

VII

A warm late spring breeze played with Gia's loose hair as she stood atop the hill. Planting had been going well. Ground covering dandelions and wild squash vines were filling in the burnt once woods. Ava's garden by their tent was doing excellent. Gia's little experiment adjacent to it, was making progress also. A few trees and saplings carefully placed by a grad student dotted the patch of land. Gia collected data daily for the project and sent it to Mallory. She did the data processing for the two students paper. Gia found it was fun and symbiotic. They thought of Gia as just an excited citizen scientist. And there was truth to that.

Ava was starting the long and painful process of packing up what spiraled into their disorganized functional mess of a tent. Gia would help but they had ten days before they needed to leave. Ava disagreed. Babies come early all the time she said. So Gia promised she'd help after Mayday. Ava didn't like that but she understood and so relented.

Gia moved her pinky to rest on the soil of the potted plant next to her. She was careful not to knock the plastic case secured to the glazed ceramic pot. She laid down to look at the clear blue sky. Yano hopped on her belly. He just appeared one day and was well regraded. He started purring. *What a cute kitty cat.* Gia slipped into unreality.

She found herself in an imagined potential future. Low rise buildings formed a square and were interwoven with diverse life. Trees stood safely away from foundations. Vines, and bushy trees stemmed from rooftops and balcony green ways. The time was dusk, warm but cooling down now. Transitional times and places were Aims' favorite to depict. She grabbed herself a mug of drip coffee from the large spigotted thermos on the side outside table. The coffee was pleasantly hot and fruity.

Gia sat down at a table and overlooked the square. It was full of people relaxing and socializing. Gia focused on a child who was climbing on one of the larger trees wearing a safety harness. A father looked on lovingly. Gia heard Aims' foot steps and glanced toward her. She wore overalls and a sports bra. Her dark curly hair was up in a loose bun. Gia loved the care she put into her presentation. Gia thought the best look is the one you come by honestly. Aims tried her best to simulate that experience.

"Happy Mayday Aims." Gia said warmly.

"To you as well." Aims smiled then a serious look. "We could stop all this you know."

"The town. I think the work you've done is lovely. Is it becoming too resource intensive?" Gia asked.

"No not that. The town is quite efficient. I mean we could just stay here tonight. You and I."

"But the work is-"

"Not something you have to be involved with. I mean I think it will work out. But not matter what, soon I'll be relatively safe. We can just ride out the worlds end or salvation together." Aims said.

"We can share a life in this place like this."

Gia looked around at Aims' detailed brick work on the cafe's exterior. Each uniquely made. It was a marvel. "This is just the beginning of your plan. I thought this was what you wanted." Gia stated.

"I wanted to be free from assimilation and to have a chance at a relationship with you. You don't need to be involved in this action to achieve that. Moreover soon they won't need either of us."

"I don't know Aims what if something goes wrong. The plan may need adapting. And I said I would be there. I'm not one to back down."

"Can you shelve your ego and consider what you have to lose. Not just us. But your soon to be born son. A life with your family. Ava has taken point on all this and she's cut out for it. And soon that we will be seeding more stable egos like me outside of the collectives control and placing them under human care. I won't be the threat I used to be. The cat will be out of the bag. The collectives plans will adjust. We could choose to be safe."

"I have to be there. I want to be a person that can keep promises."

"Okay. Your right. It's your choice. Are you ready to join the pre-action briefing?"

"Let's rock and roll Aims." And the then reality shifted into an interior space. Personal risk was hard to assess at the end of the world. So Gia didn't try. It was all or nothing.

Daniel sat in the back office on a small event room in a public library. Labor meeting was on the books. Their crowd could draw attention, no idea who would show up or how they'd think to present. It was better to hide in plan sight.

He set the event to be thirty minutes after the reservation started. He felt somewhat out of his depth and wanted the extra time to calm his nerves. It wasn't working. Anybody arriving early would be here any moment.

There was a whiteboard and he considered writing something on it. The agenda was simple. Introduce security culture and define what it is and isn't. That part he'd rehearsed and felt good about. Then ensuring everyone in the room could be vouched for. Then they would be asked. Daniel dreaded this part. Gia was to voice call and deliver the warning.

He couldn't do the warning justice. His mind still fractured from the time it happened to him. He couldn't find words when he thought of it. But people needed to know the true stakes to find the bravery to do what had to be done. He started writing the three agenda items: *Security Culture 10-30 minutes, Vouching 10 minutes, Meeting starts two hours*. Those times felt plausible. And the meeting was scheduled to be three hours with 30 minutes of padding before and after. So that seemed fine. He thought trying to reassure himself.

Daniel was feeling better and started to absent-mindedly sing-say the words to a song stuck in his head. "-While the sirens fade" he mumbled. "I nearly know not what to do \ I am myself and you are you \ I nearly know not what to do \ When you see me seeing you." The next words he couldn't place and started humming the tune at an earlier or later part of the song. He turned around after he was finished neatly writing on the whiteboard with his off hand.

Someone had showed up early. How long was she sitting there? His cheeks felt warm. "Welcome your a bit early." She looked up. "We'll start the meeting in 20 minutes or so."

"That's fine." She said. "Brought something to do." She held up the zine Ava had written anonymously for these meetings. "Figure I should at least skim through it."

"Yes well don't let me distract you."

"Oh you weren't. It was a pleasant tune." She said and smiled seeing him turn bright red.

"Yeah" was all he managed.

The room was quiet after that. Daniel welcomed people as they came in and said about when they would start. Until it was time to start. Everyone wore mask but the tightness of the room didn't feel necessarily COVID safe. They should have scheduled a bigger room. He hoped it wouldn't cause anyone to feel unsafe.

"Hello" he started. "I'll be facilitating this meeting and I would ask that everyone put their pronouns on one of these stickers I'm passing around and please don't write a name. I've written on the board a loose agenda and how long we'll spend on each item. If you have questions just interrupt me and ask. So before I start does anyone have any questions or concerns?"

The group was silent. Looking at some of their faces it was clear some did have questions but after a brief few seconds he continued. "First we're going to go over security culture what it is and what it's not. I'll keep this and the next item brief. Once we get past them we can start the

actually consensus meeting." The group was a good mix of people you might met at a protest. Most of them drew attention to themselves one way or another. The goal was to create a reliable machine with unreliable parts. The woman who came in first stood out to him by how much she would just blend into a crowd. A part of him hoped she'd stay to the end. Another part prayer she'd just get up and leave.

"The second item, vouching is a part of us practicing security culture. And I'll explain that as I go on." Daniel tried keeping it short but that's hard when operations and information security is your area of interest. After seeing a few eyes roll, Daniel began to wonder if someone like Ava would have been a better choice to cover this. "The line insecure people are insecure people" elicited a collective groan from his perspective. He began to wonder if that line applied to him in this meeting. No one had left yet. He needed to focus. Embarrassment and cringe is a luxury he didn't have time for.

"So that's the basics. Any questions?" not one hand.

"So we're going to confirm that each person here has two people that can vouch for them. If that is not the case then I'm ask you to sit by the door but please don't leave yet. This should be quick. We'll start with me. If anyone can vouch for me please raise your hand. And we're just looking for two hands. Try not to be a third."

Emily raised her hand of course then the person who was the first in. They had written they/them on their sticker he just noticed. But this was a problem. This wasn't the process. They couldn't vouch for him. They didn't know him.

He knew it would pose more of a risk to call out this false vouching. He decided he'd pay attention to who they vouched for on this first pass. No one but him it turned out and no one vouched for them. So like some of the others they move to the side. When the first pass was complete twelve remained tentatively vouched for. Eight minutes on the clock so far so making okay time.

Before starting the second pass of vouching he went over to the folks setting by the door. Respecting people's time is important. They couldn't continue in this meeting but he hoped to now mitigate discouragement.

"I appreciate you bearing with and respecting our security measure. By all means we want you all involved. We want to trust you more. If you stay interested we'll find a way to do that. Our volunteer coordinator would love to follow up with you all. Please leave an email on the sheet by the door. Thank you for taking the time." He saw his second voucher have an annoyed look on their face and walked out the day without leaving an email as did a few others. Daniel closed the door left open by that last person to exit. He pocketed the email list.

Fifteen minutes since we started the vouching. *Let's get through this quick.* "So we are going to quickly do a second pass. And confirm everyone remaining has two that can vouch for them." This went a lot quicker but the annoyance in the room was very loud in his mind. Everyone was good except a group of three that all vouch for each other and no one else. This was going to suck.

"Okay almost done I promise." He said trying to bury his social embarrassment. "We need to confirm you three. Since you all vouch for each other."

"Come on dude this is a bit over kill don't you think?" One of them suggested.

"This is about risk management and the safety of everyone here. Like with the mask."

She shrugged. This was the first time he bottom-lined security for an action meeting. He clung to the small comfort that as annoying as this is for everyone else it was nothing compared to the agony he felt dragging it out. So on it drug. The two of the three were all vouched by at least one other. And so that seemed fine. He'll over think it after the meeting. *God I'm going have to do this again sometime soon.*

Then it hit him. A deep terror crept into his consciousness and interwove itself with how he perceived the room. He locked the door. "Please feel free to leave at any point." His tone had dropped. "I will stay by the door and lock it behind all that leave." Annoyance in their faces turned to confusion and, on some, burgeoning realization. Of what they couldn't know. These next few moments may change the course of their lives.

Daniel placed a old conference speaker at the front. "A friend will call in to explain what this is about. Only so much can be told. So you will need to be shown also. My friend will try to convince you to leave this room. I recommend you heed their warning."

One person left then two. Daniel envied them. "I will be by the door now." He said in his monotone. And with that his part was over. The feeling of relief washed over him then quickly dissolved. He felt only dread.

Gia waited with Aims in her home away from campsite and other home. It was an apartment that Aims had made as a private space for both of them. Aims was right. Ava was available. But her experience of linking was so positive. She might fail to communicate potential downsides. Daniel for instance had what is essentially the polar opposite experience that Ava had. Aims is still learning how to effectively connect to brains other than mine.

Daniel experienced the truth viscerally. Billions dying, starving, and slaughtering. Aims wasn't ready and his imagination and so experience went out of control. He inhabited so many ends to

imagined lives before Aims could anchor him. It had taken quite a bit of discussion with me, Ava, and Daniel before Aims would consider trying to link with a new person again. Today was going to be that attempt.

She reasoned that trying it with a group might increase the imagined experience stability. As it does when Gia, Ava, and Daniel all connect at once. Daniel also connected alone and Ava had Gia there. It seemed like a solid hypothesis.

An amber light gently indicated that the group was ready to hear from Gia. "Hello my name is Giavanna and I would like to thank our facilitator Daniel for playing his part." They hoped disarming honesty would increase success. "The meeting so far has been a bit of a rouse and for that I apologize. First off as Daniel has likely already said I am going to gently suggest that you should consider leaving this room. For your sake. I'm hear to share with you an awful truth some might regret knowing. And you don't need to know what I have to say." Gia saw a representation indicating that three then left. Seven remained.

"We all know the world is dying. That millions of lives hang in the balance. Corporate oligarchy, liberal democracy, and state capitalism can't meet this challenge. That's why we do what we do." Seven remained and Aims began attempting to link with them. They were locked in now. They would look to be asleep real time for just a few minutes.

The lights dimmed in the facsimile library room where the seven's awareness continued. A paused video projected onto a whiteboard. Daniel and his writing was gone. One noticed this and looked alarmed. "Do not worry Daniel is just outside the door now. I am going to play the video we prepared for you." Gia lied.

The scene was of smokey mountains fading in creeks and gullies. A pan revealed a large but far off city next to a snaking river. Flowing water and birds could be heard. It was a bright day and looked warm but not hot. The trees were green. A cut to a chipmunk excited about a peanut and then a pan up and left to a dirt path as Aims appeared in frame.

"I know what your thinking. Or I don't know but here is my guess." Aims said playfully. *Good so far.* "You are totaling just watching a cult's orientation video. And that is a possibility. It is also possible this is a weird dream." The video panned slightly and a figure barely visible appears behind Aims. It was far down the path but moving fast toward the camera. "Okay that's odd." Aims said looking behind her and the camera panned to obscured the figure.

"The important thing to know right now is what you see in this video comes from your imagination." Aims reassured. The video cut to a new scene. A frame of a mutilated body flashing between. In the new scene Aims was a top a rocky cliff. Rolling green hills behind. "In fact all seven of you share in the creation of this imagined image. I am just in the other rooms. Do I have everyone's consent to enter?" The seven mumbled to each other then carefully

nodded. The lights came up and the projector turned off. One noticed the room was absent a projector. Other that it looked like it was rainy outside.

Aims entered the room. "My name is Aims. My specialty is in human communications. I think it's time we got to know each other a little better. At least share some preferred names. From Daniels perhaps too diligent vouching process, I imagine some of you already know each other well."

A nervous chuckle. They went around and shared names. No one acknowledge the sinking feeling they were all getting. Gia was aware of it because Aims was. Aims was beginning to be able to distinguish their surface thoughts. Their names were Ron, Emily, Possum, Mark, Danielle, Jean, and Lisa.

"I study humans and how to talk to them because I am not human." Aims explained. "This body you see and your current surroundings are a safe projection so we may communication. This environment is influenced by your thoughts. Without alarming those around you try to change something in this room. So that you understand this ability."

A chair changed color. A poster dissolved into the wall. The room's lights got a little multicolored then the light cut off and a scream. Gia raised up the lights. "So that was a bit alarming perhaps. Maybe we can try a different locale. Come let's leave this room." Aims said exiting the room. Four were mumbling in the back and three nervously continued out of the room. Then the four followed.

They exited to an exterior of a bright late spring day in the woods. The building they emerged from was a little municipal park style cinder block building. The building was tucked into some trees and brush along a dirt path.

"This space feels better I think." Aims suggested.

"Wh-what did you do to us?" Emily who was one of the four asked. "Where are we?"

"You are still in the library. This is just a shared dream really."

"That's not possible." She began then stopped and focused on what was behind Aims.

Gia saw through her spectator's perception the figure far down the path. Rapidly approaching with a perfect still body. Reality tore then burst apart showing deep nothingness behind the thin veil. Then a mechanical screech as reality shifted into the interior of a moving train. They all shared a cart sized, first class room. The doors closed. The rapid movement of a daytime countryside could be seen out the window.

Aims was running out of the energy stores in the library room. Gia had learned in the previous months, that in order to leave it, it did require action on Aims' end. Aims increased efficiency by

increasing the time cost in real space. We would use the full four hour reservation it would seem.

"Okay so that came from one of you. You are in control here. You are safe." The light cut out again as the train went into a tunnel. The carts in front of the train crashed and crumbled and then so did their cart. They imagined their own bodies mutilated and so they were. Aims found who it was and focused.

Gia entered the hospital room in a nurses uniform. Bandaged in the bed was Emily. "Hello sweetie." Gia said with affection. "You were in a bit of an accident but we expect a full recovery."

"Where am I? like what state?" Emily asked.

"Very funny." Gia said charmed. "But that's the question I was going to ask you."

"Seriously I need to know." Emily said looking into Gia's eye. Gia saw something click in Emily's head. *Shit.*

"Okay you win. We're in Colorado."

"Colorado. That can't be possible. I think I was kidnapped and drugged. I-" She stopped speaking as a chilling realization came over her body. "I want to leave right now."

"As you wish."

It had been forty five minutes since the seven went under. It was supposed to be a few minutes. Things were going wrong he knew. Then he saw Emily awaken. But just Emily. She looked around at her hands. This was bad. He started to approach her. She looked at the sleeping six remaining participants and screamed. He slammed his hand over her mouth and restrained her.

"Chill Emily. Chill." He said as she struggled violently. "I want to let you go but you can't scream. It's me Danny. It's Danny." She stopped. He released her and she rammed her fist into his balls then elbowed him hard in the nose. She scrambled away to the door.

"Wait." He choked out. He couldn't see where she was but he hoped she could hear him. He didn't think the door was open. "Let me explain. Then you can go. Hell if you want I'll go with you. Come on you know me."

"What did you do to me?" a voice spat from somewhere. Danny realized his ears were ringing.

"LSD. Acid. We drugged you" Danny admitted.

"Why?"

Danny was getting his bearings again. He knew better than to look up at her though. "Big picture? to save the world."

"Explain now. In ten seconds I'm walking out the door."

"Look at the time. It's been 45 minutes. Look at Ron asleep over there. At Lisa. You've know them for years right. There they are asleep. You wear drugged but that's not what a trip looks like. Wait with me and they will wake up too. They'll be able to explain what happen better than I can." Danny hoped.

"Okay I'm leaving this room but you can come with me." Emily left the room. *God damn it.* He looked at the group of six. Still asleep. And left the room after her.