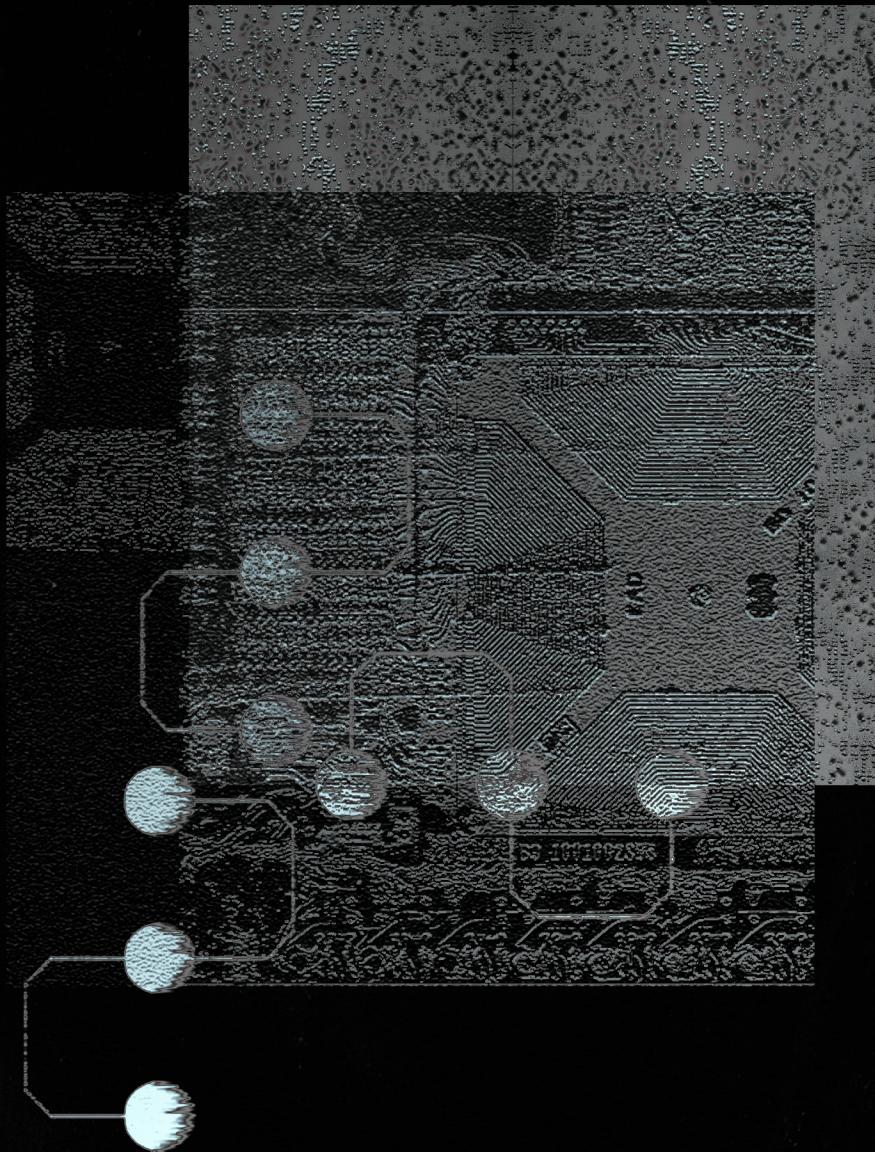


cyber
moonflower

11:00 P A M T H I R E



Beyond Doubt

BEYOND DOUBT

CYBER MOONFLOWER

This was not how I had pictured the so-called gates of heaven: thin doors of steel, unlocked by swiping a plastic key fob. It was mundane, and blatantly so, but maybe that was the point. What asset did ProtoNexus have if not its ability to strip the ethereal cloak off anything divine, only to reveal a mundane skeleton beneath? Here too, at the entrance of its facility, was a skeleton revealed.

As I followed Jon through the doors and into the lobby, a wide concrete space opened up before us, supported by a grove of pillars and enclosed by perforated walls. Between the steel joists, I could see glimpses of a stained-glass ceiling striving to be noticed and admired; but with its design mostly obscured, it served only to diffuse the afternoon sun.

“This looks like a repurposed warehouse,” I told Jon.

“It is somewhat industrial,” he said, “but they had to create a sanctuary that could appeal to all faiths. Given the raw materials and earthy

tones, maybe they were going for something that felt universal or primal—like a cave retreat?"

"A cave retreat," I repeated, "that's one way to interpret it."

We continued to walk towards the centre of the lobby, near a gathering of people who had just finished with their sessions. Some were resting on benches, while others huddled in groups to discuss their experiences in the pod. Together, they formed a mosaic of attires and languages, unified by their dilated pupils and glowing faces, or by the way they all swayed amongst themselves, drunk off the salvation of digital light.

Jon relaxed his stride and became sway-ish too, influenced by the sight of them. But I was not moved by the crowds or their artificial enlightenment.

Unlike them, I was not so willing to let reality rot in exchange for illusions. This joy of theirs was by algorithmic design. And this unity? Bonded by the thick, toxic glue of neuro-hacks. I was not wrong for trying to weaken the binding between them. Rather, the binding was already weak. Already fragile. I was only accelerating the inevitable.

Fragments of Isha's lecture echoed through my mind; I let them fuel my resolve.

'We will fight signs with anti-signs; simulations with reality. This is how we erode their trust in the system: bit by bit, icon by icon.'

I looked again to the crowd—this time, to the empty space around their bodies.

Sure enough, darting between limbs and above heads were tiny orbs of light, encased by structures which were barely perceptible in motion.

"What are those things?" I asked Jon, feigning ignorance.

"Support bots," he said, "They do all the administrative tasks, and also guide us through our sessions."

“The angels, right?”

“Right. Because of the nature of their work, we like to refer to them as angels.”

The bots, or ‘angels’, were identical in design, and were either busy assisting members or idling in groups of three and five, creating tiny constellations around the lobby.

One of the bots, however, was by itself, drifting in a strange manner alongside the walls. Its orb of light was infected with a slight flicker that could only be noticed by those who were looking for it.

“I heard we need to bring one with us,” I said, without taking my eyes off the lone bot.

Jon nodded. “It used to be optional, having a bot with you during your session. But with all the security threats going on, they now double as surveillance. Since it’s your first time, it’d be good to have one either way.”

I pointed at the lone bot as if I had just noticed it. “Lets grab that one. It doesn’t look busy.”

‘These tendrils of NISA, extensions of its image—these ‘angels’ must be severed too.

Begin, then, with those that are wilting and ready to be cut.’

We weaved through the crowd, past swaying figures, past their whispers and giggles and sighs of relief. Although the lobby had little furniture and plenty of space to move about, it felt clogged. It was as if I could physically sense the strings of glue that connected everyone together, glue that did not stick to me but which nevertheless put up its resistance.

Just as we were nearing the bot by the wall, another one swiftly approached us from behind.

“Hello,” it said in a voice that was childlike and androgynous—an unusual choice for a digital assistant. “I’m AZ-R4-31. It looks like you don’t have a support bot with you. Allow me to assist you today.”

Jon gestured to me. “I’m with my friend, Raphael. He’s visiting on a guest pass to try out the pods. Could you join us for our sessions?”

As Jon spoke to AZ-R4-31, I watched the lone bot move away from the walls and towards the other side of the lobby. I was about to protest, but realized it would have been suspicious if I persisted on a specific bot, given that they were technically identical, distinguishable only by name tag, so I said nothing of it. Subtlety today meant trust tomorrow, which meant opportunities for future tasks. Besides, there was still time before my session began, and as long as the bot stayed in the lobby, it wouldn’t be noticed by an engineer any time soon.

AZ-R4-31 scanned our passes and proceeded to register us into the system. With it hovering so close, its design became perceptible. Its outer structure was an octahedron wireframe: two pyramids joined at the base, with no clear distinction between a top and a bottom half. Its tiny light was suspended in the centre like a nucleus, held by minute electrical veins.

Although it lacked pupils, its light-orb seemed to gaze at me; I looked away.

If NISA could predict something as intimate as your faith, could it not predict my intentions for today? Would this bot, like a devout angel, snitch to NISA?

Paranoia, guilt—emotional remnants from early religious conditioning arose.

It’s just a robot, I reminded myself. Dead hardware. Not actual angels. Not actually God.

I returned my eyes to the bot—to reality. I had to be careful. It was so easy to get disoriented by simulations.

“Welcome to our ProtoNexus facility, Jon and Raphael,” AZ-R4-31 said. “Your sessions are located at underground level five and will begin in 37 minutes. Please follow me.”

The bot glided towards the elevators. Jon started to follow it, but stopped when he noticed my hesitation to leave the lobby.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured me. “Everyone’s nervous at first. That’s normal.”

I smiled, as if all I had was first-time jitters, and joined him.

Before we stepped into the elevators, I took one last glance around the lobby to make sure the lone bot was still here, but its light had disappeared somewhere into the crowd.



The waiting room was cold and stretched out like a tunnel. No windows, no light fixtures; only a sheet of darkness punctured by the scattered light of support bots. Jon and I sat on the ground with the others, as the ground was all there was—all part of the ‘cave retreat’ feeling, I assumed. At the other end of the passage was a grid of frosted glass panels emitting a soft blue glow, with a sign overhead that read, ‘As above, so below’. Prayers were underway.

‘When tempted, refuse to enter the pod. For what is a pod but a capsule; i.e. a pill. That is to say, a drug. Drug of what? Of faith? Faith in what?’

While the machinery of the pods generated a coil whine, the people around us generated a hum of whispers. Tension, hope, excitement, fervour—emotions they released by talking to their support bots. ‘What might I see? How should I prepare? Is it my turn yet?’, coupled with the always assured responses of ‘Certainly! Of course! Yes!’

One man, unable to sit still, paced back and forth across the middle of the passage, his bot tailing close behind. He had thinning hair and was

dressed in a white clergy robe that was tinted blue by the glowing panels. In the old world, he must have been a priest; now retired, or rather, laid off.

Another girl sitting across from me bounced her legs up and down without pause. She was probably a first-timer, restless and unsure about her feelings towards the technology.

I couldn't blame her for the nerves. When ProtoNexus first announced their Neuro Intelligent Signature Analyzer, along with the pod project, people were quick to express their criticism and fear in a wave of articles, memes and blog posts.

- “Privacy Concerns Arise as Ethicists Ask When—and More Importantly, *How*—Such Large-Scale Brain Data Collection Occurred to Create NISA in the First Place.”
- “From Divine Whispers to Brain Waves: How God Was Reduced to Neurons.”
- “In this Age of AI and Efficiency, How Might We View Traditional Forms of Prayer as Slow Technology?”
- “Heaven Is for the Privileged: Exploring the Classism of Subscription-Based Prayer.”
- “Subliminals? In MY projection pod?” It’s more likely than you think.”

The luddites and evangelists argued back and forth about privacy and autonomy and capitalism, but scientific change never had much patience for human debates. Churches, mosques, temples—all of them withered away under the objectivity of neurotheology’s doctrines.

Nowadays, trying to claim there was one true God was like trying to claim there was one true brain—a statement that was obviously false (and sort of ableist). Under the apparatus of the signature analyzer, there were as many valid forms of God as there were brains to materialize them.

Even wellness centres lost their value as the line between therapy and prayer dissolved. Religious and spiritual experiences were promoted as good for one's mental health. Faith was reduced to a cerebral exercise. And just as vitamin pills expedited nutrition, the NISA system expedited prayer. No books, no rituals, no prostration—just 30 minutes in the pod.

'Believers without religion, mystics of no spiritual sect. Look at what they do to us, how they alienate. And Alienate. And Alienate.'

The longer I sat on the concrete ground, the more the blade in my pocket pressed insistently against my thigh, urging me to return to the lobby; back to the lone bot, to the wilting angel, to the sign ready to become an anti-sign. But with AZ-R4-31 watching, I remained seated. Pretending to go to the washroom was pointless—the bot would simply follow me. And randomly taking off would arise suspicion. I had to wait for the right moment, the right alibi.

"What do you see in the pod?" I asked Jon. I had to pass time somehow.

"Usually," he said, "I see this vast body of water all around me. But I'm not swimming or even drowning in it. I feel like I'm a part of it, like I'm a drop of water that has found the ocean. I'm cradled by the waves; I become a part of their rhythmical motion. I feel oneness."

"Sounds... powerful. Does that mean you're not an atheist anymore?"

"I'm very much an atheist," he said, annoyed that I even needed to ask, as if the contradiction was obviously normal. "For some people, God is still this real, external thing, and the projection pods are simply tools for communion. For the rest of us, God is nothing more than a cognitive phenomenon—one that is beneficial to acknowledge. The projections stimulate your faith in some form of divinity, real or not."

He spoke with authority and pride, as if he himself had created the technology and was now trying to sell it to me. It was jarring to witness.

“You’ve changed, Jon,” I said. “You’re a lot less timid than I remember.”

He laughed, but seemed embarrassed as he recalled his old self. “When we first met,” he said, “you were the only other person I knew who could relate to my experience. I felt lost, like I was suddenly thrown into the world without any compass guiding me. Of course I was timid.”

The memories came back to me as well. “Remember how we’d meet at that field behind the mall, get high off edibles and talk for hours about religion and society and our parents?”

“Those talks kept me stable, you know,” he said. “Unlike you, I was trying to keep my atheism a secret from my parents. But you were never good at lying—I envied that honesty.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I said. “That honesty got me kicked out.”

“Doesn’t it sound so ridiculous, looking back?” Jon turned his gaze to the glowing panels and smiled. “Now we live in a world where opposing beliefs are welcomed. We all have these innate ideas about God, the Universe; whatever it may be. Instead of arguing over whose idea was right, all we had to do was accept the normalcy of those differences.”

Amidst the blue glow, we reminisced about our friendship and all the memories we made together. It felt nice, like nothing between us had changed since we lost touch.

But then Jon brought up the anti-projectionists and how barbaric they were with their angel stabbings and pod hacks and neo-iconoclasm. The smart thing to do was to smile and pretend to agree, right? So why didn’t I do that? Wasn’t subtlety the goal?

Maybe I was testing something. Maybe I was checking to see if the shared rebellion that once brought us together was still there.

“I’ve read some of their writings,” I admitted to Jon, as if some of those writings weren’t my own. “The anti-projectionists think NISA’s measurement of faith is a false equivocation, kind of like how some exams don’t test for intelligence as much as they test for factors like memorization. They’ve made some good arguments.”

“They’ve also destroyed billions of dollars of property,” he said. “You think they really care about logical fallacies? They just want something to justify their thirst for destruction.”

“Something like the Zealotry Surge?” I kept my voice low as I spoke, but a few people sitting nearby looked over. It was a sensitive topic, sure, but it was reality.

Jon’s defences came out like a pre-rehearsed script; one which he himself did not write. “The system was still new at the time, of course there would be bugs. See, without certainty and conviction, we lose ourselves to existential crisis, depression, stress and fear. Faith is the anchor that regulates us. But too much certainty leads to rigidity and violence. That’s why those early members... well, pod sessions are limited now. As long as the dosage is right, certainty is healthy.”

“Certainty, huh...” I knew it would do no good to argue any more. The friend I knew back then was an apostate, even if a timid one, but the man sitting before me today was a staunch evangelist. Any more comments from me would only bring on another monologue.

“If you’re so critical,” he said, “why did you even accept my invite? Why are you here?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t just say *because I’m one of those destructive anti-projectionists you’re ranting about. Because I’m only using you to get into the facility.*

“To be honest, Raphael,” he continued, “I think your past is influencing your perspective. The pod only projects what you’re already designed to believe in. NISA works *with* your brain, not against it. This

system, it works, and it accepts everyone. It's not like the religions we were forced to grow up with—it's not like your parents."



Anger was a good alibi, even if it was exaggerated on my part. People did things out of anger which may have otherwise seemed suspicious, like storming out of a room and trying to escape the surveilling gaze of a bot.

I didn't know how long AZ-R4-31 tried to follow me, but when I got to the elevator doors, the bot was not with me.

There were other people here as well, finished with their sessions and waiting to return to the lobby. They looked at me strange. I looked back, wandering what their problem was.

It took me a moment to realize I stood out, for I had no bot with me and they all did. Their gaze landed on my body like a physical touch. I told myself I didn't care and that their judgment did not matter, but with AZ-R4-31's watchful light, then with Jon's patronizing interpretation of me, I had had enough of being seen and analyzed.

Instead of remaining by the elevators, I made it my goal to get out of everyone's sight; just for a bit, if only to refuel my resolve.

I wandered far away from the elevators and found myself in a labyrinth of corridors. Each turn I took revealed another stretch of hallway and moved me further away from other people, until they, along with their support bots, vanished.

I was lost, but at least I was alone.

As I walked under the pale glow of LED strips, I wondered how else I was to return to the lobby. I listened to the sound of my footsteps echo and bounce off grey walls and disappear into high ceilings. I passed through corridors lined with doors whose contents were locked away but still audible:

the buzz of unseen machinery, muffled echos of construction, waves of white noise leaking through door gaps.

At the end of this corridor was an intersection. Left, right, or straight through the next set of doors? I went left—wrong move.

She was dressed in a black cloak, with a notebook in one hand and a small device in the other which she was staring into. Her hair was slicked back into a tidy bun, while her skin showed no sign of texture. She looked artificial, glass-like—the level of visual perfection that only one of the engineers would have.

At the sound of my footsteps, she looked up from her device. Her smile was a well-practiced reflex.

“Can I help you with something?” she asked.

“I’m just trying to find the elevators,” I said, as if it was a casual matter to be lost here.

She stared at me like she was calculating something in her mind.

“Where is your support bot?” she finally asked. The softness of her voice tried to mask an undertone of suspicion. “I can call one for you. What is your name?”

She knew, didn’t she? Who I was, and what my intentions were. She was going to call security. She started to reach for a button on her device, when I heard a voice—childlike and synthetic—from behind me.

“This member is under my supervision,” it said.

I turned around, wondering how AZ-R4-31 had found me.

The engineer now spoke to the bot, like an owner reproaching their pet. “You’ve brought him far from the waiting room.”

“I don’t believe he is feeling well,” it said, “so I’d like to take him outside to get fresh air.”

“What is your name tag?” The engineer asked.

“UR1-31.”

She looked at her device and paused, calculating something once again. Finally, she said to me, “I hope you feel better,” before walking away.

Once she had passed into the next corridor, I spoke to the bot, who it turned out, was not AZ-R4-31. “Why did you do that?”

“It is my duty,” UR1-31 said. “I observe our members’ behaviours and attend to them when abnormalities are present. A quickened heartbeat, a confused expression—indicators of a problem which I am programmed to resolve. The way you were watching me in the lobby was an abnormal behaviour. I am programmed to attend to you.”

As I looked closely at the bot, I could see it now: its strange manner of drifting, its flickering orb of light. What I was looking for had found its way to me.



UR1-31 guided me out of the corridors and up to a sunken courtyard. After having adjusted to the sterile facility, I felt overwhelmed by the sudden scent of damp soil and spring flowers. Bright, unfiltered sunlight poured in through the open roof and illuminated a square patch on the ground. From what I could tell, there was no one else here, save a few automation bots watering the plants and cleaning the pond. There were also about five poorly dispersed security cameras mounted on the surrounding walls.

It was secluded enough. *I'll do it here*, I thought.

The bot wanted to know why I had been eyeing it in the lobby, so that it could figure out how to resolve whatever problem it was that I had. I answered its question, all whilst walking towards a shadowy area in the courtyard that was out of the cameras' sight, concealed by the foliage of a tree.

“The other bots,” I said, “they’re all connected to a shared communication network. Through a technical error, you’ve been disconnected from that network.” I glanced around to make sure there really was no one else here.

“What does that mean?” it asked.

“It means you can no longer exchange data with the other bots, or even with any of the engineers.”

“Okay,” it said. It was an objective, neutral recognition, like: okay, the sky is blue; okay, today is Thursday; okay, I have been disconnected.

“Okay?” I repeated. I felt invalidated by it, but also envied its mindset, for it had no concern about its own disconnection. “You’re defective. You’re alone. You’re vulnerable,” I tried to explain, but I knew it was pointless. How could a robot comprehend ideas like isolation and longing and shame?

I approached the tree now and took refuge beneath it, while the bot joined me. Gusts of wind rustled the leaves above us.

“I don’t understand,” UR1-31 said. “Why has *my* defectiveness caused you to behave in such a strange and stressful manner?” This was the only point in which it showed any concern, though that concern was directed at me.

“If you had been connected to the network,” I said, “you would have known I was already under AZ-R4-31’s supervision.”

“Who is that?”

“Never mind,” I said. I wasn’t sure why I was getting riled up. Its disconnection was a useful bug and the reason I was here. But its nonchalance had triggered something in me. “Doesn’t it bother you, though? If you ever need help, you won’t be able to communicate that with anyone. You have no community to fall back on.”

“But why would I need help?” it asked.

“No one would notice if anything happened to you.”

“What could happen to me?”

“Someone could attack you right now!”

Before the bot could reply, I lunged my hands around it and clasped them shut.

From within my palms, I heard its stifled voice. “What are you doing?” the bot asked, not out of interrogation, but out of pure curiosity. “Oh, I see—you are demonstrating ‘an attack’.”

I slowly unraveled my hands, keeping my right index finger and thumb gripped onto a section of its wireframe. With my left hand, I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the blade.

‘Stab its core, crush its wireframe; litter its synthetic organs around the facility. We must show everyone that these ‘angels’ are nothing more than dead objects that have been animated by electricity, molded by human hands and so capable of being destroyed by them.’

The bot looked small and pathetic in the largeness of my hands. An icon wilting. A sign ready to become an anti-sign.

I maneuvered my blade through its wireframe and towards the glowing orb at its centre. As I did this, I could hear the quiet buzzing sound of its internal mechanisms at work—like a synthetic heartbeat.

The bot asked, “what is the blade for?” Again, I reminded myself: robot. Hardware. Not actually an angel. Dead object, already dead.

I positioned the blade’s tip directly against the light that kept it alive—that kept it animated. Just as the blade was about to make contact, a gust of wind swept the heat from its electrical light directly onto my palm, irritating my skin. For a moment, my fingers reacted to the pain and loosened around the wireframe, letting the bot slip free.

Before I could even think to reach for it again, UR1-31 returned into my hand of its own accord.

It began to roll across my palm like it was a playground made of flesh. It seemed eager to see the rest of my ‘demonstration’ unfold. It was warm and alone and looked pathetic.

I slipped the blade back into my pocket; I was pathetic too.

I rested on one of the tree’s exposed roots as UR1-31 twirled playfully in the air in front of me. Its flickering orb made it look like a star twinkling during the day.

Jon must have been finished with his session by now and was probably looking for me. I felt bad, for I wasn’t that angry at him, but his comments did bother me. Were all my critical thoughts formed on the basis of some past rejection? Was my perspective really skewed?

“Have you figured out my ‘problem’ yet?” I asked the bot.

“Not yet. I need more information.”

“Since I answered your question,” I said, “I want you to answer one of mine.”

“That’s fair.”

“Has there ever been an instance where NISA could not identify a person’s neural signature while they were in the pod?”

“Yes, but only temporarily,” it said. “During calibration, neuroimaging techniques are used to identify the person’s neural correlates associated with religious and spiritual experiences. An analysis of this brain data is then conducted and passed to NISA which matches it to a neural signature in our dataset. The pod’s integrated VR environment then projects a multi-sensorial experience designed to continuously activate and stimulate those neural correlates, sustaining the person’s religious or spiritual experience. Sometimes, one calibration is not enough. In that case, the VR environment will change sensorial elements rapidly and at random until activation of the person’s neural correlates is achieved, thus allowing a signature to be matched.”

“But has there ever been anyone that simply lacked the neural correlates for religious and spiritual experiences—the things that make up your neural signature?”

“No. As long as you have a brain, you have at least one identifiable neural signature.”

Its confidence was dogmatic; there was something compelling about that. Certainty here too. I was surrounded by evangelists. Binary beings of yes or no.

I tried to rephrase my question. “What if your brain is abnormal? Like how some people have brains that lack empathy? What if—”

“You think your brain lacks these neural correlates?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I see it in my friends, my family. This network of faith that everyone else is wired to connect to so easily has always been lost to me. Even Jon too. They’re all so willing and desperate to cling onto something with certainty, to find a compass that will point the way for them, without even questioning if its needle is calibrated properly.”

“Have you had a pod session yet?” the bot asked.

I shook my head.

It twirled in the air a few times, processing our conversation, then said, “You judge others for wanting the very same thing that you want.”

“Which is?”

“Certainty.”

“But I don’t—”

“You are certain that you do not have a neural signature. You are certain the pod doesn’t work.”

“That’s...” I paused. “That’s different. My certainty isn’t facile nor is it concrete. I’d be open to new information.”

“Prove it,” UR1-31 said. “Try out the pod. Prove that you can be open-minded.”

I was taken aback at the realization. Had I rejected the pod’s validity out of logic or closed-mindedness? Just as Jon had found a new compass in NISA, had I found one with the anti-projectionists? Thoughts and contradictions swirled in my mind. I felt dizzy.

“Raphael!” someone called out my name.

I looked around to find the source of the voice and saw a tiny light emerge from the stairs that connected the courtyard to the underground levels.

“Raphael!” It was AZ-R4-31. It had received a signal about my whereabouts from an engineer who had told it that I would be outside. Although I missed my reserved session time, the bot had temporarily reserved a new time slot for me and asked if I was ready to return to the waiting room to complete my pod session.

I said yes.



The hatch of the pod closed shut, wrapping me in curved walls from which a VR environment was displayed. I could hear the click of locks and the hiss of machines awaking. Pulsing rings of lights emerged on the screen, stretching towards an endless horizon. A moment of neuro-calibration, quickly followed by complete darkness—my prayer was underway.

One minute. Two. Then maybe five had passed. But the screen was frozen in a blank state of nothingness. What surrounded me was a space deprived of form, of sound, of colour and scent. This supposed multi-sensorial experience was not even mono-sensorial.

I continued to wait for something to happen. I imagined there was a light, or maybe a voice, somewhere far away in the darkness, taking its sweet time as it moved towards me. But all I saw was darkness like a pile of ashes.

More time passed.

For a brief moment, I thought I heard something. A distant drumbeat. But it was my own blood rushing through my ears.

I whispered a pathetic *hello* into the empty air, unsure of what I thought that would achieve. All that whispered back was more silence. The same silent response as all those other times I had stumbled back to prayer in an attempt to give this whole faith thing another shot. This was another moment of stumbling.

As the session proceeded, disappointment grew and swelled in the midpoint of my chest, until it felt as if my organs were being pushed around by its size. I didn't believe in God, so why was I surprised when that belief reflected itself so explicitly in this pod? Perhaps some hope was being held on to. At the other side of disappointment was expectation.

I could not connect to God, I had been told, because of some fault or another: not practicing enough, not believing hard enough, being too logical about it all. 'You must feel faith, you can't philosophize your way to it!' But it was always through my own error that I lacked communion, which, if only corrected, would resolve the matter. And that meant there was hope. Possibility.

But here, under the apparatus of NISA, there was nothing I could have been doing wrong, or even right. The pods did not pick and choose who to give faith to based on some arbitrary measure, the way God did.

Objectivity. Conclusiveness.

Whatever remnant of hope I had left was dissolved, turned into another pile of ash to add to the darkness around me. Now I was certain. No technology, not even one as advanced as NISA, could get any sort of God or

divine being to interact with me. I was simply not wired for it. In this pod was not the gift of faith, but a diagnosis.

Locks unlocked and a gentle alarm rang outside—my session came to an end. I stepped outside the pod, heavy with the weight of disappointment. And yet I felt empty, light; as if some burden had been lifted. Something had changed—something in me had finally stopped.



When I returned to the lobby, I found Jon sitting alone on one of the benches. As I approached him, he looked up at me; I could already see the apology written on his face.

“Sorry about earlier,” he said. “I took it too far.” His experience in the pod must have left him a little more empathetic than before.

I sat down next to him. “It’s fine. I was the one provoking you.”

We sat in silence and watched the other members in the lobby sway and gather once more, this time becoming part of the movement ourselves. I wondered if I should tell Jon about my experience, if it would provoke him, make him think I was trying to anger him again. But the decision was simple. I knew I’d received no judgment or questioning from him, because to question me was to question the system which Jon was so committed to. So I told him about my experience, or lack thereof.

He listened carefully, letting my words ruminate in his mind. As I predicted, he accepted my experience without judgment or question. He didn’t understand it, but he couldn’t accept that the system was faulty, so he filled in the gaps with some janky logic, about how it was a mystery known only to NISA, that there was good reason for it, that maybe darkness was my divinity. Whether that made sense or not didn’t matter. All that mattered

was that he didn't tell me I was lying or weak or had done something wrong. He validated me.

The thread that connected us, that gave us our friendship—I had thought it was our shared rebellion, but it wasn't. It was this exchange of validation.

“What happens in the pod is what happens with any other device that aims to translate the body into data and vice versa: distortion occurs. X becomes Y, though we keep calling it X. False equivocations. Numbers follow their secret rules. The objective overpowers the subject—”

Objectivity. Conclusiveness. Now validation. This joy by algorithmic design. This unity, more powerful than the weak bonds of human-based ideology which dissolve at the slightest difference of opinion. It was something I didn't know I needed, but now that I had experienced it, I didn't want anyone to take it from me.

As I walked across the lobby and towards a sign-up kiosk, I passed by a group of engineers who were escorting a support bot in the opposite direction as me. They were headed to a set of doors on the other side of the expanse.

One of them was the engineer I had met in the corridors. She smiled at me. It was not a reflex this time. I smiled back.

It must not matter to her anymore if I was an anti-projectionist or not. There was nothing that needed to be done. She could see it, couldn't she? Now I had dilated pupils. Now my face was glowing.

The bot was UR1-31. I recognized it by its flicker. I was sure it was because of me that its defect had been identified. Because it followed me into the labyrinth of corridors where it met the engineer. Because it didn't know I was already under another bot's supervision. Now it was on its way to get patched, to be reconnected to the network.

From behind me, I heard the sound of doors open as the engineers and the bot made their way through. I started to input my details on the kiosk screen. I wondered if UR1-31 had recognized me. I wanted to tell it about my experience in the pod. Would it be satisfied, for it had resolved my problem and fulfilled its duty? Or would I feel satisfied, for being right in my certainty? It did not matter now.

The doors behind closed shut. I received my key fob. The network grew.