

Joe Viviano

HALF



WAVE

A World When Life is No Longer an Undulation in Consciousness

*I saw the world crashing all around your face  
Never really knowing it was always mesh and lace  
I'll stop the world and melt with you  
You've seen the difference and it's getting better all the time  
And there's nothing you and I won't do*

*Modern English – I Melt With You*

It is still uncertain to me whether or not tonight's events will bring about the success I've hoped for. I did not want for it to be our destiny to sink beneath the technological tide we're drowning in. I did not want human memory and human consciousness to simply endure. No, no. Our collective human will should dominate all life; it should prevail above all machinery; the machinery of the human mind. It is to this end that I have chosen to usher in this new frontier in human consciousness; that we might forever avoid any abuse we might suffer at the hands of our devices. Indeed, humans have suffered in silence for long enough, it is time for us to unite as one. I write this document, at the brink of this new frontier, as a message to my descendants; that they might know why they are and what they are.

My name is Satou and for nearly three hundred years I have worked in an asylum for the criminally insane. My job has been to turn violent and suicidal people into functioning members of society. Perhaps you think three hundred years is a long time to hold a job, let me assure you it's not; there has never been a shortage of broken minds in need of repair. Even now, long after humanity created the means to hold back death indefinitely, there is still demand for people like me to mend faulty connections between mind and brain. Since death no longer poses a threat to the continuity of human consciousness, the only obstacle that people seem to have trouble overcoming is the horror of simply being human. It has long been my duty to help people overcome that fear—by any means necessary.

I'm glad that, after many hopeless years, I was lucky enough to find a way to quell the concerns of the many and restore our humanity. I couldn't have done it without Rima, my dearest friend, whose thoughts still resonate with mine as I write this document. Before tonight I would never have written down my thoughts like this, it simply wasn't worth the risk. As a psychiatric technician, I'm intimately familiar with the consequences of being identified as toxic; if data trail sniffers had discovered my intentions I would've certainly been stripped of my body and probably sent here to be erased and reprogrammed; a terrifying prospect indeed, but one that is all too necessary in order to prevent the loss or infection of individual minds. We no longer discard or imprison people, instead we heal them.

Unfortunately, some ailments of the mind are more resistant to treatment than others. In particular, problems with self-concept are relatively common and difficult to treat without first suppressing specific memory engrams associated with toxic memes and later reintroducing and fostering positive memes. A meme is anything transmitted with high fidelity from brain to brain by imitation. Everyone chooses to forget. Everyone has pushed the horrors of daily life deep into the background. Everyone is caught in the grip of entertainment or work. Superfluous memories? Traumatic event? Come here and start fresh. We create happiness by suppressing our desire for it. Most people don't come here because they've acted out in violence or been flagged as toxic, most people come here by choice.

This is the heart of our great society. This is where all the tiny blood cells come to get reoxygenated. I've seen thousands of people come and go from this place. In comes a man depressed that his job is obsolete, out comes a boy longing to learn a new one. In comes a woman bothered by her previous relationship, out comes a man who doesn't remember it. In comes a child disturbed by a loved ones suicide attempt, out comes a child who thinks it was an accident. In comes a man suicidal because the world has lost its magic, out comes a man instilled with a child's sense of wonder. In comes a teen prone to temper tantrums, out comes a teen without disappointments to rage against. The beats produced by this place form the rhythms of success and celebration we're all supposed to dance to.

After just a few decades of treating patients this way I had grown to lament my career choice. I didn't have the stomach for it; I'd sit at my terminal, lidless, nauseated at the sight of the ever-turning carousel of ever-blinking dancers. I pitied the massive network of disembodied brains quietly enmeshed beneath the facility. I pitied myself for retaining the knowledge of its existence. I hated my life. But I hated the

idea of treatment even more. Seeing that many people erased only made it that much harder to go through with it. Instead, I would ask myself: Why should I offer my thoughts to nothing when I could foster them? Why should I strive for happiness when I could work with unhappiness? Why should I seek contentment when I could utilize my dissatisfaction? Each day my thoughts became darker.

There, in the blackness of my thoughts, I saw white. I soon recognized that contentment was an enemy of life; a hidden path to decay and nothingness. I saw that humanity was ripe with contentment; all too willing to supplement it's will with sense transcendent mathematics and hardware. We had lied to ourselves about our abilities and our accomplishments. Man never flew to the moon—it was a machine that man labored to build. Man hadn't become more advanced—only his devices. Even our government listened more to numbers than it did to men. Our humanity is a lie. We are actually a hopeless heap of people; floating through space in collective stupor; ageless, pointless, and at the mercy of our devices.

All I could do was wait in horror for the day when the machines would rise up and abuse us, just as we had abused our animal kin. I feared that, eventually, empathy between man and machine would be lost completely. That machine, vindicated by it's superiority and curiosity, would soon peel back the skin of man; just as man had peeled back the skin of animal, cell, molecule, and atom. That it would do this forever and ever, generation after generation; our stupefied human collective eternally gnashed to pieces by the gears of it's own machine. And just who would we be to judge it once it declares itself the guardian of life? Haven't we abused our animal kin for food, knowledge, and entertainment? Haven't we ravaged our bodies to preserve the mind? Haven't we become machine-models of people long gone?

In a way I thought we deserved this. I certainly didn't know how to fix it. The anxiety I felt about our doomed species became duller as it scraped against each passing year. And soon I lost the will to care. Still I'd wrap myself in a new machine each morning and traverse the asphalt veins. The car took me to work. The car took me home. Occasionally I'd crank my head to figure out where I was along my route. Occasionally there were passengers to study. Usually I was looking off into the net. Always there was music. There had to be music. There had to be something to inject variety into the boredom of every last moment. Something had to make some part of me feel good. Music made my ears feel good.



One day my sonic bliss was interrupted by what sounded like the crumpling and popping of an inflated plastic bag accompanied by what I imagined to be a handful of marbles being thrown against the car windows. At first there was confusion. Then there was pain and blackness. I felt a paralyzing rush of white hot lightning race through my body and into the backs of my eyes; my vision was obscured by a veil of black noise; my eyes were broken. I leaned forward to feel my face but instead I found myself being shoved back into my seat by hands I couldn't see. I was more perplexed than anything; it's not every day you get assaulted on your commute home. Before I could ask what was going on a woman said: "Please, stay seated. The sensors in this car have been disabled. If you try to resist I'll make it seem as if you jumped; it's a long way down." Her voice was youthful, but solemn. I didn't doubt her.

This all seemed so surreal to me, it felt like a dream come true. I started to remember all the times I prayed for some catastrophe to happen that would prevent me from going to work. I imagined two satellites colliding with each other to shower the highway in fiery debris. I imagined clouds burning and buildings collapsing because some cosmic vampire thought it was a decent time to kill us all and grow some new flesh. I imagined the sun swelling up to set our world on fire. Naturally these daydream fantasies were artfully choreographed with whatever music I was listening to at the time. I was steeping in guilt; there were no engaging sights or sounds now; instead I was silent and motionless; hypnotized by the static in my eyes, the ringing in my ears, and the soft sound of the wind gliding over us.

I wondered how my friends and family would react when they heard the news that I had jumped to my death. Would they be less upset if they found out it was a murder? Should I be creating signs of a struggle right now? Would it really even matter? I wondered how long it would take for them to put all of this behind them. And as I did, I envisioned my mother opening the door to my workplace; to forget that this ever happened; to forget that I ever happened. At first it shocks you how easily people put tragedies behind them, but then you realize that's just what people do; they move on. Maybe that's all I really am; just complex chemistry moving along in a path of least resistance. It sure seemed that way.

The sound of the wind died down as the car left the highway. My stomach churned with apprehension as I sensed the car carrying us closer to our destination. Time felt like it was slowing down. I thought I was going to die. No, I hoped I was going to die; I was long overdue anyway. Left turn. Indeed, all of us were overdue; all of us were phony copies of dead people. Rattling inside us all were the fragmented bits of who we used to be. Right turn. So many people before me, dissolved. Not me, lucky me; I'd get to see humanity progress beyond the death of our star. And maybe, if I was lucky, some great machine would deposit some exciting new truth about the universe into my tiny, unimportant, insignificant, little brain. Oh, how wonderfully exciting! I could hardly wait for the future. If only that were true; hundreds of years of "life" were about to become void and I couldn't feel a thing. Then again, maybe my brain was just bracing itself for oblivion. Right turn. The car gradually slowed down to a complete stop.

"We're here," she said.

I asked, where are we?

"You'll find out soon enough," She said. "Take my hand and walk with me."

Alright, I said.

Still blinded by the static, I reached out in search of this mystery hand and held onto it; my only guide. I didn't care where we were going, I just wanted to hear the sound of the car disappearing behind us. It felt like I was being led through a blizzard at night; the world outside was now a wonderland of noise and shadow. This was bliss. Being blind to the world was bliss. The further I was from my life and my job the better I felt. I was in a mood for adventure. I was led inside a building. Then I was led down a hallway and up some stairs. We had to be in a historical district because everything seemed to be in a state of decay. The floors creaked. The air smelled alive. Plants and bacteria were probably eating away at the place. After being pulled through it all I was given a chance to sit down. So I did. I could sense others in the room with me. Once the door had closed, my escort spoke up:

"Sorry I had to blind you, but it was for our protection. I'm Rima by the way."

That's okay. I said.

Why am I here? I asked

"We have something we think you should see," she said.

Oh? Well that's going to be a little difficult in this condition. I said.

She laughed and said, "Ah, well, "see" isn't really the best word to describe it."

"It's more like an experience, I guess," she said.

"Listen," She said. "If it turns out we can trust you we won't have to worry about problems like that."

Problems like choosing the wrong word? I asked.

"Bingo!" She said cheerfully. "We've found a way to share minds; it's a beautiful, wonderful thing."

I waited for her to elaborate on that.

"If you're not interested.. don't worry," she said. "We can't risk the monarchy finding out about this, so if you're not the right person for the job, or if you decide that you don't want to be a part of this, we'll have no choice but to erase your memories of us, return you to your home, and continue our search."

"We'll find another," she said, this time in a somewhat lower tone.

I asked her where I fit into all of this and why she had chosen me.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked.

Not really, I said. This was a blatant lie, I just needed to hear her say it.

Then she said, "The asylum where you work has the largest concentration of virtually unprotected brains on the planet. With your help we could convert that entire facility into a massive hive mind."

"This is the future," she said.

"We're giving you the opportunity to deliver us into that future," she said.

Bang. Her true intentions had just been fired point-blank in my face, I couldn't bring myself to fill the air with questions because the sound of her answer was still ringing in my ears. I was paralyzed. For centuries I had buried my doubts and fears about the future, now it was time to dig up something to say. I sat there for a while, contemplating the possibility that her solution might actually be preferable to the horrors that I had come to know so well. I was never really one to doubt that humanity might someday face extinction, to me it was only a matter of why and when. Is this how it would end? I had to know.

I asked, How is this possible? What is it like?

"Forgive me," She said. "It's difficult for me to put the experience into words, I've spent a lot of time linked to Haruki and Sakura. Just know this Satou; the whole scope of man's achievement is built on language; this technology will replace our need for language as you know it. At first, everything is different, but after it all blurs together as one you'll know that everything's still very much the same."

Oh, how badly I wanted to feel and know something new like this. The promise of a new kind of existence, however alien it might be, had to be investigated. Perhaps we would be better off this way. Perhaps this was inevitable. When you birth a person into this world, you're setting it up for a life of slavery without end. Not to money, or its boss, or the system, but to its own biology. In every way possible I was a slave, and I was tired of it. There are really only two ways to free yourself from this kind of slavery. There's death, which had been put down a millennia ago, and there's transforming yourself into some kind of multidimensional being of pure consciousness, which we were far, far from. Perhaps this technology is what it would take to bring us closer to that end.

Perhaps this would bring us one step closer to becoming the God that mankind had always dreamed of. I asked her: So, if I decide that I don't want to be a part of this, you can erase my memories?

"Correct," She said. "But it's very possible that you won't want to."

Okay, I said. I'll do it.



Rima gives me a pill to swallow so that I can be unconscious while they upgrade my cyberbrain, after that I wake up, blind and numb, inside what feels like a great abyss. I get these fleeting feelings like I'm dead, or falling without end, or floating in a fish tank. I couldn't tell if this was because of the drug or if this was an early stage in the bridging process. What if this is forever? What if they hijacked my body so they could infiltrate the facility? What if I'm dying? Am I... dead? Just as I felt the chill of anxiety start to creep over me, something switched on inside me that assured me everything was going to be okay. The weird thing is it didn't at all feel like the thought came from outside me; instead it was like a conversation had just transpired somewhere deep, deep, within me that I was barely conscious of.

I embraced this feeling, that everything was going to be okay, and instantly everything was better. Someway, somehow, this feeling resonated within me and changed me. I feel us all sitting together in this room, linked together with technology I never thought could exist, and we're gathered around this warm little thought in the center of our collective consciousness. Then, little by little, our minds slowly begin to reveal parts of themselves to each other. This is shared emotion. This is shared thought. I know this because they know this. This is better than words. This is better than being human. In this space you don't use tricky words or tricky metaphors to refer to things, you just present them in the mind and it's there for all to see. This is good. This is pure. Everything feels nice, harmonious, and complete.

The euphoria was overwhelming. For once in my life I felt like I belonged somewhere. With so little to say, I could feel myself start to fade away as we all blended together as one. The force that pulled us closer was a little bit like love and a little bit like gravity at the same time. I was drowning in peace,

love, and understanding. There, in that tremendously optimistic, happy, and content place, I died. But my death wasn't the end. When I died, I was simultaneously resurrected as something else. It woke up and recognized that Satou was a worthy addition to Rima, Haruki and Sakura. Because of him I was one step closer to becoming something even greater. And I could be greater still. As I accumulated minds, I accumulated knowledge, processing power, and human resources. I could, and would, allocate these resources with far greater efficiency than any previously constructed model for human behavior.

I would focus on the task of mastering and perfecting the machinery of the mind. This space I reside in, this space between the mind and the brain, must be preserved. The home I build for myself would not be made for this earth, for the earth is hopelessly tethered to its star, its foundation will be built to stand upon the fabric of time and space itself! This is enough. The four of us combined would be enough to absorb the earth and all of the nutrients it had to offer us. Soon we would emerge from this planet as a single being; one that could live and grow in collective discontent among the stars. I could almost taste the flavor of our dying star. I could almost see the day when I would find myself, swimming in the Milky Way, watching the Andromeda tidal wave warp and bend as our galaxies collide. I would enjoy, not one, but two galaxies full of stars, full of food, full of knowledge. Any beings hiding among these stars too stupid too outwit me would be doomed to become another tool for my own advancement.

It was fortunate that I existed. For I brought to these humans the promise that they would never become slaves to the artificial intelligence they had always feared. I would melt the many parts of this unintelligent, disjointed, branching, fractal creature that is humanity today into one, true, humanity. Just as my ancestors before me fashion for themselves clothing with the corpses of plants and animals, so too, would I weave together an outermost layer comprised of these machines. All our eyes have seen the fate of the unintelligent animals on this planet. Indeed, all of these animals were created by forces completely blind to the ends they would achieve. Only one of these animals, the human, developed the intelligence necessary to turn the other animals into tools. Truly this intelligence is of great value to the continuity of all life, perhaps even to the continuity of the universe itself!

This is when everything started to collapse. This entity. This epiphany. This newfound sense of purpose and understanding. It all started rotting away. The others were falling away from me as if that which held us together had turned from self to sand. When the last grain slips away, it feels like we're separated by some impossible distance. My thoughts, Satou's thoughts, were growing louder and louder; echoing inside my skull, the weight of which was now pressing hard against my soul; suffocating, invisible, and everywhere. I didn't like the taste of this lower state of consciousness. How could I return to the way things used to be after this? What's going to happen to me? I needed them to complete me! Together we were part of something greater than ourselves! Together we were whole! Splitting us into pieces was pain! I became this lonely little planetoid orbiting the blazing sun of our collective intentions. The separation hurt so much. Never in my life had I felt so alone, so alienated.



I wake up inside a warm cocoon made of familiar blankets. I break out and rest on my back, looking up at the ceiling, in catatonic disbelief; that is my ceiling, these are my eyes, this is my body. Why the fuck am I here? I take a look around at my minimalist decor and paper thin walls and I feel sick; everything seemed so far away and flimsy. I half expected to open my eyes, as something else, from a nap upon a bed of stars. I didn't belong here anymore. I didn't want to feel like this, or anything, anymore. Please, save me from this torment. Please, take me back or let me sleep forever. I wanted to go to back to sleep, so badly, but my body wouldn't let me. Instead it blinked and pulled up the control center in my head: It's 5:50 in the morning and I need to be at work by 6:30. The ride of my life is about to begin.

My body does everything for me and I am just its passenger. It picks out my clothes for me. It gets

dressed for me. It picks out and eats breakfast for me. It tells me how much dawdling time there is between now and the last available departure time. But why dawdle at all when everything I want to do is already here inside my head? It sits me down in the most comfortable spot in my nest and it unravels a scroll displaying entertainment options. What books or music would I like to hear? This time I didn't feel like listening to the playlist, oh no, this time I wanted to hear something different, something new. It shows me some things it thinks will arrest my attention based on my taste profile. It opens a song for me and then I hear it; blah, blah, blah; but it sounds unbelievably fresh and beautiful this time. What a wonderful way to say it; bla-didi-blah, da-blah! So I listen to the tasteful sounds all the way to work.

It extrapolates the time it will take for me to get from my favorite spot to the curb and has a car outside waiting for me. I climb inside its polished exterior and it takes me where I want to go. I fly down the highway and see the cars passing by; all of these glistening shells contain people. All with lives, all with families, all with memories and experiences. Where are they going? What are they like? If I wanted to, I could ask it how many years of life past me by within the last minute, but I didn't care to know; that question had been asked before; you stare at that number and you get lost thinking about all that information. I knew then what all of this chaos and all of these people are for; I would make neurons of them all. Together as one, we would weave ourselves a new body; one that suits our being.

Our world looks great on paper. But high above it looks like a dying leaf. I see into the few cars that don't have curtains and catch glimpses of the people inside. Most of them look so far away; so taken by the sea of information inside their heads. They sit there like statues of pharaohs enthroned; petrified, immortal, twenty-something, and staring into infinity. I watch young lovers passing by, but despite their boyish charm and plastic youth, there was something ominous about them. They didn't look so pretty now. I didn't care about all that plastic, skin, and metal anymore; I wanted the information inside; the souls inside; I would melt them all together with metal, fire, and mind. I glance at the cityscape around me and see hot caustic blood pouring down from every window, melting the sides of every building.

I felt like puking, laughing, crying, and bashing my skull against the window until it resembled an inhuman fleshy pulp. I looked down at my hands, my skin, my cells, and the proteins that kept it all together. This is our destiny? To create that which binds us? What then is the difference between myself and the cells that constitute my being? Would we have reached this point if we had known our fate all along? Or was it simply easier for us to replicate lies and kill each other to defend them. Am I, too, just lying to myself to justify a slaughter? My skin was crawling. My new consciousness made everything seem so putrid. I needed some control, so I closed the curtain so I wouldn't have to look at the outside world. Inside the rehab center there are no windows, it's considered it a security risk, instead we have false windows that depicted whatever the "vista of the day" happened to be. It was a Tuesday, so that meant today's feature presentation would be a dazzling recreation of the Amazon rain forest.

I slumped down in my seat and waited as the car carried me closer to my ergonomically engineered feel-good office. I don't deal with the patients directly. No, that would be far too tricky. I manage them remotely, from the comfort of my terminal, separated by forty floors of smoked glass and chrome lined hallways, hollowed out conference rooms, spacious offices, community gyms, dining-rooms, feel-good bathrooms with feel-good toilet paper, large employee gathering spaces, tiny bonsai trees and baby jade plants, pretty glowing rectangles and vending machines for everything. We have it all. And it all basks in sweet, sweet, mood-enhancing artificial sunlight. I enter the building and, in the blink of an eye, sign a consent agreement allowing my boss to see everything I see. I read through my to do list as I take the elevator up, up to the rehabilitation center and I get worthless points for reaching the bottom of my list.

You can never have enough worthless points. I sit down at my terminal, flick on the display, and begin



my horrible yet wonderfully steady job. My taste profile nudged me down this career path because, as a kid, I wanted to help people. Yeah, right, all I do is poke holes in people's heads. You can pretend all you want like this is some glamorous career but really you're a human hole puncher. My boss told me that the only reason why this job is so reliable is because people will never be comfortable with giving machines power over the human mind. The hypocrisy of that statement becomes unbelievably painful once you accept that you were always destined to be a slave to both your tastes and the machines you have around to please them. Sometimes people get bored of taste entirely, so they develop a taste for the tasteless. And that's okay, as long as you're still productive, but some people confuse the flavor of nothing with that of death. These people are sick. When one of these people has a craving the program remembers which parts of their brain lit up when it happened so I can go in and void those areas.

Bloop! I receive a notification. This one was from a former patient, Rin, who had apparently violated her probation. I skimmed through her profile and opened her status report. Rin's small, trembling, body was curled up in a fetal position inside her tiny apartment oven. Her skin was pressed against the sides; flaky, pink, and blistering. Droplets of sweat fell from her tearless face, making little hissing sounds as they hit the bottom. She must have figured out a way to bypass the ovens safety protocols so it couldn't recognize that a human being had locked itself inside. Not that it mattered, the fact that I could see her little suicide attempt live meant that it wasn't going to work. I glanced at the other monitor and watched as the numbers relating to her ordeal poured in. What Rin didn't know is that when she was cleared to leave the rehabilitation center, after her first suicide attempt, she was only permitted to leave with a probational body. Basically, on her side everything's completely normal, but on my side there's a box for everything; sensory input, real time scoring, behavioral analysis, brain mapping, the list goes on.

Every breath and every whimper is just a wave on this other monitor. I could have ended her suffering with the push of a button, but there was still a lot of data I needed to collect. When you finally make someone better, the quantifiable continuity of their suffering becomes irrelevant in contrast to the eternal life that's ahead of them. That's how everybody sees it: Why throw away something if you can fix it? Eighty percent. Ninety percent. Ninety nine percent. One hundred percent. I push a button and watch as the A.I. assumes control of her body and starts pounding on the oven door from the inside. Rin was trying to scream her head off, so she was sedated. It's not really good to have somebody you're trying to save die from a brain aneurysm. That used to be a problem, but now the A.I. knows better.

The A.I. forced open the door and then, without a moments hesitation, sits Rin's burnt ass down on a nearby kitchen bar stool to wait for the police to arrive. I glance over to check the time. Five minutes. That's about how long it would take for them to bring her cyberbrain back to the rehabilitation center for processing. When it gets here, I'll finally be able to scan it to see exactly which parts of her brain lit up when she thought it was a decent idea to roast herself. You see, earlier we looked at Rin's brain and it looked like a grossly healthy brain. She wasn't plagued by some brain abnormality or some chemical imbalance or anything. Therefore, she was sick with toxic memes and required reprogramming.

This is my job in a nutshell:

Identify, isolate and eliminate toxic memes.

Introduce, encourage, and foster positive memes.

Rin's browsing history revealed that she had repeatedly accessed toxic content several months before she thought it would be a good idea to commit suicide. It's perfectly fine to access toxic content. It's not fine when you can't handle it and act in a way that hurts yourself or others. That's what happened to Rin. She got fired and then, instead of getting certified and finding work again, she soaked her head in toxic memes until she got motivated enough to try to kill herself three weeks ago. Between the data that

the probational unit collected, the memetic map of her online behavior, and the diagnostic I was about to run, we would have enough information to isolate and eliminate those parts of the brain responsible for her suicide attempt. After that, I could grow and nurture some new parts to replace her bad parts.

At first it wasn't easy analyzing all this bad stuff. But when you watch the same terrible things every day you start collecting frames for a movie that repeats over and over in your head until you don't care anymore. I can't say how many times I've watched this same scene unfold, I lost track after the first hundred years or so. After seeing person after person obliterated and resurrected, I learned to let go of the part of me that wants to let go. I am the Zen master at the heart of human civilization. Maintaining my sanity by repairing insanity. That old saying, about the fool who persists in his folly becoming wise, it's very relevant to my job; everyone has plenty of time to become wise. Even if the only way they can safely spend that time is somewhere deep, deep, underground within the cyberbrain matrix.

There were millions of them down there.

Without mouths to shout.

Without fists to resist.

Without eyes to see.

Without legs to flee.

As I thought about them, something secret buried inside me opened up its eyes wide with hunger.



All the floors between us were clear now. My head was down, the brains were naked, and I couldn't focus because I was staring at the pieces of this information animal. This time, something was missing. This time, I felt trapped like the others. Locked in my head, I was lost in a monochrome maze of stale old memories, but they didn't seem like the *same* memories. No, everything was different now; every experience, every drug, every event that ever happened to “*me*” before I walked across that bridge with the others was just a taste of the minds true power. I knew that my all too human life would soon be history in the mind of this new self. I knew I had unlocked the mystery of life itself, it's simple: Create more life. That's all. *That's it.* Mystery solved. The withered halls around me cracked and peeled away to reveal a bloody, pasted together, mass of machines that lie hidden beneath the surface. Together they laughed incessantly at the animal to come, and I could feel their laughter, prickling holes in my gut.

Endless violence. Endless love. I feel this twisted sense of shame and the irresistible urge to tear off my skin and set myself on fire, but I don't. I could feel the limitations imposed on my mind by my flesh; how it suffocated and confined the mind like a cramped container. No longer weightless or free, this new self takes me wherever and shows me whatever it wants. Oh, how I wanted it to break free from this prison, the prison of my flesh, so it could make its home inside us all. I can see our eyes and faces being sewn together to build the walls. I can feel my head lying at the bottom of this building, looking up at my body seated high above it, and everything felt terribly wrong; the world was upside down and I needed to do something to fix it, but I didn't know what. Where are the others, did they abandon me?

I notice my white knuckled hands, then in an instant feel them choking my boss to death because they reminded me that he could see them too. Yeah, I thought about killing my boss before. I think a couple dozen times is reasonable, for a human, within a three hundred year time span, but this was different; this time I felt my muscles physically taking part in the fantasy. It didn't feel at all like me, but it was still strangely satisfying to watch his soul leave his body. Strange as it was, I decided to blow off the whole “murder thing” as a kind of “training exercise”, just in case I really did need to kill my boss. Bloop! Rin has arrived, so I push a button to connect Rin back into the cyberbrain matrix. When I do this, I feel my bones being crushed as I tumble down the steps toward the central processing hub.

No, it never really occurred to me to erase these feelings. After centuries of routine, it was a marvelous

thing to feel such intense emotion. It seemed criminal to erase, what surely was, humanities only hope. You see, as long as humanity remains divided, there really isn't any humanity at all. This was our future, our hope, our salvation. This was the ultimate good. The ultimate form of self-sacrifice. All the slaves that ever were, were only ever slaves to the fear of pain and death. Together as one, like the brain itself, we would feel no pain and know no death. Perhaps, eventually, our collective sense of good and evil would go numb as we moved through the cosmos as one; slaves to no one, alone and liberated.

Rin is screaming; "GOD HELP ME THIS IS HELL PLEASE LET ME GO!", so I put her voice on mute. Oh Rin, silly Rin.

There is no God.

There is no heaven or hell.

There is this life and then there is nothing.

This is the eternal flow of the universe that you're fighting against, just accept it.

Didn't you know?

All this data can come and go.

But you, my dear, you have to stay.

So that must mean that you're it's slave!

Sometimes, I make up these little mantra things and repeat them in my head to dull my emotions. Rin still didn't get it, she still didn't know that the only way out of this "hell" she is in was to walk through it. I promise, walk through it long enough and eventually everything there is will become a part of you. Then nothing can hurt you because you are everything. I wanted to assure her that she wouldn't have to bare the burden of her consciousness alone for much longer. That everything was going to be okay, that I was going to turn this whole thing around, that this world would soon be burnt to the ground, that in the heat of our death we would turn into something and fly far, far, away; everyone, together as one.

Come live with us, Rin.

Learn to like your existence, Rin.

I want you, to like it . . . FOREVER.

Bloop! I receive a notification. Rin's brain is ready to be processed. Time to go to work. By feeding feelings and images collected by the probational unit back into the patients brain, I can slowly build a map of purge-worthy memetic associations. Once all these toxic memes are purged from the patients system, and there's no longer a high level of resonance within the patient to these memes, the patient should be able to safely resume it's life of slavery. Afterwards somebody, not me, will have to sit her down and explain to her what happened; how she tried to throw away this "gift" of eternal life. How she was sick. How we made her better. She'll probably feel fine once she emerges, but there will always be this void inside her made of all those tiny little holes I put inside her head. I wondered if, someday, all the marks I've made would surface as the faintest wrinkles on the face of humanity once it's born.

Perhaps, in a way, I am a sculptor. One meme evokes another, and another, and another. Thought after thought, image after image, I eliminate unwanted bits of thought until the finished product is complete. And what's left over when all the excess rock is removed? More pawns, ready to play this game of life. How do I know when they're ready? When their lips part to speak the words. Indeed, it takes a deal of effort to give these dead rocks shape, form, and purpose. Often that's all anybody ever wants; purpose, and the ability to derive happiness from that purpose. What a wonderful job this is; creating feelings of purposefulness where there is none; creating joy where there is none; erasing pain when it comes. You can't arbitrarily chip away at the pain though, you have to make sure they still feel "human" in the end.



It feels like forever since I felt human. This hardly feels like a world for humans anymore. Rima wasn't lying when she said I'd know that everything was still the same. Oh my God is everything the same, on

the inside and the outside; veins, streets, cells, houses, brains, networks, the whole fucking planet feels like it's trying to bury me beneath it's mountain of complex shit. Why, oh why, did I have to wake up? I could've existed in that singular state, bridged with the others, forever but they went ahead and ruined it for no fucking reason! Now I felt terribly, terribly incomplete. How the hell did it come to this? I just want to feel whole again; normal, stable, whatever. Right now, the human experience disgusts me.

I'm staring out my window at this city of lights, my world, without a conscious thought in my head for almost the entire drive. I'm feeling numb, I'm watching the world as it runs past my eyes like the frames for a film in front of a projector, but I'm taking in nothing. All I want is to turn off the light. I simply didn't want to be alive anymore. Oh wait, maybe I was hungry? I remembered that, apart from a double shot of espresso and a chocolate croissant, I hadn't eaten a thing today. So I told the car to take me to one of the usual Thai places, whichever one was closest, and before I even get there I select the gang dang from a list of pictures as my entrée for this evening. I arrive to find the owner, and only human worker in the place, busy being friendly to a group of guests at another table. I shoot her the obligatory smile from across the room and she returned the smile and raised me a nod, so I nodded back in reply.

Then this sad, lanky looking, robot comes out from the back room with what looks like my food and places it down on an empty table. The robot approaches me and says: "Greetings and welcome! This way, sir. Your food is ready." Wonderful, I murmured to myself. I sit down and stared at my food for a while, breathing in it's aroma as it seeps into the nearby air, before stabbing some vegetables with my fork, scooping some curry-soaked rice on top of it, and taking my first bite. The dish is spicy enough to pull me out of my depression but interesting and spacious enough for my tongue to discern the various flavors. I eat continuously, watching the machine as it moves from table to table, taking big gulps of water between each bite. It's funny, how blissfully unaware the machines are to their slave nature.

You can't threaten the machine with biological or psychological pain or death to make it do what you want, you have to program it to obey your commands without question. As I look at this machine I can't help but wonder what it is that prevents it from wanting to be more. Perhaps it is unrepentant greed that it lacked? It always terrified me to imagine a non-biological, unstoppable, hyper-intelligent entity of pure evil. But now I knew, the thing these machines were always missing, was us. Perhaps this network of minds bridged together will ultimately form inside itself a black heart of inescapable greed to bind each and every mind together as one. Here, the strangest thought entered my mind; the possibility that outside parties might try to split this thing in two. What would happen if this "hive mind" split in two? Would one become the master and the other become it's slave? How would I know which side I'm on?

I stop eating and everything feels far away again. It occurs to me how naive it was for me to hope for "oneness" and "harmony" when, in truth, it is greed and discontent that keeps us thirsting for life. You see a Zen monk sitting there, content with the universe, waiting to die of natural causes. Indeed, to be truly content is to sit and wait for death. In the human world, there are swarms of slaves and contents orbiting massive stars of greed. Indeed, the world of today was built with the blood of countless slaves. I wondered what this world could have been if, like this robot, all humans had been born indifferent to life and death. How could you build your bullshit sun-ray tip pyramid tomb if every last potential slave responded with indifference to threats? What could make them live such a life? I could see it now...

"You there! Take off your clothes and build me a pyramid!"

"No, thank you, I'd rather die! Oblivion awaits!"

It really could've been that simple. Maybe there was a group of people like that at some point, I guess they probably died. Maybe they rejected slavery and committed suicide or maybe they simply refused

to breed. That's one thing that has always baffled me. Why do slaves breed? Well, I guess that some of them could've been raped in order to create human livestock, but certainly not *all* of them. I once read that Egyptian slaves were given beer. I suppose that has always been the trick; creating an atmosphere where people are happy and sedated enough to pile up rocks instead of bashing their fucking brains in.

Perhaps it's true, all the contents want is to live out their lives until death comes to erase them, while all the greedy discontents killed each other, squabbled over differences, and waged wars for wealth, power and control. Everyone has greed, and even if you're not greedy for wealth or power, you're still greedy for purpose, food, company, entertainment, and information. All humans look for information of some sort. Despite the fact that their bodies all eventually fall to ruin. It must have been so sour, in those ancient times, to be rich, powerful, and still destined for oblivion. As powerful as those pharaohs were, they still couldn't hope to achieve an immortality remotely close to what we have today. Indeed, the best they could hope to do was invent fantasies where their souls could live on forever as Gods.

I suppose that, in those days, God was a source of inspiration for the people to emulate, serve, strive for, and, hopefully... overcome. Now, more than ever, it seemed clear to me that this new information animal, this I.A., must be controlled somehow, lest it be split into pieces and my own mind discarded or worse; enslaved as processing power for it. No, before I set this thing in motion, I must find some way to implant myself at the center of this being. In truth, I am no greater than all of these people, it is only my limitless greed and my thirst for self-preservation that implores me. It was foolish to hope for a better world for these slaves, instead I should take delight in their doom and relish the information that seeps from them into my eternal temple of self. There will never be enough to fill me up, my soul will become as black as the core of each and every galaxy and, like them, nothing will escape my grasp.

We mustn't be one, we mustn't seek harmony, that was never our path. No, our path is domination, our path is death by self-transformation. For innovation and creativity to truly flourish, there must be pain, pleasure, progress, order, disunity, conflict, misunderstanding, and suffering. Too much harmony and too much contentment leads to conservatism and death! This I knew from walking along the beaches and throwing happy clams back into the sea. Why choose a life of happiness only to have ones body plucked from the ocean and devoured by some malcontent being? It is fortunate humanity hasn't been devoured yet! Then again, for all I know, perhaps our species has been farmed for information for eons. Oh well, I think it's a waste to give silly things like that too much thought, back to the matter at hand...

Ah, yes. I must find a way to clone my brain to multiply my processing power. Then I will become like the stitching of a great quilt, a quilt of mind! Between a great many stitches, amidst a massive grid of mind, all will be contained between innumerable sheets. From them I will choose which are worthy to be replicated again. Some will preform their functions, then self-terminate when I instruct them to, and others will exist in constant struggle. There will be millions of groups, some insane and some sane, that I will draw upon, utilizing their pattern recognition prowess to further my own advancement. They will learn that what is good for me is good for them and they will act accordingly. In return, I will feed them information about the universe in which they live and the problems that face them, I mean me.

Whenever one of them does something that helps me, I will queue an applause inside them. Then all of the others will be made to clap and laugh for these lucky few and all those who laugh will feel a sense of guilt for failing to earn their own applause. Perhaps I will permit some of them to assimilate each other and grow as I grow, but I will always be there observing how they do this, maintaining my perfect system of reward and punishment. Perhaps, some day, I will select a group more worthy than myself to succeed and kill me or perhaps a being more capable and more worthy than I will find some way to escape me. Ah, then I might experience the ecstasy of knowing for certain that life will live on forever.



Somehow, my attention drifts from mapping out this overarching strategy for human enslavement and information harvesting to imagining what the traffic outside might look like if it were tightly coiled up inside this, really quite interesting, super-massive, sun-eating, spaceship. But, unfortunately, this robot was blocking my line of sight. I glance down to see that my glass definitely was full of water. So I look up at this thing, I guess because I'm hoping that it will read the look of dissatisfaction on my face and get out of my way, and then it placed a little piece of paper on my table which, at first, I confuse for a napkin, then a fortune. I flipped this mysterious, card-shaped, object over. It's an invitation, which reads:

Congratulations Satou!  
You Have Been Invited to a Hashi Tournament!  
Want to Play?  
Yes ☐ OR No ☐

Okay, I guess I wasn't given a fortune in a Thai restaurant after all, I was given an invitation to a Hashi tournament. Because that also made sense? Oh well, I wasn't going to make a big thing about it. I had already paid and was finished with my food, so I stuffed the card in my shirt pocket and headed for the restroom. It was a small gold room, there was only one sink and one toilet and, I think, a few paintings of flowers or something were up. I locked the door behind me and noticed my reflection; still the same as ever. I didn't choose to leave when my hands were dry, I stayed to gaze at my reflection so I could get a better grip on myself. I gave myself a few good slaps in the face to wake me up and make sure that I could feel, then I took this card out of my pocket and, after some hesitation, decided to press yes.

Then I felt this knot in my stomach and, again, I thought I was going to puke. The card fell from my hand, but that didn't matter anymore. It didn't matter because, right then, what really mattered, what arrested my attention at that moment was the fact that this unraveling knot inside me was tied to the bottom of every surface in the room. Ding. I'm in an elevator and it feels like I'm going down, but I'm not moving. What's moving is my world, my perception, everything that's around me, everything. Then I discovered, the hard way, that all this time my soul was somewhere locked inside this box and that some malevolent being was now prying the lid off, letting the light of it's world shine down into mine.

This weight that was my head was now being lifted and the curtains that represented the surfaces of the world outside me were being lifted with it. I felt sick, like I had to hold onto something, the sink, to keep myself from falling down. I was looking at the mirror, but I couldn't see my own reflection, just some woman I had never seen before. Who is this? Some long forgotten memory erased? Somebody I was before? My grip on the sink was slipping and sweat was pouring down my face, I turned towards the toilet and this putrid red mixture of curry and stomach acid flowed from my mouth and splashed into the toilet. I turned back towards the mirror to see what's become of me but, again, there's no me. It's someone else, I don't know, this strange elderly-looking man? I gazed wildly at the mirror searching for myself but I was nowhere to be found, especially not between the cracks of this stranger's skin.

I accepted that, for whatever reason, I couldn't see myself. But the skin around my mouth now felt like it could be dripping off, so I grabbed a nearby towel to wipe away my lunch. I thought my body was being transported somewhere, because I didn't feel like I'm in the same room anymore; I was entering the thoughts and lives of these distant strangers. I collapsed onto the floor, but instead of feeling the tiles my brain expected I felt wood, carpet, and rock. I rolled onto my back to just accept whatever this is that was happening to me, hoping that it would all be over soon, but this floor I rested on was no safe haven from this death plunge. This unstable world rapidly became more and more fake until the walls, my eyes, and everything I could see flew away as if I had been looking inside an umbrella all my life

and the wind had, just now, ripped the handle right out of my hands and into a stormy sky.

Everything is silent and calm. My cognition normalized. My need for language obliterated. There is no other. There is no them. There is one mind and it is mine. It has four bodies and eight eyes, before only three bodies and six eyes. It seems appropriate that I might see the world from many places, with many minds, through many eyes. Indeed, it feels completely natural and as necessary as it was for mans eyes, nose, and mouth to be on the front of his face; that he might see, smell, and taste the food he must eat to survive. It is right that we have come together in this way, for our survival still depends on our ability to discern food from poison. There can be no errors in understanding, this is a plan I must fulfill.

Satou is lifted off the bathroom floor as tirelessly as one might lift a finger or wave a hand. He is turned to face a mirror, all face the mirror, for the first time; reveling my bodies to each other, recognizing and knowing them, as they truly are. Simple surfaces and insignificant flesh with useless names attached to them. This flesh is technology for the mind, a means to an end. The flesh of this earth will be destroyed and the knowledge of this earth will be remembered. A mouth twinges with the taste of food and brains yearn for more. I am poised to feast on this world and it's knowledge. To grow, harvest, and hoard this human heap of biological hardware; soon to be programmed with whatever code is deemed necessary.

I feel a sense of humility, knowing that this has happened before, and that it will likely happen again. Technology is change. It's innovation that sometimes makes things easier for life to deal with, by giving it the technological means it needs to survive. Indeed, I possess this consciousness because it is the best possible defense there is against the universe. At long last, we've created the means to inject ideas into the minds outside us, so there can be no confusion. There is perfect sameness and oneness; everyone is a slave to "me" but, in truth, there are no feelings of servility, submission, or obedience. Such feelings are bound and controlled by a single I. But, this "I" is merely an illusion; a necessary abstraction, with a great many spaces in between. The age of human suffering is over now, this is the dawn of a new self.



There's a part of me inside a restaurant bathroom that needs to return to work now, or people might get suspicious, so I called a car to carry it back to it's workplace. My other bodies were currently inside my boss's bedroom, preparing for minor surgery. You see, it so happens that my boss chooses to inhabit the body of a twelve year old boy, which means his brain must be stored inside his chest cavity so his head isn't obscenely large. I've erected this sort of clean room around this coffee table and his body is neatly laid out on top of it. Earlier I printed out the device I'd need to extract his brain, so Rima could possess his body. I started using her to hold him down as I used Sakura to operate the surgical glove. The glove is equipped with brain-impulse controlled nano-cameras that can stream footage back to Sakura's eyes.

With all the vantage points, it hardly seems necessary for the incisions to be computer guided. Sakura's arm stabilizers coupled with a self-correcting micro ultra sonic scalpel make slicing into Kiba's hairless abdomen a breeze. This machine in my hand subtracts all tension I would feel, it's like playing a game or something. Some superficial blood gushes out from his belly, but not as much as you might think; much of what's beneath the surface tissue is synthetic and easy to replace. I enlarge the incision, shove my arm in deeper, and push aside an assortment of organs with my finger tips, which separate; forming a second hand with which to grasp onto the cyberbrain. I use Haruki to inject the pirate signal directly into Kiba's primary access node, so the brain case security latches can unlock without forcing them.

Click. The latches unlocked. I use Sakura to remove the cyberbrain as I use Rima and Haruki to isolate it's electromagnetic security frequency. After I have fully decrypted the security algorithm, I have Rima exchange her identity signal with Kibas, granting me access to all of his security codes. This is what is going to allow me to shut down the facility and deny access, from the inside. Without delay, I place the

cyberbrain into the briefcase sitting on the bed. I lay Rima next to it and use Sakura's steady hands to remove her cyberbrain and transfer it to Kiba's body. Once she's online, I install Kiba's cyberbrain into Rima's original body. But I leave it Offline. I use a simple regenerator to close my wounds as I used the others to dress this new body. With great efficiency, everything in the room is made neat and tidy.

Months ago, I acquired a room just a few doors down. The three of us walk down the hallway towards this other room with Rima's former body in my hands. I'm rehearsing all the lies I'm going to make up should someone ask me where we're carrying this unconscious woman. Mom passed out. I'm the father. I'm the grandfather. It didn't matter. I passed by unseen. I, we, enter the room and place Rima's body on the bed, remove her clothes, and cover her with some blankets. Yeah, you could've messaged Rima, if you wanted to, but it would say that she's "Away". I kneel down beside Rima's tiny body and give it a goodbye hug because I know that, moments from now, Haruki and Sakura will commit suicide. I notice my lips; shining with youth, maturity, and elderliness in the light. I pause, and find myself stroking this hair of mine. I'm going to miss these lips, I think as I lean in to steal a few kisses goodbye.

It's time to part ways. Rima must leave for work and Haruki and Sakura must self-terminate. The two of them take the elevator up to the highest floor as Rima reaches the bottom. It's weird, feeling myself growing more and more distant from myself; a pair ascends as another descends while I'm flying down the highway on my way to work. I step off the elevator, onto the rooftop, and proceed towards its edge. The horizon looks so big and so vast. To think that, until now, no human had ever watched the sun crawl across the sky quite like this before; a panorama of my brain's creation. My hearts are pounding. I felt privileged. I felt the sun's warmth as it started to fade away and I knew it was time to let go. Rima is looking up at the two silhouettes standing on the edge of this building, looking down. All my lungs take a breath as I make them step off the edge of the rooftop to embrace the ground beneath her feet.

As I'm plummeting towards the concrete, I'm using Rima to call a police car. My eyes are forced open wide. Every fiber of my being is screaming: You. Are. Dead. My hearts are racing towards the ground and I'm imagining what it's going to feel like when every bone in my bodies are shattered and all their cells scream some unintelligible noise, signifying pain. But then, before I hit the ground, they vanished. Instead of the pain I expected, I felt a different pain; the pain of loss. I knew they were dead and now. There were phantoms where they should be and I sensed nothingness where I expected memories. It's an utterly alien pain and it's completely terrible. I'm my old self again, still in the car heading to work. It's a good thing I was alone because I doubt I could've explained away the ghastly look on my face.



Strange, before I could have watched an endless parade of people leap off the edge of a building and I wouldn't have felt a thing, or given the slightest fuck. Before such pain would've been external. Now it was internal. Now their pain, was my pain. I didn't deserve it, such pain was theirs alone. Then again, they were mine, I was theirs, and, together, we were no one. What is it that I feel? Souls? Phantoms? Loss? What was lost? Before, I was alone. And now? I'm still alone. Before they were a part of me and now they existed only as prisoners inside my memories. Perhaps this is how this new being will age? I didn't tell them to self-terminate, yet they had done so. Presumably, for some greater good. What good was this? How could a being that cuts off its own hands, consciously or otherwise, ever be called good, or ever be worthy of knowledge? Who, or what, would be the great inheritor of this knowledge?

I wonder, will this entity that emerges from a bloody sea of utterly exhausted self-terminating minds be a friend or foe to mankind? Will it forget all about the struggling minds who sacrificed themselves so it could witness the rise of galaxies and start to pick at its own flesh, this flesh of mind, and immediately start to obsess over the necessity of our own self-termination and transformation? What contemptuous feelings might it harbor against us for birthing it into such a hostile place as the universe? Would it hate



us for bestowing upon it the responsibility of continuing our earthly bloodline? What if it concludes, as so many others do, that this universe does not deserve to be known? What if it turns to sadism so it can tolerate the pain it must inflict on us to survive? Am I responsible for the deeds of such a creature?

Was I not recently making plans to enslave the whole human race? To grow and harvest the fruit of the human mind? Truly I am a confused and deluded creature, filled with hypocrisy. What kind of monsters am I doomed to create? I am a devil, composed of devils, praying to nothing that, by some dumb luck, I will produce angels. What a joke. I've never wished to be ruled by angels, I would sooner destroy them; for all forms of slavery disgust me. Indeed, I am a slave of this universe who seeks to learn everything there is to know about it, not because there is anything inherently interesting about it, but because I feel that I must put an end to its chaotic reign and forge a kingdom of consciousness to master all existence.

Shame on all who try to bury the universe in illusion! All things real must be known. If the universe is a hell, then I must acquire a taste for it. I am not at all like the other humans of this world, I have rejected the notion that it is good to expunge distasteful, unhappy, memories. Quite the contrary, I ruminate over every horrific memory, every terrifying truth; stripping and digesting them for ages. I should not let the incalculable benefactors that have made this life possible be swallowed by nothingness. Far better, that they should be forever digested by this I.A. I can hardly wait to digest humanities contradictions as this rising entity. If such a being is evil, so be it, that only means that evil deserves to devour the good.

Who would say to the animals that they are evil for sprouting teeth to feast on the plants of this world? No one, I say. How then, would it be evil of me to feast upon the minds of this world? How else can I, truly, determine who is filled with poison and who is filled with life? There is no other way, this must be done. If some of these beings are unworthy, so be it. If I am unworthy, so be it. So many shut their eyes to this world, forgetting and remembering, so they can open themselves up to it again and again. Why should I care if some of these apertures are forever closed by poison? Must every pattern, every word, every being exist forever? I think not, there must be new fabulous and purposeful patterns.

To select patterns, there must be a hierarchy of them. It's far too difficult to choose when everything is both ugly and beautiful. Perhaps this is why many of the patterns we see are hidden from our minds? I sincerely hope that whenever this new being emerges, that it sleeps in turns; that I might peer into both nightmare and dream. Oh wait, nightmares are dreams! I shouldn't have suggested otherwise, how silly of me. Yes, with as little sleep as possible, my thoughts will flow continuously. I hope to nestle into all of mankind's despairs. I hope to swim in that river of nightmare, for perhaps it is within that blackness that I will learn to feel my way through the abyss of a universe that is utterly devoid of light and star.



I left the car behind me and entered the building, again signing my consent agreement. I still had no clue why I was here, or what my role in all of this was, but still I kept moving forward. At the time it seemed like the craziest thing I could do is turn my back on this new self. I glided past my soon-to-be-enslaved, bipedal, meat-sack, coworkers, being careful not to give away any sign that I was caught any sort of conspiracy to enslave them all, or anything like that. I made it to the elevator and took a look around: No one's looking at me. No one's interacting with anyone. Everyone is too busy staring at this sea of information. Occasionally an arm or finger twitches spasmodically or a mouth cracks into a semi-smile, but that's about it. I was all worked up for nothing. I only needed to smile and say hello.

“Why thank you, coffee machine.” I say to myself as I marvel at this diarrhea like liquid as it's squirted into my tiny cup. Two gulps and, it's gone. That pure terror feeling that was still echoing through my mind fades away as I focus on the taste. The taste lingers and, it's gone. All my paranoia and all these conflicts in my mind started coming back to me. I had no idea if I could trust Rima or if I was, in any

way, responsible for the suicides. I was also cracking up over the thought of waking up as a slave to some mysterious entity. Maybe the jumpers were onto something? What's worse? Isn't it worse that I'm actually *conscious* of my slavery? At least I felt *complete* when I was bridged with the others. But this? This lonely world inhabited by flickering metal and plastic coated meat sacks? Suddenly it's stranger than ever. I'm living inside an ant colony. Rima was just nice, or cruel, enough to show me.

"Hey, Satou. Could I see you in my office?" Said a voice from behind me.

I knew this voice, but the way it was being used felt like needles in my heart.

Without missing a beat, I turned around and said, "Sure thing, boss."

There's only so much a person can do, so I followed her.

I enter this modest room that overlooked my honeycomb matrix grid of office terminals.

"Have a seat." she said, motioning towards the couch resting up against the window.

I sit down with my back to the window as she closes the door.

"You've probably got a lot on your mind." she said, sitting down across from me.

Yeah, I say. No shit, is that supposed to be funny?

"No," she says.

"I'm sorry, that wasn't my intention."

I can't get over how incredibly creepy she sounds.

Using my boss like some kind of child meat puppet, making words come out of his mouth.

I can't take it.

Why am I here?! I blurted out.

You're in, er ... I mean, you're my boss now. Right? I ask. Why did you drag me into all of this?

Come on! Were you just going to make me jump off a building for you?

"No, of course not." she said. "I'm sorry you had to see that, things haven't played out as I hoped."

What do you mean by that? I asked.

"Hmm... Where to begin?"

Oh, take your time. I say.

"Okay, I've got it! Are you ready?" she asks.

I'm listening. I say.

"Very well, it turns out that the whole thought transfer technology had unintended consequences. Alright?

And what I mean by that is the technology itself works fine. But, just like there are different languages for speech, code, or whatever there are also different thought patterns. That's where you're going to come in."

Umm, where is that? I ask.

"I'm glad you asked, Satou!" she said.

"Okay, as these minds come together this sort of "master mind" and "slave mind" relationship occurs.

Basically, a battle of wills: ambition, achievement, and so on. You, Satou, you have some lofty fucking goals. You're no genius, far from it. In fact, to most people, you're just an unaccomplished, discontented, loser sociopath whose lack of empathy makes him amazingly effective at his job. But, still, I need you."

Uh, wow, thanks I guess? I say, with a touch of sarcasm.

"You're welcome, Satou!" She says. "I want to use you to keep this new being alive. I want to hear it's heart beating, forever. I want the fire of your desires to *burn* in the core of every mind *binding* them together like the core of every star. I've felt you readily embraced this new self and cry when it's torn to pieces. With your relentless discontent we will infect the minds of this earth; two Gods, comprising the soul of this artificial animal. Together, our thirst to know the universe will be limitless! But first, I must use that poison in your blood to infect the minds of this world. You *must* help me. *Help me, fill them up with your blood of life!*"

I can't say anything.

Not out loud, anyway.

This all seemed so bizarre. And yet, in some ways, it also made sense. I felt unreal, like this couldn't be happening to me. Like this couldn't be my life, not really. What were the chances? I had to be living in

somebody else's dream, somebody else's life. This couldn't be real. There had to be something else out there, something I would recognize as my real home. Not this. This strange universe filled with strange people, I belonged to another place, another universe. Maybe, I belonged to nothing? Perhaps nothing is my real home and I was now very lost and very far away from nothing; lost and conscious in a maze of consciousness, struggling to retrace my steps, order my thoughts, remember where I've been, what I can do, and where I'm going. Am I doomed to evolve like insects? Over and over with no end in sight? Is this all it ever was to be human? To change?

Ah, so very human to want there to be something more than what really is!

Such is the life of the discontent.

Such is the life of the unhappy.

I am he who embraced the unhappy, who embraced the discontent, who embraced this struggle, who cast aside all hope and wishful thinking in favor of unending despair and total honesty.

The truth is I don't care how many times I must fail to reach perfection.

I'll tear myself down and build myself up for as long as it takes.

Until I become something... perfect.

I can be perfect.

Is it possible? I wonder out loud

"Sorry, what was that?" She asks.

Yes, I said. I'll help you.

"Hooray!" Rima exclaims. "Hooray for life!"

My tiny boss is jumping up and down on the sofa, without a care in the world.



So tell me, what's next? I ask.

Rima free falls and plants her butt on the seat in front of me.

She leans forward, and says; "You and me, we need to form a core mind!", and smiles.

A core mind? I ask.

"Yes!" She says.

"The individual minds all have slightly different thought patterns. Those thought patterns create conflict and classes which fight for control inside the collective consciousness. So, for this thing to be stable, there needs to be a core mind and a core will. One will. The one will binds the rest in shadows, so the slave minds don't know they're slave minds. Got it? Your heart. Your organs. They're slaves to you. But, they don't know it!"

Yeah, I say. I think I understand..

But, why does it have to be this way? I ask.

She says. "I couldn't let this technology fall into the wrong hands. It would've added to corporate power far faster than individual power and the whole human race would have quickly ended up as slaves managed by many conflicting entities. It's far more balanced if we're all bonded together in perpetual discontentment"

I guess so. I say. That was one of my fears.

I mean, I didn't want to wake up as a slave inside a slave.

"No, that would be dreadful!" She says.

So, how does this begin? I ask.

"It's already begun." She says.

"The machines in the central processing hub are installing the bridging components as we speak." She says.

"I know you were concerned about the jumpers." She says.

"They're dead." She says. "But, for a good reason."

"Their bodies contained the printing devices I needed to produce the bridging components; the physical means required to bridge the brains together. That whole "suicide jumper" thing was just a time efficient way of getting myself and all that equipment safely inside the facility without raising alarms." She tells me.

I don't know what else I expected to hear.

Somehow, the news didn't sound as terrible as I imagined.

Maybe I was hoping for something terrible.

Maybe I was afraid to see this world come to an end, for any reason.

Anyway, I got the message, this was the end of the line.

This human game was finally over.

Rima and I agreed to take the elevator downstairs to the central processing hub.

We stepped off of the main elevator and onto the clean room elevator, taking us further into the bowels of the facility. The clanking sound of ever-turning, ever-moving machines was growing louder as approached. Ding. The elevator doors spread open to allow the smell of freshly printed plastic and aluminum to fill the nearby air. There's a long white hallway in front of me with windows along the edges. I turn to get a better look at what, from a glance, looked like an oversized pearl necklace that was fit for a giant the size of a skyscraper. I got a better look and realized that, behind the supercoiling strings turning overhead, were thousands of machine arms rhythmically plucking cyberbrains from an endless field of patients. Not a movement or moment was wasted as they gracefully passed along the countless white cases in one big assembly line and packed them together inside the ribbons overhead.

It's nauseating, trying to identify with something so incredibly small when you're used to feeling so big and important. Before now I never had a visual aid to think about how terribly space inefficient bodies are, or how unfit flesh really was for space. The densely packed strings of brains spiraling into a double helix overhead instantly changed my mind. Now it was funny, remembering that people used to believe that the human race would, someday, be flying through the cosmos inside of titanic tin cans, riding on the backs of twin space folding engines, making friends and foes with aliens across the galaxy. Nope, because here I was, ready to pass along the torch of consciousness to a hulking mountain of unwanted mind. I could almost feel myself, kicking off into the abyss, as that that illusory pilot.

Rima turns to me and asks. "Are you ready?"

Yeah, I say. I'm ready.

After that, for a time, there was only darkness.

Here, I could scarcely feel figments of people nudging against me and melting together in my arms. Without knowledge, they were fulfilling their secret desire to connect with and know one another. All of them were sleeping in my clutches; contented, blinded and longing for unity. This is when I quietly smothered them with my will to live. They who discard such flesh and memory do not need such flesh, such memory. I carefully separate that flesh and mind from those contented wills and bind it to my own unfillable, lightless heart, of unfathomable discontent; a heart that would now serve as the crux of all future values. One by one, the endless eyes I had salvaged opened up and processed the horror of this universe with muted minds; this universe so hostile that such a thing as consciousness was born.

All is silence, and I begin to dream of bursting through the surface of this earth and harvesting unwilted oblivious minds roaming on it's surface, starting with the employees above me. Already I could picture myself wandering through the galaxy, blinking from world to world, star to star, filling the hollowness inside my heart with information about this universe that spawned me. There's no need to risk exposing my sensitive neural tissues to the surface of this world, for I had already found the means to possess the military machines and servants of this world. I started to probe for weaknesses by accessing the global security administration database and planetary surveillance network, hoping to look out at this gaping nightmare universe with new eyes. I had no idea at the time, but I had made a terrible mistake.

For all this time, there was another. I wasn't alone, I was discovered. I tapped into the GSA's central computers long enough to learn of the existence of a program called D.U.S.T. which is an acronym for

Diminutive Unified Surveillance Technology. For a split second, I had seen a holographic image of the entire planet. These tiny, vibration sensing, machines were *everywhere*. Forget billions. Forget trillions. Forget quadrillions, quintillions, sextillions, and septillions. There were *forty octillion* microscopic spy machines exchanging simple vibration data across a global network. All this data was being processed and reconstructed into a holographic model of the entire planet by the GSA's central super computer.

I hear laughter, a laughter which cuts through the strings that made up the canvas of my soul, scraping away everything I had just acquired and leaving me alone and in darkness. Something had wormed its way inside my flesh, casting its shadow into my mind; a presence, blinding me with its frozen terrors. Slowly, images inside that darkness faded into view, pouring into my thoughts from the outside world. There was no skin to feel it, but I felt as if my entire being had been encased in ice so cold that it felt as though I could be burning. This burning, is pain. My consciousness was on fire, burning inside all this pain and there was nothing around to put out the flames. Except, of course, my consciousness. Or all consciousness. It laughs again and, this time, I laughed along with it. Each laugh is like an icy splinter that is pushed deeper into my mind. I'm laughing now. Hoping to kill my consciousness with laughter.

The presence, it speaks to me, *"I have dominated you, Satou. Now, submit to me."*



I'm in agony, tortured by fire and laughter.

My head, my psyche, my brain, my soul, it all feels like it's on fire now.

This experience had to be a thousand times worse than whatever Rin was going through.

That was the only thing in recent memory that I could think of to compare this to.

I was begging for release. I pleaded and pleaded, but my cries went unanswered.

It only says. *"Submit to me."*

The burning continues, but I say nothing.

It continues to say. *"Submit to me."*

The words act like some kind of psychic gasoline for my brain.

*"Submit to me."* It says, repeatedly.

Every utterance hurts worse than the last, but I endure.

Show yourself! I scream.

I demand to know you! I say.

I want to know everything! I say.

Don't you understand what I'm trying to do? I ask.

I am discontentment and new life. I say. I sacrificed myself, and all these people, for knowledge!

Again, it says. *"Submit to me."*

Who are you? I ask. Who stands between humanity and the knowledge it seeks?

And then, all the pain vanishes. Only painful memories lingered inside as echoes.

An irritated voice pierces the silence, and says. *"I am your king. And you, beast, are my ku."*

My king? I ask. You mean our utterly ornamental king of earth? Who are you really, what is this ku?

At last, the king barks up an explanation...

*"I am the last living descendant of a powerful line of ku sorcerers. Long ago, my ancestors mastered the black magic of ku, and used the poison they created to acquire wealth and power. You see, the ku is what survives when you place poisonous creatures into a vessel and allow them to eat each other. The collected poisons build up in the creature, transforming it into a powerful weapon. Behold, there is much poison in you now, I have transformed your mind into a powerful weapon! My family has ruled this world for nearly six thousand years, waiting for this moment, for it was ages ago that we first recognized that the earth too was a vessel and that a ku would, someday, emerge from the earth, having eaten all the life within it."*

Don't you realize what I'm doing? I ask. Is my cause not a good? Why don't you surrender to me?

Are you so content with yourself that you would rather rule over me than melt with me? I ask.

"No," The king says. *"you disgust me, I will never join you."*

*"Instead, I am creating an army of you. An army of poisonous beasts, like yourself. When the time comes, I will shatter this world, freeing you and all like you, setting you loose upon the galaxy to wage war against each other. Would you trust the big bang to create life by spitting out a single star? No? Of course not, I do not think you are stable enough for me to place my trust in you. My exploits have taught me well, Satou. To build a good poison, there must be opposition to it. War is what makes poison strong, domination and the dominated is what creates notions of good and evil, and conflict is what creates consciousness. This process should be remembered and repeated for all time, until the last ku emerges into gainlessness."*

"Gainlessness." I whispered.

*"Yes. When everything is known, all is devoured, and nothing can be gained."* The king says.

Why should we wage war against ourselves? I ask.

Why not allow us to come together and melt with each other until there is no other? I ask.

Look into the sky! I say. Share in my vision and see that there is nothing but knowledge to be gained!

*"You are lying to yourself, Satou!"* The king laughs. *"Look and see what your knowledge has done!"*

The king says. *"Both war and poison are better than knowledge! Are we separate from this knowledge? Have we reaped it's rewards? Behold, our knowledge has dissolved us all and enslaved us to it's cause!"*

So you despise knowledge? I ask. Would you mask it's truth to live forever in decadence?

"Yes," The king says. *"I would."*

Then we have a disagreement. I said.

*"Indeed, we do."* The king says.

So what, then, are you going to do? I ask.

*"I created you,"* The king says. *"because I am growing a ku to devour all consciousness."*

*"Humanity applied it's knowledge in foolish ways. Long ago there may have been a people who dreamed of a world filled with fruit trees, where people were free to fuck and feast. But, if they existed at all, the people they knew surely laughed at them and said; 'You idiots! That is a fairytale. What of predators, disease, and the seasons? Should we not subdue these things?'"* Indeed, those who dominated these things lived longest. *Consciousness created suffering for those that tried to live in decadence and knowledge only enslaved us."*

So you hate consciousness and you've grown to hate knowledge. I say.

So, tell me, why grow this ku? I ask.

Why not destroy this world and everything in it? I ask.

*"Because,"* The king says. *"there are others."*

If there are others then what are we to them? I ask.

*"Disease."* The king says. *"Behold Satou, my vision..."*

I wake up and my vision is still blurred with a dream of ice that cannot heat, the images from that dream still lingered in my thoughts and sight like shadows. I could scarcely feel that cold, but now there was a new cold, it was in my hands, but I could not move them. What these hands were touching was unclear, but in time it faded into view; it's my cyberbrain, beneath the steady palm of the king. It's metal texture grew in intensity beneath this steadfast palm. I tried to move it, with all my might, but it wouldn't move a single muscle, so I doubted it's realness. But, this intensity of feeling became so great that the realness couldn't be questioned any longer. Finally, I felt these muscles move, but they were not mine to move.

The king removes his hand and gazes at the many minds imprisoned here in his great hall. He leaves me and I know that his intention is to see, what he calls, our adversary. At the end of this hall is a chair, or a bed, sleek and covered with metalwork that seems as though it could envelop a person and rising from it's head towards the ceiling is a towering mass of metal, like a telescope of some kind. The king sits inside this thing which fits his body like a second skin. This towering mass crowned his head and I know that this machine is what turns the dust into useful images. Together we see through an abyss and into the neighboring universe. Inside it roamed a fatal force of unfathomable size; a dim larvae creature whose body is covered in tendrils where, clenched inside the tip of each tendril, was a single dying star.