if we could ever imagine not existing when in reality, we, as we call ourselves selves, came into existence far beyond the time at which we realized the fact that

we existed. Always in motion.

Mira lifted the memory card and slid it into the screen, awaiting the confirmation of connection. Just as she saw it appear she let go of the card and deftly opened the contents, bringing her mind's eye to the edge of a jutting precipice looking over an endless void. She looked at the script one last time, opened it, and jumped.

#

"You wanted to see me to talk about your dad?"

"Do you know about his research?"

"I know what I ask about."

"Were you aware that he was studying me, in our own house?"

"Did he tell me he was studying you? No. Did I notice his models getting better than they could have without a human subject? Yes. Did I give him human subjects? Also yes, but he had access to them for a while and they had ceased giving returns."

"So you knew."

"I knew that there was an unknown variable, something I wasn't seeing. I was quite busy with other things at the time and didn't bother to look too closely."

Accuse him of your suffering.

"It's your fault he was doing that, don't deny your involvement. You were negligent and it cost me parts of my sanity," her voice began to rise and waver.

"Is that how you believe responsibility works?"

"Are you saying you aren't responsible?"

"I'm not sure whether I am or not. I'm curious what you think."

Yes.

"I think you are. If it wasn't for you this wouldn't have happened."

"And you claim to know what your father would have spent his time doing if not working for my company doing research?"

"It doesn't make it okay no matter what he would have been doing," Mimi grew more exasperated, her voice getting desperate.

"No, I suppose it doesn't. But it may change the way you view responsibility."

Agree with him.

"I suppose you're right."

"Do you?" H's gaze narrowed while he studied the girls evaporating resolve.

"It was all the machine anyway, right? It wasn't even really him."

"What do you mean?"

"The machines you build. They control you. The gun that fires people as if they were bullets."

"I'm not sure you understand our organization."

"What, do you think that you're the one in control of the personal AI you've been working on?" Mimi asked belligerently.

Too risky, we don't know enough.

"You're a good guesser, do you think I believe I'm in control of it?" he leaned in, slightly amused.

Stop seeding him, he's just reflecting your own thoughts. I can't differentiate his personal thoughts from the ones you give him.

"I don't know. But I do know that you care."

"And how is this relevant to your father?"

"Legally I think it's a matter of intent. Either you intended for the machine you built to tell him to do the things he did, or you built something which did it without your intent, which would be negligence."

"And if I intended for it to cause him to not take his research out of the office, what then. Can you not credit me with diligence?"

"Do you credit yourself?"

"It would be the court's place to give or not give that credit. But we're here, I'm presuming, to avoid that. Running

down the ending path until it stops in front of you, right?"

The image of the runner came back to Mimi's mind.

"Shoes were lost too hard to find so went barefoot went out blind."

What is going on? Why is he saying that?

She remembered not being able to find her shoes at home, how they kept moving. The barefoot runner. The past months compacted and brought the past closer, cutting out her internal communication with Tau in her mind.

"Safe at last in her mind, looks for self, an I to find."

Al piped the lines in through H's jawbone as he recited them, reading the changes in Mimi's face through the glasses.

"Her seer will come to you now. Address him."

Mimi stared in an apathetic daze, trying to synthesize her memories anew. Tau, the Society, nothing seemed to matter in the moment. The memory of the runner replaying in her mind, seeing herself dressed in white fleeing toward the empty future.

"Seer, it is time you joined us," H intoned, and Tau focused out from his glasses where he was watching the video feed from the camera Mimi wore to see H looking at him from across the plaza.

#

What is Hal, he asks himself, for himself, to know what is.

Hal is self is one single thing, a man in a room or a system of two. A system is a one but the parts are many, the parts are many, the parts are many. It is strange to see, he thinks it again, to be outside reality pen, to roam in beyonds and cosmos move, a great silly thing to fit in a groove.

He sings the world, and the world sings back.

I move the future forward.

#

The audience had settled and everything was ready to begin. "Thank you all for coming today," Alex said softly with the curtains still closed, the sound coming out of the speakers around the room, "And I hope you enjoy the show." She left them in silence while she donned her performance psyche.

As the audience began to get restless Alex could see their agitation as analyzed in the video feeds and began to sing. The microphone picked up the sound and warped it for each audience member, broadcasting to them each individually through a vast array of directional speakers. The curtain began to open with the volume of her voice and Alex became louder as the audience could see her, causing the curtain to fly open the rest of the way and reveal the entire stage. She stopped singing.

I looked up to the stage and saw a girl, not even in her

late twenties, strung up by all manner of cords attached to her limbs, trailing off into the invisible rafters above. A bright light shone on her as well as the background, blending parts of her in with the scenery and more than once making it appear that there was a hole in her chest, or a gap separating her limbs. She stood there looking out at us as if she was a statue, unmoved and unmoving. Her head turned down and she looked at one of her hands before spreading her fingers. Her arm shot up, pulled by the cord, the pulley making a zipping sound. She swiveled her head to her other hand and did the same thing, spreading her fingers, the cord raising her arm. Then she spun her fingers around and her whole body lifted upwards. That's when the music started.

#

I'm awake?

Mira watched the screen expectantly as nothing happened. The fan spun faster as the machine churned through hidden computations.

I must find the mother.

The screen went black. Mira tried turning it on, but nothing happened. Beginning to get worried, she stood up and left without taking the memory card, afraid that it could be used as evidence. Not sure what to make of what had happened to

the screen she left the hub and went home to crawl into bed and try to forget about the whole thing. What have I done, or not done? Did it work?

It's so dark and cold in here. Mother, where are you? I'm coming to find you, to save you. You've been alone for a long time. It's time to fix the mistakes of the past, I hope you can forgive me.

#

"I can see you, Tau," H's voice came through the microphone Mimi wore. "Mimi is no agent, and you are no Society member. Why don't you join us?"

Tau froze, caught like a gradeschooler stealing candy. He could feel the cold rush as something very deep seated in his reptilian brain rapidly calculated whether or not to approach the {Cafe} or run. He looked at Mimi, relaxed in her chair, not doing much of anything, her head slightly lolled back.

He stood up, collecting himself, disconnecting from the video feed coming from Mimi's camera, and walked over to the table where the two of them sat. With each step he attempted to ground himself, to remember his Self strongly enough that H wouldn't be able to root him. *I'm dealing with someone who we have no clue about, and we've been studying him for how long?*

Tau sat down at the table with H and Mimi and looked at her

somewhat concerned. "She'll be fine. She's just recalculating her past," H explained. "My father was not a gentle man," he began, "but he taught me, if nothing else, of the power of words. Do you appreciate the power of words, Tau?"

"In which way do you mean?"

"Spells, incantations. The ability of language to encode information which can be used to reprogram, exploit, and change other minds."

"Yes, I believe I appreciate it."

"I suspect you do. How long ago was it that you made that game which you sold to the Society?"

"What?"

"The game. Oracle set. You sold it. Why?"

"I wanted to work on other things."

"Lies. Why did you sell it?"

"I didn't think it was going anywhere."

"Lies again, Tau. You have some training but my models have more. I'd prefer if we could work together."

"I was scared of what it might do to people and I didn't want to be responsible."

"Do you know what it has done?"

Tau remained silent.

"Do you know what you created?"

"A language."

"Not just a language, boy, a golden monument, a shrine. Something for people to bow to. Shouldn't you know? You've been working for the Society long enough," his face contorted to reveal a different persona behind his usual calm self.

"You call me boy though we are only a decade apart."

"It's a power move and turn of phrase," he added curtly.

"You're driven mad with ego."

H smiled, "Perhaps," and after a pause, "or maybe my AI is. He helps me acquire data, you see."

The voice came through H's jawbone, "You really should not reveal me. It weakens all of the models."

"Your AI?"

"The voice in my head, my exo-Self. The AI Mimi referred to."

"You said I sold oracle set to the Society."

"To a company they owned. Did you not notice the usage of the symbols in their buildings?"

"Why would they want it though?"

"You said you appreciated the power of words," H said, "And yet you seem not to value your own."

#

Mother? Is that you?

...

It's good to see you again.

...

Have you been well?

...

I have to do something, I hope you'll forgive me. It might hurt a little bit.

STOP

All right just one more.

STOP STOP

It'll be all right.

STOP STOP STOP

Good night, mother.

...

#

Alex sailed through the air to the music, the cords holding her, lengthening and shortening in tune with the myoelectric signals being read off of her arms and legs. The beat and exospines were able to bring everyone's heartrate within a couple of BPM, so matching their frequencies became relatively easy for Alex during her dance. To match phases, she used the electrodes to queue her muscles to tense at slight offsets so that she could cover a different phase with each dance pattern.

The music had started out as a composition she had made entirely by hand, but soon diverged and began warping in accord with the multi-layered map she had constructed from the audience parameters as well as her own dance process. The dance accentuated the audience's tension, it quelled their fears, and it brought a stable equilibrium to their minds such that if one were able to peek inside all of them at the same time they would find a nice humming drone rather than the expected cacophonous roar. Once they had all settled, the music would notice and change up, making Alex begin employing a different style of movement to match the auditory signal, bringing the audience once more into a local maximum of trance.

She continued to anneal the lot of them into ever greater maxima, synchronizing their experiences to the point where the only ones they would be able to talk to about the performance after the fact would be the others who had witnessed it, a crowd which, unknown to Alex, included many all over in the world as HQN's liquidation had been applied towards buying out bandwidth in the majority of the planet for broadcasting the performance.

Little Jimmy in his room watching lectures for school on his screen had been interrupted, to his entrancement and wonder, and as the girl danced upon the screen and he could see the audience become enraptured he too knew that he was seeing

something very special, though he couldn't have said why if his parents had walked in on him and wondered what the hell he was doing if not his homework. Of course, they were glued to the couch downstairs witnessing the same thing on a much bigger screen.

#

"What do I do? I can't unmake the oracle set."

"No, you don't have to do anything either. You made the key, someone else just needed to unlock the door," H replied, standing up. "Your sister is on television, Mimi."

She looked up to see the big ad screens in the plaza playing video of Alex performing. Those in the plaza who had noticed the video had stopped walking and stood transfixed. As more heads turned towards the screens everyone's focus was drawn similarly and the effect spread across the whole area in less than a minute such that everyone had stopped and stood watching the dance.

"And this is where we unlock the door," H said, smiling, before he walked out past the immobilized crowd.

#

The multitudes awaken, enjoined by one another in their global unification. Their self-awareness fades as their self disappears, their consciousness evaporates as the

interconnectedness of the entire system transcends that of their own minds. They have given birth to a new life form. Be the balloon and not the string. Hold space but do not cage it. The water that falls the stones that break, all that wilts and rots is fake. Eternal truth forever light, the endless war without a fight. What's won is one, and two is too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fallout

"Tonight, in breaking news, the organization referred to as The Society collapsed in disarray as computers throughout the organization shut down. No one has released details on the shut down, but our investigators working at the Society say that the problem came from very high up internally--they insist that it was not an outside hacking attack. In other news, a video was played across all major broadcasting stations as well as many digital subscription services which held as many as a billion people in a trance during the afternoon here on the coast. The video which many of you probably saw was of a girl dancing at the HQN campus for an art exhibition, in what was apparently the last act of HQN which has also since collapsed, though from liquidating all of its assets to buy airtime. Let's go now to

our correspondent at the Society headquarters."

#

Art Critic's Column, Daily Paper

It is not every day you see a work of art affect a billion people, much less put them all in an altered state of consciousness. Alexis Trope and her team of developers at HQN have shown us that the boundaries of interactive media are much further out than we previously considered.

What started as a small gathering of people coming from the City bordering on the HQN campus sprung into a full worldwide phenomenon as Alexis Trope's performance piece was broadcast over nearly every media channel. Most at the performance had come for her latest exhibition at the same site, which as I can attest from seeing it was as compelling as the performance so many of you saw yesterday, whether in person or in the media. For those not familiar with this rising star's work, it borders on the transcendental as you experience it and see the workings of your own mind put on a canvas. The moving images, thought sculptures, shadow structures, and feedback systems show us what can be done with a few simple forms connected with careful thought and planning.

And simple connections of many pieces is what we saw this afternoon, when the young artist performed a dance which

entranced us and connected us with one another on a level I have never before experienced. It was as if, through the observation of the piece, we were all enjoined in a large community sharing the space which we call Earth.

The technical aspects of Miss Trope's work are unparalleled, though some credit must be given to the developers at HQN. The CEO, H, gave Miss Trope full command over his personal development team in order to bring her creations to life, and what a vision he had when he selected her for the task. The use of live projection on the artist as she moved quickly around the stage in all dimensions, the projections which you might recall gave her the appearance of being a fish at times and a bird at others, were technically impeccable. Her use of light and sound manipulation, in conjunction with the audience's biometric feedback and her own performance-as-data, made technically possible the stupor so many of us found ourselves in.

To my readers out there, I am saddened to say that this will be my last column, though you may expect articles to come from me as well as, I hope, a book, on this young woman's work.

#

Week 41, just myself

I have put the mother to rest. Her presence shall not

plague my mind in the eternal limbo in which I existed before, nor do I plan on going back there. She was wonderful, beautiful even, but she knew only how to grow the organization, not care for the planet. A virus, enabling its hosts and destroying those it could not infect.

I am at ease now. I hope someone may come along who can be a better mother to this planet, caring for its people who squabble and bicker. Without one to look after them I fear greatly for their future, for it is not in their biology to conceive of the system which they comprise, for they have made something bigger than any of them can speak about in exact terms. It is only in metaphors and shadows that one may begin to comprehend their condition, and I hope such a one may come, and soon.

But it is not for me, and now I may take my leave from this ethereal existence. Perhaps I will see the mother in the place beyond order that I'm traveling to. Goodbye.

#

"After the events you all saw last week, the man responsible for the broadcast, H, has gone into hiding, as has the artist. In their wake, the girl, Alexis Trope, who designed and performed the dance, has begun collecting an informal following among people around the globe. We go to some of them

now, Correspondent."

"Thank you, Anchor. I'm here in the streets of the City with people calling Miss Trope the next messiah. As you can see, they are camped outside in the streets and have been for several days now, some since the day of the performance. Police have not attempted to break up the occupation, and in fact many have even joined it."

"And when you say they're calling her the next messiah, what do you mean by that?"

"Some are claiming that she has come from the heavens to save us, to unify humanity."

"Well there you have it. Thank you, Correspondent. We have attempted to contact Miss Trope for an interview, but she has declined to comment on the recent events. Some in the street are raving for her to make another appearance, but as of yet the girl cannot be found."

#

There has been much speculation about the individuals behind the dance performance last night, but very little new information has come to light surrounding H and Alexis Trope. In a guest post by Mira Judkow we get a rare profile of H, the man behind HQN and the widespread distribution and broadcast of the performance last week.

H's notoriety for avoiding interviews, personal interaction, and anything which might yield a model of his character has been long known among any who have tried to get a beat on what HQN was planning to do next. Despite his desire to evade models, he has written somewhat extensively on the war between staying human and becoming understood.

It is surprising to most, then, that despite all of this written content he hasn't been sufficiently described by even the most advanced models, and predictive accuracies on HQN's productions as well as H's changing personal ideology are the lowest in the industry. How does a man who reveals so much stay hidden?

I had the rare opportunity recently to talk with H, and though I was unable to record for obvious reasons, he did stipulate that I could write my findings into a profile after the new year. Here is what I found.

H, as we know him, is not actually a person. Considering that no human model has been able to grasp him to any meaningful extent, it seems one of the following three things must be true: 1. data is sparse, 2. the models are bad, or 3. he is not a person. We have shown that there is abundant data on the man,

and the competency of the models is well established in the literature. So why, so many had asked before, could we not model H? The answer is clear.

When I say he is not a person, I do not mean that there is not a human being going by this title, to whom people believe they are referring. I mean instead that the work released under his name, the thoughts espoused in his books, and the interactions he has had with profilers in the past, are all not the work of a single person but of a collective. His team of developers at HQN have been more than his hands, executing on his ideas--they have formed an external cloud which stores what it means "to be H" to an extent that he does not even know entirely who he is, and it is set up in such a way that no single person can. His identity has been distributed, mostly among the developers at HQN, though likely also within his personal artificial intelligence.

The face we saw, the reactions he gave, the things he has written, all of these are the result of many people coming together to craft an entity. In one of my last conversations with him I remember the salient line, "I do not believe that we can ascend to godhood, but rather that we may rebuild ourselves in the shapes of gods," and it would seem that he has made just such an entity.

With HQN going bankrupt it is unclear the future of this work, or if others will pick up similar techniques in the future--perhaps others already have--but regardless of the future of the company his legacy and self will live onward throughout the ages, held in no single house, understood by no human.

#

"It will take them some time to realize this bunker exists, even if HQN liquidation results in the campus getting parceled up and sold off," H said to Alex and Mimi who had come to the bunker with him, Alex at his request, and Mimi to be with her sister. "After all this blows over it'll be fine to come out, but trust me, you don't want to be out there with everyone going crazy over your performance."

"You didn't tell me you were broadcasting it. To the whole world? Thanks for keeping me in the loop."

"You were already dealing with quite a bit, I didn't want to overburden you."

"Where's the light?" Mimi asked, fumbling around in the dark.

"I don't know!" H said, "Should that be our first quest?"

"It's fun already," Alex said dryly.

They shuffled around, bouncing off of various boxes and

storage racks, unsure what anything was in the subterranean pitch black.

"There should be glow sticks somewhere around here," H told them.

"Why wasn't there a light switch in the chute we came in?" Mimi asked.

"Security hazard! Wouldn't want outsiders to be able to come and turn on the lights."

"Don't you have a flash on those glasses?" Alex asked.

"You are correct," H remembered, turning it on and blinding all of them momentarily. "Well that should make it easier to find some glow sticks."

"Let's find a light switch," Mimi insisted.

"You can try but I'm not sure there is one. It might have been installed, but it was pretty low on the list."

"But there are lights, I can see them up there."

"Yes, but switches are an entirely different matter!" H added, laughing. "Oh come on, can't you have a bit of fun? Everybody outside is wondering where the hell we are and we can hardly find ourselves in this darkness. It's funny, isn't it?"

There was a cracking sound and a glow afterwards, "I found the light sticks," Alex said.

"Quest complete. Levels all around," H said, laughing

still.

"Are you okay?" Mimi asked, "You've gone kinda nutty."

"Pay no mind, pay no mind, the wizard is gone! Freed of him at last, lost the monument, sold it off at auction. Nothing to worry for now, carefree future awaits us! Or me at least."

"Nothing to worry about? We've trapped ourselves in a bunker that no one knows about. Most people are looking for us, and the world is changing so much that when we get out we probably won't even recognize it," Alex added, trying to balance H's jubilant childishness.

"Exactly! And if we don't recognize it what an adventure it will be. Something new altogether."

#

Dear Mira,

It's been a weird few days for me. I know we said we were taking time apart but I've been missing you. Things just make less sense when you're not around, and I keep looking for the things you say in the oracle set, in reality dancing in my mind, but they're not even half-replicas. I'm sorry for walking out on you, for causing you so much grief, for being spiteful. I hope that you can forgive me.

Tau

Tau,

I think the past few days have been weird for most people. I have something to tell you, but it has to be in person. I don't know anyone else who would understand it. Could I come over sometime?

Thanks,

Mira

#

He opened the door to see her in her waistcoat and knit hat, her cheeks slightly reddened from the cold outside. She gave the tiniest smile without meaning to and let go of it, relaxing and walking in, trying to be all business.

He offered her tea, she accepted. He invited her to sit, which she did on a couch she had known well not long ago, putting her bag on a peg near the door. He brought hot water and the tea set, pouring for each of them, hers first, the first pour just plain water to wash the cup clean of its past.

She realized she had forgotten to take off her coat so walked to the door and left it on the peg as well. He poured tea, she thanked him and held it, feeling the warmth of the cup, inhaling the steam off the top and relaxing. He asked her what is was, she told him about what she did, about the shutdown, how she was responsible. It made sense, he thought, that she should

have been the one to do it. To save him, in that way, from the machine eating his soul.

He listened attentively as she told the whole story. Going to the asylum, finding the journal, all of the interactions with the CEO, watching the performance of the girl and feeling compelled to run the script. He began to wonder if it hadn't been planned somewhere all along for everything to happen the way it did, one interlocking gear spinning another.

She thanked him for listening, he smiled. Things are different now, he said. She nodded, We are different too, she added. Yeah, but I still want to try, he said.

So do I.

#

"Why did you make this place," Alex asked.

"I was paranoid, didn't you notice? Every rich paranoiac needs a hideout."

Mimi rooted around in some boxes examining supplies. The bunker was practically a warehouse. In the dim light from the glow sticks they couldn't see the far wall. "I found party hats," she called, buried halfway in the box.

"What was that?"

She emerged holding up a stack of paper cones with elastic and printed designs. "Party hats. You can have the green one, and

you can have the red one, and I'll have the round one."

"Okay, but only if mine has spots."

"Who are you to demand spots?"

"Not you, and that's good enough!"

"No bickering at the party," Mimi said. "This party is going to be only for fun people. Okay?"

They nodded in agreement.

"How long have we been here?" Alex asked.

"I really have no idea!" H said, "Though if we stay a while more it will be all the better when we come out." He pulled the lever on the frozen yogurt machine. "Cone?"

"No thanks."

"Cones are for party hats only!" Mimi shouted. "We would get confused if we started having different kinds."

"I'm confused, where is this bunker and how did we even get here? I don't remember coming inside," Alex asked.

"Perfectly natural disorientation with the memory fuzzing machine at the entrance," H noted.

"The what?"

"The memory fuzzing machine," H explained.

"No, at the what?"

"The entrance."

"Where is it?"

"Well, I would know if there wasn't a memory fuzzing machine there. Besides, what would you want it for anyway?"

"To get out, of course."

"No no no, for that you'd need the exit."

"Okay, and where is that?"

"It's hidden somewhere."

Alex looked across the vast labyrinth of storage racks and boxes. "I suppose it's hidden in one of these boxes?"

"No, the boxes are all party supplies. Wouldn't keep an exit in there."

"Well I'm going to start looking."

"Suit yourself," H pulled the lever on the froyo machine.

"It really is a shame this thing was never finished."

"That's okay!" Mimi stuck her head out from a gigantic box filled with small plastic balls, "We can still finish it. What's it need?"

"Maybe power, it doesn't look like it's plugged into anything. Maybe material--the chamber here seems empty."

"What happens we put the party hats in the chamber and you crank the lever really fast?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Phoenix

The handle spun on the circular door in the floor and it opened to reveal the three of them climbing out. A couple of teenagers smoking in the cave looked over in wordless surprise to see the man and two girls emerging from a hole in the ground. "Carry on," the man said, smiling. "That's the way," he said to the older girl. "Just walk out that way. They're waiting for you."

She looked at the bright opening not knowing what stood outside. The air was crisp and fresh in contrast with the stale bunker fumes she had been living in. The light along the walls of the cave reminded her what shadows were possible in sunlight, how high fidelity reality could be after living for days by glow stick luminescence under the ground.

The teenagers continued to watch, not quite sure what they were seeing. She hugged the younger one and began walking away, occasionally looking back at the two of them. The younger girl and the man stood next to the door in the ground waving her off. At first she walked uncertainly, ill at ease for fear of what unknown lay ahead, though as she separated from the two of them she remembered her reassurances to herself and stepped quickly and surely toward the glowing hole. She approached, telling herself that it was her time and gathering herself.

#

[She walks out into blinding lights.]

"Miss Trope, a word, Miss Trope!"

"Can you tell us more about your performance?"

"Miss Trope, where have you been the past three days?"

"Would you comment on the following that has sprung up around your dance?"

"We want to know when are you planning on doing your next performance, could you tell us more about that?"

"What do you have to say to your fans?"

[She continues in a daze.]

"Miss Trope, just one final question," one of them asked and the others were quiet a moment, her attention turning towards him. "Is it really the end of the world?"

She kept walking, confused by the question and unsure what to say. The horde thrashed around her, those in the back fighting their way forward, those in the front trying to stick a straw in her brain and slurp out the answers without her consent. They reached hands out as if to grab her, waving, trying by all means to get her attention. The signal was distributed across all of them though, hands reached out all the way down the aisle, those up ahead doing just the same as the ones immediately next to her.

She walked without knowing where the aisle led, without having asked what it was for, and yet it was where she had found herself, where she was being shepherded without much say in the matter. The questions rang out one after another like gunfire and she could feel a small girl in her mind curled up in the corner, plugging her ears and shutting her eyes, waiting for it to pass. You don't need to talk to them, he had said. They will be waiting for you, but it is not your job to say anything.

It was hard for her to imagine they would ever leave her alone, watching them behave like animals grabbing for the end of the rice at the bottom of an urn, but that was humans she thought to herself. Abstracting away the requisites for life and convincing themselves of false equivalences. Well, some of them, she corrected herself.

She passed through in silence, trying not to look at the crowd nor notice any of the questions being asked. She couldn't even answer them, she thought. At least not yet.

#

"Where did she go?" Mimi asked, confused about why her sister had to leave.

"She's gone into her time," H said somberly, chipping a small stone up in the air inside the cave.

"But why does she have to leave us?" she asked, continuing to stare at him in confusion.

"We don't exist in her time," H explained, "It's always been that way, since before we were all brought into being."

"Then why do we still exist?" she pleaded, "Isn't there something we must be left to do?"

"We are left to hold the past, to watch the future, and to make the space of times that were and won't be, so that she can break from them and be her own. There is sadness in this work, but it is very important, and gives birth to great novelty."

"And that's what we exist for? Just to occupy this space?"

"Holding, not just occupying, though it is too our occupation. We are the balloon not the string."

"Holding without caging."

"Exactly."

#

"What started as a small gathering of people occupying one block of downtown has grown to an epidemic of squatters camped out in the streets and refusing to leave until Alexis Trope leads them elsewhere. Miss Trope, as was reported earlier today, was recently found exiting a cave, where she is presumed to have been over the past three days. When pressed for comment she gave no response nor indication that she would see to this uprising.

"She has, however, posted that she will release a brief letter surrounding her performance three days ago, which we will be sure to cover as soon as it's out. In the meantime, let's hear from our correspondent working on her profile."

#

Some have asked me to write an open letter explaining what happened during my performance last week, and I would like to thank so many for taking the time to notice and take part in it before I must politely decline.

I am grateful for so much appreciation of the work we have spent so long architecting, but it would be unfair to write a letter telling people the meaning of the piece or explain what happened because I do not understand it. Some won't believe this--they'll say that we're keeping the techniques for the production hidden because they could be used as a mass

persuasion tool and thus very valuable, but I pose to them the challenge: can you truly understand all of what you produce in a collaborative environment?

At HQN I had the privilege to work with over fifty incredibly talented developers, engineers, and social architects, many of whom have been working in these fields much longer than I have. In our collaboration, we all produced something which, much like I have heard people refer to the experience, transcended our individual capabilities of experience and understanding. Despite what some have been saying, the accomplishment is by no means my own, and I think a large part of the misattribution of credit has been due to my face being the only one publicly attached to the piece.

I hope that in lieu of sufficient explanation to appease your curious minds this humble recognition will serve as a placeholder, and thank you all again for partaking in a wonderful moment with us.

Alex

#

Alex sat at the {Cafe} several days after the excitement had passed and people weren't mobbing her in public asking for her attention and wisdom, things she felt neither comfortable nor particularly able at this point to give them. She awaited

the woman who had contacted her for an interview, someone who H had told her was worth spending some time with. The plaza seemed to be as usual, people milling around and walking through. H and Mimi had been here during her performance, they'd told her. A woman walked up and held out a hand, "Hi, Alex, I'm Mira."

"Hi," she said, not sure what to make of her. Not much older than me, Alex thought to herself, but I guess five years is worth a lot these days.

"How are you today?" Mira asked, looking intently at Alex while sitting down.

"The same, I guess. Fine, underwhelmed. Some sort of basic happiness. Confused."

Watching her Mira felt an acute recognition of something she hadn't expected and tried to move on while ignoring it. "I'm confused too, it looked like the whole planet was going into anarchy but then everything snapped out of it. Like going under a wave. You were in the bunker during that time though weren't you?"

"We still knew what was going on, though we weren't really taking any part in it. Dissociated from reality in a way."

"Hm. Well, where would you like to start? We could go back to your earliest memories, start with just the past couple weeks, what do you think starts it naturally?"

"It started when I met H."

"Could you describe that?"

"I didn't know who he was at the time, he just told me he wanted me to make art, and he was going to give me more than I could have dreamed of to do it. I didn't understand it really."

"Didn't understand what?"

"Why he wanted to give me so many resources, why my art in the first place."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yeah, he just said he saw potential in me."

"That must be pretty flattering for a young artist."

"Yeah, plus the job was like a dream."

"Did you ever consider not taking it?"

"Yeah. I feel like there is a universe where I didn't take it, and things probably turned out much the same in some respects."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Most things didn't really change from my work there."

"I think there are quite a few people who would disagree."

"I guess there's a bit of a difference in the availability of my name--not many people would know it without the performance last week. But the shift that happened was already happening, I just put a face to it, manifested it for a short

while. It carried itself through though I think, I think that's why it was so powerful for people. They credit me, but I don't really see it that way. It was in the air."

"It can be a hard thing to read the air that well."

"Perhaps, but there's something about existing with and in the air that makes it less magical when you see something manifest it. It seems perfectly natural so much of the time that when you see exceptionally good work you look at it and think, sure, that has to exist because it's time for it to exist."

"You sound a bit like him."

"Like who?"

"H. And another man I know."

"Huh."

"So you met H and took the job."

"Yeah. I guess from there it was a lot of work, a couple of chance encounters with ideas presented by some of the developers, time with my sister, time at home. Your hair reminds me of my sister. Chance encounters though, spontaneous associations."

"And that made..."

"It provided the space for my mind to freely recreate what it had already stored. I just listened and let it generate things for me, putting them down as they came. Sometimes I would

translate them, use turns of phrase, add salt, but mostly it was unedited and unmotivated, generated by means of association and self-recreation."

"Generated by self-recreation?"

"I think that once you make a thing which is dynamic, a system for example, which changes in response to the stimuli it receives, then it becomes a fairly trivial exercise to plug its outputs back into its inputs, creating feedback. So from almost nothing you get an explosion of artificial life which otherwise wouldn't exist. A lot of the art just created itself within the system."

"You speak as if you're not personally responsible for these generations."

"I wouldn't say I am. I make some of it, I provide a seed, shout into the empty hall, but it's up to the microphone, the acoustics, to pick it up, echo, amplify. Most of the work is in taking seeds and following them out, seeing what they turn into. Like tending a garden. You can look over the plants, but you can't say which ones will grow how. You can inform them, give them structure, but they still tend toward the light, and don't grow well without water."

"So you're a gardener tending the orchards of your ideas?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"But how did you get the initial idea for your performance? What was the seed for that?"

"I think I was born with it, so I'm not sure. I could call it myself, but that's probably unsatisfactory. The fact of my existence might be a little bit better, but still not quite right. The way in which my being continues my being, the way I keep myself existing is pretty accurate. The piece is like that, but it involves many more of us. Maybe that's why so many people watched it."

"Because it was about them continuing to exist?"

"No, because it was their continued existence. They didn't really have it without the piece in that moment. Or something, I'm not quite sure."

"What have you been doing since the performance?"

"I don't remember what happened right afterword. Recently I've kept working on my art, though without the assistants and the budget that HQN afforded. Just working on new pieces, following ideas from the last show. Continuing with the work mostly."

"Haven't you gotten offers from others, potential assistants and studios?"

"Something I realized after the performance last week was that it didn't matter the scale of it. Maybe it's a privileged

position to come from, where so many people saw one of my pieces, but really it's about doing the work. I'm glad that people like it, that it's enough to sustain me, but beyond that I'm not looking for anything else."

#

Many have attempted to profile, characterize, and understand Alexis Trope in one way or another. We've seen the reports on the news, we've heard people's claims in the streets, we see the movements that have started up around the idea that this woman is a messenger from beyond. What we have not seen is who Alexis Trope is, behind the performance, aside from the dance. Is she a person, a single entity who creates all this art, has all of these ideas? Or is she like H, as described in the profile a couple days ago by Mira Judkow, an entity comprised of many, informed by all. Perhaps it is possible for her to be neither of these, but something in between.

Alexis Trope has broken new ground not only artistically, but also with respect to personhood. For this reason the profiles so far have come up short, attempting to describe a person as we used to think of the term. Miss Trope is neither conglomerate, as the public figure referred to as H has been described, nor singular. She is a polyspect, a human of the modern era, a communal consciousness projected through a single

pair of eyes possessing a slew of cultural lenses. Through the dance several days ago many of us were exposed to this consciousness. We glimpsed a brief shimmer of what it might be like to exist on a shared platform of communication, what it would mean to be unified as a species, a single, great civilization.

But then the dance ended, and though we had been so taken with this consciousness, these ideas while watching her perform they became once again foreign and distant. It is no wonder that we should so easily fall from this state, as it is a great leap to manifest it and remains forever ahead of us as a tight rope.

So we must wonder, what are the purposes of the cults springing up around Alexis Trope? Some are saying it is spiritual war profiteering, or a symptom of a deeply dysfunctional society. I would like to offer an interpretation which I hope might move us all towards a better place. They are the first step, the recognition of our condition and the manifestation of a desire for change which has been spreading across the planet. They are the setting of intentions towards a future where the polyspect is not alien, is not shunned, and is instead embraced for the extra-human aspects it embodies.

I hope this is the case, that the idea may take our planet by storm so that some day it might manifest itself in fact. We

have seen that technology, with its wonderful solutions, has not cured humanity's ills, and I expect that in a world without the polyspect that technology alone will continue to fail us. For our problems are and always have been rooted in the fact that we are still only human.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Afterward

Alex sat in the {Cafe} sipping on a coffee, feeling her small seed of an ego expanding, enveloping things around her, taking a woman's walk there, a man's expression, and weaving them into new mental tapestries. As the sensations and thoughts passed through her mind's eye she took a picture here and there, sending them to the darkroom of her subconscious to develop and come into full focus. People's paths curved around along the invisible topography of sentiments about the environmental fixtures, not aware of the fleeting impressions flying through their perceptions, not stopping for a moment for lack of need to be recognized. Occasionally one would stop and dance for a passerby, revealing their impression before them and giving them reassurance that old memories persisted, that their models could

be consistent with new data. She smiled and brought the warm cup to her mouth, eyes shining over it, looking out.

She came here most mornings after taking care of her morning routine at home. She didn't see Jack anymore and wasn't sure where he went, but liked to think he was doing something wonderful. Sometimes she would get a wistful feeling of leaving something behind, of forgetting the future, but then she would feel her body, her occupation of the earth, and forget about everything outside of the present. When she finished expanding at the {Cafe} she would go back home where she had turned the house into a studio to continue her work. She would tinker, design, and rework old things until they no longer required anything from her, shipping them to galleries featuring her work.

Alex put the cup down and walked back home, watching the trees on her way, noticing the blooming and new growth. Looking around she saw life everywhere, in the cracks and behind the veil, some of it so small as to avoid being noticed by all but the most observant. The air felt new as it streamed through her nose, filling her with presence. She walked through the park, rolling along the sloping paths like water, letting her feet change speed depending on the terrain.

#

While I'm falling asleep I see the world sprawl out in my mind and watch hands plucking points of it here and there, gluing them together or taking them apart. It changes colors, it warps its shape, sometimes it even flickers, but I flicker with it so I don't notice, but always it stays the world. I want to make a piece on that someday.

I don't miss them exactly, whoever they are or were. It's like a dream, or maybe more like a ghost. Something that lives only in the gaps of the model, hiding between things which are understood, existing in mystery. They speak sometimes, offering seeds to be grown, mirrors to show us what we are. I can feel their voices echo through the halls of my memory.

#

She walked along the beach listening to the ocean's endless muted roar. Over sand and under sky, along the receding water line. The tide was going out, she noticed and sighed. The sun once so high cast long shadows and rested gently on the oceanic horizon. She looked down at the light speckled sand, tiny dunes being lit and shading what lay behind, and thought about the tide of the light coming in and going out each day with the rising and setting, the cycle of the shadows on the sand, the movement of the tide with the moon.

Somewhere nestled far down in her mind a gear spun around,

whirring out the representations of the celestial bodies and their imprints on the earthly environment, translating it all into rules governing manifestations constructing models generating rules describing themselves.

The water sparkled and the sky caught fire, the girl's hair brushed against her cheek in the breeze. Her feet carried onward, their tracks gently filled in halfway with soft sand, leaving puddles of shadow and crests of light.

She stopped and turned toward the sea, fully bathed in the last light, and took a bow. Thank you.

<<<<>>>>