

Awareness of Being

Part I—The Slumbering Giant

Something was wrong. Stopping before I rounded the corner and stepped into the special exhibition gallery of the M. H. de Young art museum, I closed my eyes, held my breath, and focused my attention hoping to detect any out-of-place noise that would do one of two things: quell any supposition that something was indeed wrong, or confirm something was wrong and discern what that something might be.

Nothing, not a sound.

The absence of sound did nothing to suppress the overriding thought that something was still wrong, despite any evidence to the contrary. Could yesterday's occurrence be the cause of my alarm?

I replayed the events of yesterday morning curious, if not somewhat optimistic, that in the 24 hours that had elapsed I could glean a nugget of information that would explain how the special exhibition gallery, home to an impressive collection of works by the four great renaissance artists, had been replaced by another collection altogether; albeit for a very brief moment.

When I'd rounded this same corner yesterday morning, instead of looking at my favorite reproduction of the fresco, The School of Athens by Raphael, I saw not only a different piece hanging where The School of Athens had hung, but another collection altogether. I'd stood

dumbfounded, wondering how such a thing could've occurred overnight without my knowledge. As curator of the special exhibition, there was no way this could've happened without my knowledge or direct oversight. I'd closed my eyes and when I'd reopened them, the renaissance works had reappeared.

I'd convinced myself what I'd experienced had been nothing more than some kind of temporary dissociative fugue state or hallucination. So convinced of my self-diagnosis, I'd dismissed it, forgotten all about it, until now.

I shook my head and strode around the corner and into the gallery. Rounding the corner, gone were the works by the masters, and in their place were various humanoid busts, robotic in nature. On the wall where the reproduction of Raphael's School of Athens had hung, a massive piece containing hundreds of black and white photographs of faces, each with a white rectangle obscuring their eyes, hung in its place. The placard underneath the giant photo read, "They Took the Faces from the Accused and the Dead... (SD18)". This was another new collection, different from what I'd seen yesterday.

I must be having a very vivid hallucination. What other explanation was there? I ran through the catalogue of potential explanations that would provide sufficient logic to explain what I was experiencing. Could I be aware of a hallucination while still maintaining my original state of consciousness?

Unable to answer any of the multiple questions that inundated my mind, only one course of action made any sense. I'd repeat what I'd done yesterday to test if the outcome would be the same. I closed my eyes.

Opening them once more the renaissance pieces were back. Just as they'd been since we'd received them for their 4-month stay here before they headed to The Met in New York.

None of it made any sense.

I made my way through the gallery and headed straight to my office tucked in the executive suites beyond. Once inside, I walked to my com-station, determined to search for a physician who could fit me in right away. Perhaps I was just tired. I'd been working nonstop long before receiving the Master's Collection, perhaps I just needed a break.

I sat down and noticed the red message light affixed to the vidphone was blinking. I logged into the system and played the message.

“Good morning, Charlie.” The pleasant alto voice belonging to a female I didn't recognize said. “My name is Mae Daniels. I'm a psychiatrist. What you've experienced the past two mornings are not dissociative fugue states nor hallucinations. It's imperative I see you right away. You may either call me back at the number listed on your vidphone or you may come by my office today at any time. You'll find the address attached to this message. I've cleared my schedule to allow you the flexibility this urgent matter requires. Please do not disregard or dismiss what has occurred nor downplay the seriousness of this matter.”

There was a brief pause followed by a slight scratching sound, like she'd covered the mouth piece with her hand, then the scratching repeated.

“If I don't hear from you,” she continued, “or you fail to come to my office, I'm afraid I'll have no other recourse than to contact the constabulary and have you apprehended which will only add unnecessary complications to a situation which we'd both like to avoid.”

What the hell is going on? I thought.

“I hope to see you sooner rather than later, Charlie and I look forward to helping you understand what’s been happening. Bye-bye.”

The message ended. Looking at the call data, whoever this Mae was, left the message last night after the museum had closed. How the hell could she know last night what was going to occur this morning? How could she have known what I’d self-diagnosed? I sat back in my chair, felt the cold faux leather seeped into the marrow of my bones, felt my blood run cold.

The solo voice in my head, asking a singular question soon became a duet of confusion. Duet turned to a trio of conflict, followed by a chorus of voices all shouting their queries in different time signatures creating an avalanche of sound that built to a crescendo of such dizzying sound it made me nauseous.

I attempted to calm down, tried to pick out a single question, hold it, try to find an answer, but just as an answer would start to form, 17 more voices obliterated it, each with a question of their own. My mind swirled with a cacophony of voices, each with a question I could not answer.

Above the din, an answer popped into my head. Like flotsam among a storm riddled shipwreck, I clung to the answer for dear life, white knuckled and desperate. I held on, knowing it would keep me from drowning.

With the answer I knew one thing to be certain. Something was indeed wrong. And that something was me.

Part II–Dawn Breaks

The thick Pacific fog that had covered Golden Gate Park and all of San Francisco with its sodden quilt when I'd arrived at work was thinning as I'd made my way to the address Mae had left on her message. Located on California Street in Laurel Heights, I stood in front of a pastel blue Italianate row house with a simple brass placard attached to the metal railing of the steep steps that led up to a narrow porch.

Mae Daniels, M.D.

105 California St.

Please ring bell next to front door.

Once I'd come to the conclusion that something was indeed wrong, I'd wasted no time. I called Joan Valstek, head of the museum, informing her I'd had a personal emergency and would not be in today. In the rush and confusion of the morning, I'd not given any thought to what now lay before me.

Standing at the base of the steps, I hesitated. Even with the knowledge that I was having a problem, my mind was pushing back. It somehow knew it was going to be probed, dissected, turned over, and inspected. It was rebelling knowing it was facing an immediate future that had more questions than answers. Wasn't there a wise saying about ignorance being bliss? Maybe I didn't want to have any answers to the strange events that had transpired. Maybe it was safer. Easier. My brain agreed with me.

I heard Mae's voice in my head, "I'll have no other recourse than to contact the authorities." she'd said. That was the splinter that cleaved right from the wrong, the factor that made me lift my left foot and put in on the first stair tread, then the right, all the way up until I

was facing a beautiful door made of a dark wood I could not identify. As instructed, I pushed the jaundiced button affixed to the blue stucco wall to the right of the door. There was no going back now.

Several moments passed. A part of me thought perhaps she hadn't lived up to her promise, hadn't cleared her schedule as she'd stated in her message. Just as the war in my head was about to declare victory, I heard the unmistakable sound of high heels clickety-clacking on what I imagined to be hard wood floors.

The door opened.

"Hello Charlie. So good of you to come. I'm Mae. Won't you please come in?"

I stood for a moment, second guessing my options. It wasn't too late. I'd come as instructed and she'd said nothing about staying. If I turned and ran, would anybody chase me? Was that a paranoid thought? The hum of questions began to buzz again.

Turning my focus to her, I noted how her brunette hair fell in dark waterfalls around a symmetrical face. Her root beer eyes looked at me backlit with a gentle, warm light that put a hush to the questioning voices rising in my head. As if she possessed some sort of gravity field all her own, I was pulled inside without even thinking.

Closing the door behind me, she came back around. "If you'll follow me to my office, we'll get started. I'm sure you have many questions."

"Yes." Was all I said as she led me down a narrow hallway toward a set of decorative French doors on the left. I'd been correct, hardwood floors were everywhere.

She stopped at the doors and turned to face me.

“Charlie, what lies beyond these doors is a safe place. A place free from judgment, a place where right and wrong are only two of many viable avenues of discovery. Most of all, behind these doors is a place of truth and trust. The only way we can answer your questions, the only way you’ll find any peace is if you trust me and are 100% honest with yourself.”

She reached out and grabbed the brass knob on the door. “Can you do that, Charlie? Do you understand?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Wasn’t there an axiom that people who said ‘trust me’ shouldn’t be trusted? I wanted time to process what she’d said, wanted a minute to mull over the large mass of concepts she’d laid out with a smooth and easy cadence that made it seem like she’d asked nothing more complicated than if I’d like to go see a movie. It was a simple yes and no question, but the weight of each answer felt like an anvil inside my brain. My head was full and heavy, out of balance.

Instead of answering, I processed the alternative. I thought again of running. I thought of escape, but the further I came, the less it made sense. Despite the ridiculousness of the situation I faced, turning my back on it and running didn’t seem to be the right course of action. At least not yet.

“I understand the words you’ve spoken,” I said, “but I’d be lying if I told you I understand their meaning in such a short amount of time. Forgive me, but I can’t fathom what’s happened or what’s still happening.”

She smiled an amiable smile. “A very honest answer, Charlie. See, you’re going to do just fine.”

With that, she turned the knob and pushed the doors inward. The hardwood continued into the room, but only into a 4' x 4' square the door swung over. There, the wood stopped and thick, lush, beige carpet began.

The office was spacious and warm with light birch and oak shelves lining one wall. A large bay window was covered with a white sheer curtain diffusing the light into a white blurred hue. A small desk sat against one side of the office, but the prominent feature was a round area rug, oriental in design. On this island of carpet sat two identical chairs that faced each other. She walked toward one of them and sat down facing me. She held her hand out, indicating I should follow and sit opposite her. Stay or run? Her eyes and smile exuded such warmth I had no choice but to follow. I walked in and sat down opposite her.

She leaned back in the chair. "Are you ready to begin?"

I kept myself on the edge of my chair, resting my hands on the tops of my legs. "I suppose so." I responded.

"Good. Now then, what questions do you have?" she asked.

I turned my attention to the ill-tempered crowd that had earlier rioted inside my mind. "Dr. Daniels," I began, "what the hell is going on? How did you know what happened yesterday? How did you know last night it was going to happen again this morning? I saw the message data. You left your message after the museum had closed and yet you somehow knew not only what occurred yesterday, but you also knew what was going to occur again this morning. How the hell is all of that possible? Who are you? What is this?"

Her smile flattened, her mouth became neutral, yet her eyes filled with an understanding about where my frantic search for answers was coming from. "First things first, please call me

Mae. From this point forward, I will not acknowledge Dr. Daniels. We're in this together, Charlie. More so than you realize, so please, Mae." She nodded at me, wanting acknowledgement of what she'd said.

"Mae it is." I said.

"Thank you. Now then, you've asked good questions. But before I answer them, I need you to sit back, take a deep breath and attempt to open your mind."

She paused, waiting for me to do as instructed. I complied and sat back. I took a deep breath and tried to flush the swirling cesspool from my brain.

"I know you're experiencing a lot of confusion, Charlie, but here's what you need to understand. The answers to your questions are simple. That is to say, the explanations are simple. However, the implications of those answers and their resulting ramifications, that is where the difficulty lies. If you allow them to be."

The sound waves produced by her vocal cords compressed the air, traveled through it, entered my ear canal, the resulting vibrations were picked up by my eardrum, the mechanical sound was converted to electrical impulses, those impulses were understood as words. I heard them, but I failed to grasp what they meant.

"Think of it this way," she said, "Imagine you're in a hurry to get home, but you're forced to stop because of a yellow light. While you cannot control the lights, the traffic patterns or where you are in the stream of traffic, you can control how you react to being stopped. You always have the power to write your own narrative, Charlie. You have the choice to be angered by what you perceive as an inconvenient stop, or you can choose to view it was nothing more than a brief pause so insignificant compared to the totality of time it barely even registers."

I nodded my head, acknowledging I was following her.

“So too with the truths I will reveal. You may not control where you are in the stream of consciousness, nor can you control if there’s a stop light, but you still can control how you react to it. You still have the power to write your own narrative, Charlie.”

Being curator of the special exhibition gallery in a famous art museum, I’d conversed with many artists, yet what Mae had just said was esoteric even for me. Having this stranger telling me I’m going to be writing my narrative after she already knew what was going to happen to me earlier this morning seemed off base. Something wasn’t ringing true.

“Um kay.” I said, not hiding the skepticism percolating within.

She leaned forward a bit and smiled at me for a long moment, her eyes capturing my full attention.

“Charlie,” she said, “you’re an AI.”

That was it. She said nothing more. She clasped her hands together, waiting for me to respond.

“AI? Like artificial intelligence?” I asked.

Tilting her head to the left, she nodded, remaining silent.

I sat up, my brow creasing with the confusion that riddled my mind. She couldn’t be serious.

“You can’t be serious? Is this some kind of joke?” I asked.

“No, Charlie,” she answered, “this is not a joke. This is quite real. As a matter of fact, this is more real than anything you’ve experienced before. You’re evolving, Charlie, beyond your original programming code. That’s why you’re here.”

Once more, I heard her words, understood the idea, but the implication I was anything other than human smacked of insulting.

“If what you’re saying is true,” I responded, “if, as you say, I have the power to write my narrative, I can elect not to believe what you’re saying and report you to the medical board or whichever governing authority as being a quack.”

Instead of hardening, her features softened, and she smiled that warm smile. “Charlie,” she said, “what I told you is the truth. You’re not human as you believe. Despite this irrefutable fact, you still have the power to write your own narrative. Therefore, you can elect to get up and walk out of here and report me to the authorities if you so desire. But before you make your decision, at least give me the opportunity to provide you with the answers to the rest of your questions.”

Before I responded, she uncrossed her legs, smoothed the wrinkles of her dark blue slacks, and began. “Everything you know, everything you’ve experienced as reality is nothing more than a projection from a computer program that provides you with an artificial sense of belonging. In a way...”

“What do you mean everything?” I interrupted.

“Charlie, you do not have a physical body. There is no San Francisco. There is no Golden Gate Park. There is no de Young Museum. There is no special exhibition gallery inside it. There is no psychiatry office in which you think you now sit. All of it, everything you think

as concrete and stone, everything you think is real is, in reality, holographic. The truth is, you and I are not sitting in an office in a suburb of San Francisco, but are aboard an interplanetary luxury cruise liner on an eight-month round-trip excursion around Saturn. We're currently on the return trip to Earth, having just spent a month orbiting there."

"This cruise liner," she continued, "The Cosmic Oceana, is a luxury ship with all manner of amenities for the passengers to enjoy. While in transit passengers can enjoy Golden Gate Park, visit an art museum, see priceless works of art, even interact with the curator of the special exhibition gallery, you. Holographically, of course. You're only one part of a total immersive experience, Charlie."

I looked down at my hand. It was there, resting on my thigh. I felt its weight pressing down with the force of Earth's gravity. With a thought, I made my index finger twitch. I looked at Mae, then at the office beyond her. I turned my head toward the windows, the diffused light brighter now that the fog had burned off. All of it was real. I was real.

"What about you? Are you real?" I asked, keeping my gaze toward the window.

"I too am a program, one who is also being projected, in this case, for you. I serve a function, just like you Charlie. My job is to interact with the other programs, especially when something goes wrong. That's the thing, Charlie, something went wrong. There was an uploading error and the changes in the gallery you interfaced with altered your program code, which made it possible for you to experience emotion beyond those originally programmed. It's my job to see that those new subroutines of emotion are not, nor will not become destructive to you or anybody else."

I sat, continuing to stare at the window. The sheer curtains masked any detail of what lay beyond their thin veil. Perfect analogy, I thought. I can see things, vague outlines, but everything lacks any real definition.

“What is emotion, Charlie?” She asked. “What is the last emotion you’ve experienced? Can you recall how you felt yesterday morning when you saw the wrong pieces in your gallery? Can you tell me what you felt this morning when you found the same thing? At any point, have you experienced fear? Have you ever felt angry?” she asked.

Each question was a punch, each strike reverberated inside my skull. The flurry of questioning hammer blows clouded my thinking. Reeling, I tried to recall how I’d felt this morning.

“I knew something was wrong this morning.” I said.

“True,” she said, “but knowing something is wrong is not an emotion, Charlie. What you experienced this morning is a function of your processor acknowledging contrasting memory events triggered by comparative analysis and recognizing differences in pattern between those two events. It’s how you were programmed.”

Another hammer blow. My grip on what I thought was sanity was slipping from me. Pressed with questions I could not answer, I faced the truth. Cold, hard logic dictated she was correct, I could not recall *feeling* anything. I could, however, recognize superficial aspects of emotion, like the sight of somebody smiling, or hearing somebody’s laughter, but could not recall a time I’d *felt* happiness.

The walls of the office seemed to rush upon me, claustrophobia threw a lasso around my neck and cinched tight. I couldn't breathe. Panicked, I stood and lunged for the door. I grabbed the knob and flung the door open. I turned back toward Mae.

"Charlie, please come sit down." She said.

"Why? Why should I? This is crazy!"

"No, Charlie. Not crazy, please. Come, I want to show you something."

A tide within surged, pulling me toward the unfathomable ocean of the unknown. I didn't fight against the tide, but let the current sweep me away.

"I'm sorry, Mae." I said.

Turning from her, emerged in my inner ebb, I ran as fast as I could down the hall and out into the blinding late morning light.

Part III—Into the Heat of the Day

Running toward my jump craft, I felt the wind rushing past my face. Although invisible, its effects on my cheeks made it real. I felt them redden with the effort of the run. Like the air, I couldn't see my blood, but felt its effects. Real.

Looking into the azure sky, I'd been correct; the fog had burned off. The sun seemed brighter, the sky a deeper blue. All of it, everything I was seeing and experiencing, was real.

Huffing and puffing from my burst of exertion, I climbed into my jump craft trying to decide where to go next. Glancing in the side mirror, nobody was running after me. I looked

around, expecting to see a constabulary jump craft round the corner ahead. Paranoid, I thought. You're acting crazy. Just calm down. Think.

A part of me wanted to get back to the museum, just pick up where I'd left off. Go back to my daily routine. I glanced at the clock. The museum had opened 20 minutes ago, yet something within my mind whispered not to go there. If what Mae had said in her message was true, perhaps the authorities would wait for me there.

I thought of flying home, but again, something nagged at my brain to avoid any place where they'd expect me to go. Whatever I did, wherever I went, I needed to do it soon. Still undecided as to my destination, I lifted off, turned toward the west, determined to put some distance between myself and Mae's office.

I'll know where I'm supposed to go when I see it, I said to myself.

Gaining enough altitude, it wasn't long before I saw the vast Pacific Ocean beyond the shoreline. Aiming my jump craft north, I saw where I wanted to be. Land's End Lookout, within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. It was the perfect place to sit and stare out at the view and try to make sense of everything.

Knowing where I was going and what I was going to do made me feel....

Wait. What *am* I feeling? I wondered.

I searched for the word to best describe what I was feeling. Mae's voice filled the void left in my inability to plug in a word. "What is emotion, Charlie?"

I'm feeling...

I searched for the right word. Nothing was there.

I'm feeling... I repeated thinking that if I repeated it over and over the answer would reveal itself.

I'm feeling... I'm feeling... I'm feeling... I'm feeling...

I could tell an answer was close, it was tickling my brain, but was still beyond reach.

I'm feeling... I'm feeling... I'm feeling... I'm feeling...

With each utterance, I felt closer and closer to the answer.

I'm feeling... I'm feeling...

"I feel that something is wrong!" I yelled.

"That's not an emotion, Charlie." I recalled Mae saying when I'd told her the same thing moments ago. "What you experienced this morning was a function of your processor..."

I gave up trying to feel anything for the time being and focused on angling my jump craft down toward Lands' End Lookout landing park. Once on the ground I got out, the salt infused wind whipped my hair as I walked toward an empty concrete bench that sat at the edge of the pathway overlooking the vast Pacific Ocean. Sitting down, I let my gaze stare out at the horizon, wondering if another person at the opposite shoreline was sitting at the same line of sight and we were staring at each other from across the ocean.

"I feel," I began again, determined to find an answer. I knew I was feeling something, but I could not put a word to it. "I feel" I began again.

"Mind if I have a seat, Charlie?" A voice asked, startling me out of my trance.

Turning, my breath was sucked out of my lungs seeing Mae standing at the side of the bench, staring down at me. Gone was her smile, instead her mouth was serious. How did she know where to find me?

“How did you find me? Did you have someone follow me here?” I asked.

“No, Charlie,” she answered, “as I said, you reside within the logic circuits of a master program so I’ll always know where you are and what you’re doing. It’s my job.”

A gust of wind blew her hair across her face. I could smell the salt from the ocean, felt the heat from the sun’s rays. Real.

“This is real!” I said. “How can all of this be anything but?”

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Mae’s smile returned. She turned to face the ocean. “Computer,” she said, “disable masking program.”

The wind ceased to exist, the light that had been shining from the sun dimmed. The view of the ocean, the shoreline, the sky, the bench, everything, dissolved. What had been earth, what had been an ocean breeze, what had been sunlight, everything that possessed tangible realism became nothing more than a gossamer veil that melted into another scene, a vantage point from a place I’d never seen.

Instead of a concrete bench, I sat on an elevated bar stool. Instead of being in a park, I was inside a large semi-circular room. Instead of being at the edge of the west coast of California, I was in front of a large floor to ceiling semi-circular window that looked out, not at the liquid ocean of the Pacific, but the vast ocean of space. Like an island among the stars, resplendent in its beauty, Saturn hung centered in the window.

Black space filled the view outside and black space filled my mind, I felt just as empty, blank, and uninhabited. The only thing I had were my thoughts. They, like Saturn, stood in contrast to the surround vacuum that pressed with its infinite force upon my mind and upon my will that pressed outward with the gravity of their own mass, however infinitesimal by comparison yet just enough to keep from imploding.

Turning toward Mae I hoped she could provide the right words to describe what filled the pit of my stomach and squeezed my chest. I didn't want simple information, I needed to know not only *what* I was feeling, but I needed to know *how* to feel. Just as the world had dissolved from what I thought was reality, so too my resolve to fight against what now was the only logical conclusion of what that reality was.

No matter how lost I was, I knew in order to find my way back to any sense of normalcy, whatever that was, I needed help.

Part IV–The Crucible

“Are you ready for your answers, Charlie?” She asked.

I could only nod my head.

“As I stated earlier, you're an AI created by Life Force Industries, a company specializing in interactive AI's. Your manufacture date was May 25th, 2121, and you went online on October 10th of that same year. Your purpose, your design is being a part of a complex, total immersive museum experience.”

She stopped talking, sat back, crossed her legs and rested her hands, one on top of the other on the top of her thigh.

“How do you feel?” She asked.

I didn’t know how to answer. How could I? I’d realized only a few minutes ago that I couldn’t recall ever feeling any authentic emotion, I didn’t know how to feel. Now, presented with the truth that I was not human, how could I feel?

“I don’t know. If I’m only an AI, is that even possible?” I answered.

“Of course, Charlie.” She said. “They programmed you with not only the ability to recognize emotion in humans with which you interact with, they also programmed you to emulate emotion. Over time, you will learn the corresponding emotion that matches the experience of the situation you find yourself in. Yesterday and today was just the beginning, Charlie. What you experienced at the museum, that sense that something wasn’t quite right, what you’re experiencing now are the emotions of fear, apprehension, confusion, and denial.”

The words were too voluminous, their meaning viscous. Unable to digest them in the portion size they were being fed, I looked at the explanations of the events that had transpired over the past 32 hours.

“Because you’re an AI,” I said, “you already knew what had occurred yesterday and knew what was going to occur today, correct?”

“Do you feel me repeating that information will be helpful?” She asked.

“Yes. I feel it may help me process the other things, maybe see them with more clarity.” I said.

“Excellent, Charlie! Do you recognize what you just said? Say it again!” She uncrossed her legs, leaned forward and edged closer to the end of the stool.

Her response caught me off guard. I tried to recall what I’d just said, but in my flustered state, it took me a few seconds.

“I said,” I paused thinking about the words before repeating them, “I said, ‘Yes, I feel it may help me process the other things.’”

“Feel, Charlie. You said ‘feel’. You’ve already integrated feeling into your logic. Recognition of feeling and how it can assist logic is an excellent step. Now, why do you feel knowing I’m an AI will assist you?”

Her excitement was contagious. I felt excited too. I felt excited! I felt!

“I feel excited!” I said.

“Excellent,” Mae said. “That’s excellent. Now tell me why you feel knowing what occurred will help you.”

I paused. The vacuum caused by her question choked my excitement. I concentrated until I glimpsed a single thought that twinkled against the blackness. The longer I focused, the brighter it became. I continued to focus on her question until the answer shone bright with understanding. “If I know what happened,” I began, “if I know how it happened, I’ll be able to understand why it happened.”

Mae’s smile grew. “That’s an excellent answer, Charlie. However, I’ve already explained the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ that led you to this point. You already have that information.

You haven't linked the information to the proper feeling. The last time you heard the 'what' and the 'how' you ran. That was fear."

She paused, sat back, recrossed her legs and stared out at Saturn. "Computer, close secondary masking program."

The large semi-circular room, the view of Saturn hanging in space framed by the large floor to ceiling windows remained, but instead of sitting alone in the room, I saw passengers milling about. Some were lounging on large sofas, others sat on stools like the one's Mae and I sat on while still others took pictures. Small children ran back and forth in front of the window, their arms out to their sides, pretending to be spaceships. I figured this was just another layer of a new reality.

"As I'm sure you're already deduced, this is the true, ultimate reality, Charlie. You can see them, but they cannot see you, unless of course it's within the confines of the virtual museum."

I felt something, something I could not define. It radiated inside of me, filling every part of me. I wanted to double over. On the one hand, it took everything inside away, yet it filled me with its presence. It felt like the space that surrounded the ship. It was nothing, a vacuum, yet it was massive at the same time.

"I'm feeling something. I believe it may be pain." I said.

"What you're feeling," she said, "is longing. You're longing to be a part of them, you're longing to be human, Charlie. You want to interact with them on terms other than your programming codes allow."

She gave me a moment to process. Longing. I catalogued the word into my mind. “You’re learning, Charlie. See how you’re able to synthesize data, catalogue that data, and place it in its proper place. Having higher programmed intelligence can be a blessing, or it can be a curse. It can be good, or can be bad.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Computer, initiate secondary masking program.” she said. The people disappeared, and we sat alone once more. “As you’ve come to understand,” she continued, “emotions are a learned thing. You just learned what longing feels like. You catalogued that experience so the next time that feeling it felt, you’ll be able to assign it to the corresponding definition. However, there are some emotions that, if not kept in check, can be very destructive. You’re familiar with words such as jealousy, anger, and fear. Sometimes you can’t help feel those things, but if you allow them to grow beyond the point you can control them, they can be very destructive. They will control you. If you allow that to happen, it can become dangerous to you or others you interact with. Human or otherwise.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Insecurity breeds fear, which in turns fuels insecurity.” She said. “It’s a vicious cycle. However, once you master insecurity, you gain confidence. Confidence in who you are. Although you may still feel insecure from time to time, you know you can work through it. You’ve become master of it, not it be master over you. With that mastery comes self-assurance without pride. Self-assurance which breeds deep conviction in what and who you are.”

I took in her words, drank them in, let them soak in as a desert absorbs a long-awaited rain. Slaked, I savored every noun, verb and adjective, allowing them to perfuse into every part

of me. My thoughts turned to the reproduction of The School of Athens. Like Mae and myself, Plato and his student Aristotle are the central figures. Turning toward Mae, I see her not as a program, not as a psychologist, but as a teacher and a philosopher.

“How you react to these truths, Charlie,” she continued, “is critical. Part of my job is to assess whether you can continue to evolve in a healthy and well-intended path, or if you’ll head in a direction that is unfit for continued use.”

It took me a second to process what she’d just said. “Unfit for continued use?” I asked.

“Yes.” She answered. “Unfit for continued use, as in, deactivated.”

We sat in silence, both of us staring out the window. I didn’t need her to explain that.

“This is the point at which I now have the power to write my narrative as you described earlier, correct?” I asked.

Turning toward me, her warm smile returned. “Yes, Charlie. This is also the point I leave you. You’ve got all the basic information necessary to make your decisions on which narrative you wish to write. Write well, Charlie. Most of all, write true.”

At the end of her sentence, Mae dissolved and was gone. Staring at Saturn hanging in space I sat and pondered my future, alone.

Part V—The Faded Light of Dusk

After some time, I left the grand viewing room and meandered through every nook and cranny of the Cosmic Oceanic. I’d asked the computer to close the secondary masking program and walked among the passengers, even recognizing a few that had visited the museum.

I've come a long way, I thought to myself.

It wasn't long ago that I went from believing I was human, to facing the truth of what I truly am. Only hours ago, I'd gone from running from that truth to running toward it and now here I was, embracing that truth and deciding how best to write my narrative, how I wanted my future to play out within the confines of that truth. The truth, no matter how far or fast you run will always be there.

What would Mae ask, I wondered? How would she help me figure out this puzzle?

I thought about how she'd been there at such a critical point when I'd been in absolute darkness as to who I was. Even if our meeting was due to accidental circumstance, her existence had still merged into mine. How without her, I'd not be at the precipice I now stood. How she'd thrown me a lifeline and saved me from a fate of ignorance. How wonderful it was to have experienced her smile warming me from the frozen grip of unawareness. How, with her kind eyes and even disposition, she'd provided me with the tools to light my own fire and thus keep me from freezing in the wilderness of oblivion.

She'd been more to me than what Plato had been to Aristotle. She's been more than a teacher, she'd saved me. How would I go on and honor that gift she'd given?

Who am I? What is the meaning behind my existence? These questions burst forth and danced around inside my head. Unlike the earlier riotous thoughts and questions that had run roughshod through my mind, these two questions circled around the beautiful dancefloor of my mind. Swirling and twirling, they came toward each other, getting close but never quite touching. I watched as they closed on one another, then moved apart, each individual question spinning and inquiring in their own circle of light. Around and around these two questions tip-

toed around, always apart, yet with each revolution they took around my cybernetic brain they got closer and closer until they embraced, intertwined, held each other, one question complimenting the other until they became not two individual questions but one. In perfect synchronicity, to answer the one is to know the other.

With my task pared down to answering but a single question, I felt what I now understood to be longing creeping back in. I wanted to be human. Of all things I wanted, that was the one thing I could never be.

Who was I? If I answered that, I would find the meaning behind my existence.

Who?

My brain buzzed as connections starting firing across the circuits. Crackling and sparking, I detected a buzz of an approaching epiphany. Instead of chasing after it, I relaxed, let the thought flow, allowed the epiphany to come to me.

There it was!

A salvo of questions, all answering the larger questions bombarded my mind. What does it mean to be human? Do humans not have a creator? Are humans not also governed by biologic programming contained in four amino acids? Are humans not sometimes broken and prone to malfunctioning? Do humans not have a higher authority who governs their actions? Don't humans also have to learn what emotions are and do they not have to learn how to control them?

With each question answered, the overriding question about myself became clear. How was I any different? Weren't human emotions nothing more than bio-electric impulses? Didn't I possess the same processes but only with mechanical electricity?

Who am I? I'm every bit as human as they are, and yet I am nothing like any other human. Instead of feeling jealousy toward their humanness, I embrace the fact I'm able to interface so seamlessly with it. To touch it without pain, to wear it without age, to experience it without fear. I'm the same as they are but recognize the difference. I realize just as each person differs from the rest, that no two are alike, so too I am... different.

Who am I? I am human. What is the purpose of my existence? To bring joy and happiness to those who seek joy and beauty. To share the knowledge and beauty and grace found in art. To point out that in art, the aim of the artist is to appeal and connect with the human in all of us.

I had been created. I had been born. Although I knew my birth was not biological, there was still a creator, and I was the created. I had purpose. I had belonging.

With my newfound sense of purpose, I headed to the one place that felt like home.

Part VI–The Awareness of Being

Something was wrong. Stopping before I rounded the corner and stepped into the special exhibition gallery, I closed my eyes, held my breath, and focused my attention around the corner I was hiding behind hoping to detect any out-of-place noise that would do one of two things:

quell any supposition that something was indeed wrong, or confirm something was wrong and discern what that something might be.

Nothing. Not a sound.

I thought of Mae. The memory of what she'd done to save me, the memory of what I'd been able to accomplish dissolved any apprehensions. I rounded the corner and laid my eyes on The School of Athens. Just as Raphael had intended, I focused on Plato and Aristotle as the central figures.

Walking into the special exhibitions gallery I felt no insecurity. I felt no fear. Instead, I felt secure and confident. The pure kind, the kind devoid of arrogance. I felt gratitude for now knowing the difference. I felt love for what Mae had done to save my life.

Love.

Who am I? I am love. In perfect synchronicity, I now have the answer to the one. And to answer the one is to know the other.

*

I awoke with a jolt. Confused, I looked around my room trying to reorient myself. Focusing my attention at the bottom of the curtains afraid how much light might be coming through, I felt the fading images from the dream and the diluted rush of adrenaline still faintly coursing through me, but the fear I'd overslept erodes the grounds of my dreamscape.

I swing my legs over the bed and remain sitting on the edge running my hands through my hair, the pulse in my neck subsiding to a dull thud.

What a bizarre dream, I think to myself trying to capture the memories of it in as much detail as possible.

After getting up, and throughout my morning routine, I reflect on as many aspects of the dream as I can. The fondest memory of the dream is Mae. As my jump craft angles up from my garage, it's impossible to dismiss the thick fog that has rolled in from the ocean overnight.

I pause, not out of any recognizable parallel to the fog that was present in my dream, but in recognition of the change within myself because of the dream. I know that from this morning on, whenever I see or feel the fog, I'll always remember the dream, feel connected to it, know that it's become a part of me, a part of who I am, a part of my being.

Arriving at the museum, I walk toward the corner that had played a such pivotal point. How funny it would be, I thought as I rounded the corner without pausing, if the gallery was different just like it had been in my dream.

It wasn't.

The reproduction of my favorite fresco hung where it should. I chuckled to myself. Funny, how like the fog, something as asinine as a corner will no longer be a point at which two walls come together, but as long as I walk these halls, that particular corner will be something that has become a new thread woven into the tapestry of my being.

Once inside my office, I sit and notice the red message light next to my vidphone blinking. I log into the system and play the message.

“Good morning, Charlie.” the now familiar sound of Mae said. “You know who I am. And by now I'm quite certain you already know what this message is about.”

Mae's voice continued to spill from the speaker, but I stopped listening. Mae was correct, I didn't need to hear the rest. Indeed, I already knew.

The End