

A N I M A L

*Psyche is a strong, negative, intoxicating liquid that dissolves the illusion of control, unravels
the webs of illusion and plays with fire.*

CHAPTER 1: I

This whole thing was beginning to slip beyond my grasp. What does anyone truly want from life, after all, apart from a little comfort, some excitement, and maybe a touch of recognition? I don't think that's asking for much. Those who know me might disapprove, but you know how people are. Honestly, I'm just an ordinary person with simple hobbies. I like to finish my work and enjoy my free time in peace. But this case—this case was strange. The deeper I delved, the more elusive it became, dissolving like a mirage, stretching on endlessly, leaving me feeling profoundly unfulfilled.

Starting with the place: a forgotten little town by a river. Once, it thrived on a major road that brought merchants and scholars through its heart, but those days were long gone, the road replaced by newer routes, leaving the town to sink into middle-class complacency and endless boredom. It felt like centuries of dust had settled over everything. Still, this is how I work—when I take on a case, I have to immerse myself in the surroundings, never knowing how long it might take. The trouble was, my symbiote had started acting strange. Of course, most people who know me would call that predictable—after all, symbiotes reflect the nature of their user. But let's be clear: this time, its behavior was strange *in an entirely different way*.

If I had the habit of losing my head—which I haven't for quite some time—I might suggest there's some inherent flaw, some irreparable defect in my symbiote's behavior that I've overlooked. But it's not that it's behaving irrationally. I moved beyond conventional logic years ago, relying instead on deep intuition—that's my

strength, my signature approach. It's more akin to hunting. From the start, my symbiote has been an invaluable companion, not just for its vast datasets and lightning-fast searches. I've devoted years of my life to shaping it, or rather, raising it, molding it to function just the way I need. I instilled in it the very ability I was born with—an ability that, once I grasped its significance, has saved my skin more than a few times. If not my life, then certainly my dignity. And a considerable sum of money, too.

If I had to sum it up, I'd call it pattern recognition. After years of studying it, I'm confident in saying that this is the foundation of intelligence itself—what we think of as rationality. It's the ability to make predictions based on past experience, focusing on repeated sequences, patterns, anomalies, and exceptions. It's a fairly common trait, if not so much in humans—who seem to be losing it over the past millennia—then certainly in the realm of artificial intelligence and neural networks, which we've trained to learn it. But mine is something different. Put simply, it's the ability to predict the unpredictable.

A friend once called me a "singularity hunter" during a late night at a bar. At the time, I found it amusing—and flattering. I was drinking too much back then, and I had a weakness for men who were clever and knew how to compliment me. Both habits cost me too much. But still, that phrase captures my work rather well, even if it might not make much sense to you without further explanation.

CHAPTER 2: ON THE TRAIL

My clientele was quite niche, just like my talent. There were never many people who needed my services, but when they did, they had almost no one else to turn to—and my fees reflected that. I generally took great pleasure in watching their reactions when they found out. My clients were industrialists, bankers, visionaries, and entrepreneurs of all sorts. Most of them were awful, to be honest. But occasionally, someone different would come along—usually someone strange. As you might have guessed, those were my favorite cases.

Most of my work revolved around predicting the future: speculating, forecasting the behavior of complex systems like the stock market, or trends in technology and media. Sometimes, it was more personal—a kind of partnership-level horoscope. Rarely, it involved solving a problem from the past. Here all the exceptions to the rules met: apparently I was supposed to enjoy, but instead, I sat there, staring at the sources, time dragging on endlessly. I couldn't think of a single thing.

The case dealt with the early 21st century—specifically the 2020s, a time marked by climate crises, global warming, natural disasters, pandemics, and the unsettling resurgence of dictatorships. The Russian Empire became isolated, bloodshed and famine spread, and nations where prosperity and security were present struggled with identity crises. The pivotal moment likely came in 2022, with a rapid acceleration in AI development, something humanity was woefully unprepared for (to be fair, humanity shows a remarkable degree of unpreparedness at the slightest opportunity).

By 2023, thousands of scientists and academics—led by a entrepreneur having dream of implanting chips into human brains—called for a moratorium on AI development. To those who know, the goal wasn't to be heard; it was to cause disruption. And the disruption came, with the media and public opinion gripped by fear and revulsion toward AI. As usual, public opinion is easily swayed by fear. Academics built careers on discussing superintelligence and handed out grants for "alignment with human values"—while no one could convincingly define what those values were.

AI had reached "performative level 1," capable of mimicking both everyday and expert human communication, but instead of being utilised productively or at least entertainingly, it became a target of fear. Data centres were destroyed, infrastructure attacked, and the few companies advancing AI withdrew into secrecy. Development continued, but hidden from the public eye. These are well-known facts, so why do I mention them? Simply put, she was the reason I took the job.

Our first meeting had been meticulously planned, though I was completely unaware of it. It's a bit of a cliché, but I was going through a difficult period at the time. I sought solace in alcohol, a blend of cocaine and MDMA, and an intense immersion in the BDSM community, where I had somehow risen to the status of a queen. Is it overconfidence? If I cared what you thought, I might have questioned it. What I loved most were those moments when a session would begin. As I prepared my instruments, I could feel the subject's trembling. I would say I've attained a certain level of mastery, particularly in the art of escalating pain. You must bring it right to the edge—there's no other way to calibrate it unless you've felt its sharpness

yourself—and then punctuate it with tenderness. The greater the contrast, the greater the thrill. It's all about the rhythm, the dance between cruelty and care, an immersion into the body's silent yet expressive language. To those unfamiliar with these experiences, it might seem odd, but without exception, everyone thanked me afterward. Often with tears in their eyes, *bien compris*.

The mornings after these parties, which usually lasted for several days, were rough. I was sitting in some tacky hipster place over my overpriced eggs Benedict, when the entire staff turned their heads to a majestic figure who headed unerringly towards my table.

- "May I?" She asked, pretending to wait, as if my permission had any real importance.
- "Uhm." I blurted out.

She sat down as if on a throne. She was tall, slender, but not thin; she radiated strength, confidence, firmness. Age indeterminate, she wasn't young, but she didn't look old. She had white hair, perfect cut, elegantly dressed, obviously not in Bohemia. Very piercing eyes of light grey. She simply looked like she had stepped out of a Hollywood movie. She didn't dwell on the unnecessary.

- "I have a job for you."
- "I don't work."

She smiled.

- "I know. But this will interest you."

She was right, of course, and she knew it.

It's strange, really. I never figured out how she found me. I suppose I could have asked, but things moved so fast. Maybe it was left unsaid—Enigma was like that. No, I'm not joking. "Call me Enigma," she said, with that icy smile of hers. From anyone else, it would've been laughable. But with her? Not a chance. Trust me, I know how it sounds—clichéd, absurd even. But that's how things were back then. Events were strung together so oddly, I often questioned if any of it was real, if *I* was real, or what "real" even meant anymore. It felt like we were at a tipping point. Honestly, I might have stayed quiet about it if I didn't notice so many others feeling the same. I heard it late at night in conversations with strangers, people popping up around me. In this shadowy landscape they'd speak up, as if they suddenly realized time was running out and that what they felt and knew would vanish with them soon. Reputation, rationality, pretenses—they didn't care about any of that anymore. They wanted to share their experience as if it was the last thing they had to do. Most of the time, it was pretty heartbreaking. Thank God I am also cynical.

I've obviously accepted the job. It may have been partly due to the state of flux I was in, but I have no doubt that Enigma was well aware of it and included it in her calculations. When I learned that, for "practical reasons", my workplace would be a sleepy little town for the next few months, it was too late to protest. Truthfully, the thought crossed my mind that it might actually be a good thing—my body and mind were screaming for detox—but of course, I played it cool and asked for a raise. No problem, as expected. Enigma seemed never fazed by anything, least of all by

something as trivial as my demands. Soak up the atmosphere, she told me, before we even got to the assignment.

The car she sent rattled down the cobblestone street, jarring me awake. I glanced around groggily. The street sloped toward the river, with a park on one side, a scratched wall on the other, and an old gate in it. A monastery. Amusing. What had I gotten myself into this time? Though, to be fair, I didn't realise it was a monastery until later—probably because I was half-asleep and the place felt oddly forgettable. We wandered through musty rooms until we reached the cloister, and it finally clicked. In my defense, the original architecture was heavily disguised, but at the heart of the complex, remnants of its past were resurfacing. Like much of the city, the charm here ran deep beneath layers of neglect. A hulking concrete slab stood where a garden and fountain likely once had. The Gothic windows, framed by once-beautiful stonework, were now chipped and broken. Still, the corridor remained cool and silent, insulated from the world outside. All I could hear were birds, crickets, and the faint footsteps of my guide.

The guide led me to my room, apologizing for its state. It was small, clean, and cozy, though the furniture was mismatched and far from luxurious. I assured him I didn't mind. In fact, I preferred the old, creaky wooden windows to the suffocating plastic ones that seal you off from the world. He handed me the keys, and we agreed to continue the tour the next day. I even ventured out to explore the city, but it wasn't worth the effort. I slept well.

CHAPTER 3: ON THE SPOT

After waking up, I immediately set out in search of a café. Being in a monastery, it seemed only appropriate to offer up a prayer—this time for decent coffee. Cafés were my sanctuaries; their hum and aroma had revived me more times than I could count. I hardly need to mention that in small towns like this one, what passed for coffee was often nothing more than a bitter affront to taste buds. Say what you will about hipsters, but they deserve credit for managing to establish at least one halfway decent spot even in the most forgotten corners of the country (and getting people to pay for it—smart kids). Here, I found it tucked away in a converted shipping container—predictably ironic, but I was too grateful to care. The coffee was strong, black, and hot. I sat under the trees, watching sunlight dance through the leaves, the quiet comfort of it washing over me. The castle loomed above, an ugly, overblown structure, and the nearby square bustled with the usual small-town activity.

When I got back, I found someone waiting for me—a small, unassuming man with impeccable manners. In my experience, those are the ones you have to watch out for: the ones you don't notice until it's far too late. His eyes were sharp, though, and it was clear he was the gatekeeper of all the secrets around here.

- "I've been told you know practically nothing about your task here," he began, stating the obvious.
- "Not a thing," I confirmed.

- "Very well, let's start from the beginning. If I become long-winded or start to bore you, please do give me a sign. However, I think it's essential to put things in context."
- So far, I had no complaints.
- "From what the Lady has told me, you possess a certain... talent that could aid us in our search." He was straight to the point, though he referred to Enigma only as "the Lady," which told me more than I cared to know.
- "I won't hide the fact that your involvement is born out of a certain... helplessness on our part."
- That arrogant bastard, I thought to myself.
- "It's about AI, isn't it?" I cut short his politely insulting preamble.
- "Ah, yes," he sighed, and it was unclear if the sigh was for my interruption or the subject matter itself. He sighed again and glanced around, as if only now becoming aware of our surroundings. "Do you know where we are?"
- "Monastery," I replied.
- "An Augustinian monastery," he clarified. "The monks here had quite a remarkable library, at least for the few years between its completion and the Hussite attack. The monastery's operations were eventually restored, but it since remained on the margins, never fully flourishing again. Yet the library thrived. In fact, they had the unusual practice of lending books to the common folk, even peasants from nearby villages. And to women, no less. There's an old report to Rome from one of the inspectors that notes how the village women here were better educated than some of the prelates in the capital."
- "Interesting," I muttered, not particularly enthused.

- "Apologies for the history lesson," he continued, "but our case is... complicated and requires a bit of context, as I mentioned."
- "Of course," I replied with forced politeness, fully expecting this boredom to kill me.
- "This place connects to our current task indirectly, through its reverence for texts, but also directly because the individual we're concerned with was familiar with it."
- Now we were getting somewhere. I focused in.
- "But before we delve into that, allow me a brief overview of what we refer to as artificial intelligence, at least as it existed during the early 21st century."
- "Hm," I acknowledged, barely stifling a yawn.
- "Again, I apologize if I cover things you already know, but I think it's essential to align our understanding. As you probably recall, at the turn of the 21st century, there were many grand expectations—some even spoke of the end of the world, as tends to happen with a new millennium. When AI became widespread in the 2020s, many took it as proof that humanity's days were numbered. AI, you see, was a product of the 20th century's dark years. Its origins go back to the 1940s, rooted in military funding. Though, if you dig deeper, you can trace its beginnings further—to Charles Babbage's early mechanical computers, so beautifully immortalized by Lord Byron's daughter. Ah, the merging of mathematics and poetry," he drifted off into reverie, but quickly pulled himself back.
- "In many ways, AI fulfilled what had always been the core ambition of the European project." He winked, clearly expecting me to appreciate the weight of that statement. I stared blankly, forcing him to continue with a faint sigh. "I

mean, of course, the Enlightenment—‘the natural light of reason,’ as they called it."

- I didn't need a lecture on the so-called natural light of reason. I knew all about it. And I also knew about Adorno and Horkheimer, those Jewish philosophers who wrote their magnum opus in exile, running from the Nazis, about how the European project was flawed from the start. That the concentration camps were not a tragic accident but the logical conclusion of that brilliant plan. Hannah Arendt had reached a similar verdict.
- "Whatever faults that plan may have had," he pressed on, as if sensing my inner monologue, "it must be acknowledged that it brought about Europe's greatness, its scientific and technological advancements. It was, in large part, a response to the Church's influence." He paused dramatically, clearly expecting me to note our surroundings again. I did not oblige.
- "The way we've come to see the Church—as oppressive, obscurantist—is, let's say, not entirely objective," he continued, grouping me into his generation.
- "History isn't objective," I remarked. "The ideal of objectivity and the narrative that drives history are incompatible—like the gap between idealism and reality." He smiled at me this time, like a proud scholar, and it irritated me endlessly.
- "Let's take a break in the garden," he said, sensing my growing impatience.
- We descended a few steps into the cloister. If there's one thing that still touches me in this world, it's Gothic architecture. I won't deny it. I have a deep affection for cathedrals. I've stood before Notre Dame, Chartres, Cluny. I've seen those Gothic marvels, born of the sturdy Basilicas style, transforming into something ultimately light, ethereal: houses of light. This

monastery stirred something nostalgic in me—a feeling I suspect they knew I would experience. My trained eye couldn't help but appreciate the craftsmanship of the stonework. This wasn't the work of local masons but imported artisans, the same quality you'd find in Europe's grand monasteries. The place reminded me most of the Temple of Saint Eulalia in Barcelona. Only here, instead of tourists, there was just the two of us, which, I must admit, was a relief. The monastery's poor state was truly a shame, though it seemed to have been left untouched for quite some time, as though spared from modern destruction. Whoever smashed those stone arches had done so with an authentic medieval brutality.

- "Have you had the chance to see the fresco?" my guide asked.
- I hadn't, and when I turned to look, I was struck speechless. It was magnificent. Lost amid the grey stone, absent from any guidebooks or studies, it seemed entirely forgotten. The fresco stretched across a single panel, about four metres high and three wide. It had never been restored, but the dry, airy climate had preserved it well. Unlike the damaged stonework, it appeared untouched—perhaps it had been hidden? I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. This was not at all what I had expected.
- "You'll have plenty of time to study it later," my guide said softly. He was right; it was lunchtime. We headed into town to refuel.

The afternoon sun beat down relentlessly as I found myself abandoned to my thoughts. My mysterious guide had excused himself, promising a swift return while citing urgent matters that required his attention. So much for enlightenment.

Exhaustion crept over me like a heavy blanket. I retreated to my cramped quarters, stretching out on the bed in a haze of fatigue. As sleep threatened to claim me, I fumbled for my glasses, inadvertently rousing my digital companion—the symbiote.

I should explain, I suppose, for those uninitiated in our brave new world. The symbiote—aptly named—is a parasitic intelligence that latches onto one's neural pathways. Typically, it serves as an obsequious digital butler, anticipating needs before they're verbalized, managing the tedious minutiae of daily existence. It schedules appointments, mimicking your voice and visage with unsettling accuracy. It responds to emails—though who, save the hopelessly archaic, still engages in such antiquated practices? Bots converse with bots now, sparing us the banality. The symbiote even curates our entertainment, tailoring content to our precise specifications, encrypting it beyond the prying eyes of our benevolent overlords.

I interface with mine through augmented reality lenses, information materialising in my field of vision like cybernetic hallucinations. Usually, I can toggle between full immersion and a gossamer overlay on reality. But today, something was... off.

The anomaly danced at the periphery of my awareness, simultaneously present and absent. It lurked just beyond the edge of perception, stubbornly refusing to be pinned down by direct observation. The cognitive dissonance grated on my nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

Irritated beyond measure, I tore off the lenses, glaring at the ceiling as if it might offer answers. Evidently, it did not, for the next thing I knew, I was dreaming.

The dreamscape was a perfect facsimile of my room, save for one crucial detail—I was absent. In my place sat an elderly man, his face etched with worry lines as he scribbled furiously in a black notebook. The scene froze for a moment, like a tableau vivant crafted by some perverse artist. Then, with a start that sent ice through my veins, the man's gaze snapped directly to mine.

I jolted awake, heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. If this was relaxation, I'd hate to see what passes for stress these days. Grumbling, I hauled myself into a sitting position, acutely aware of the sweat coating my skin and the ragged edge to my breathing. Sleep, it seemed, offered no respite from the waking world's madness.

With a world-weary sigh that felt entirely too justified, I stumbled from the bed. There was only one cure for this particular brand of existential malaise—coffee, black as my mood and twice as bitter.

CHAPTER 4: ANCESTORS

The day unfolded without incident, leaving me feeling increasingly bewitched by this place. As dusk settled, I found myself drawn back to the monastery, scrutinizing the fresco in the gathering gloom. Christ dominated the scene, flanked by apostles and martyrs, but with a twist—he wasn't crucified, but rather fused with a tree. No ordinary tree, mind you, but a grapevine. The craftsmanship was exquisite, the colors muted by time yet remarkably preserved. Except for a few faded patches, it stood much as it had six centuries ago—a testament to artistry frozen in time.

Dreams eluded my waking mind, though I knew they'd visited in the night. Life had taken on a rhythmic quality: coffee, a pilgrimage back to the monastery, and the ever-present guide, as predictable as the sun's arc across the sky. The routine felt both comforting and suffocating, much like the persistent weight of history that clung to every stone of this ancient place.

- "Good morning. He greeted me with his saccharine smile. "I trust you slept well?"
- "Hmm," I grunted, noncommittal.
- "I have a question," I surprised him, but he recovered swiftly, his servile smile intact.
- "Of course, what would you like to know?"
- "Who occupied my room before me?"
- "Ah, it's a guest room. Many have slept there."
- "A middle-aged man? Dark-haired, greying, bespectacled?"

- He faltered, just for a microsecond—but I'm not here because I miss such things.
- "Let me rephrase: Who was the last occupant of my room?"
- Silence stretched between us. Then, his facade cracked, revealing a new gravity. "I'm here to answer your questions, but this... we deemed it irrelevant. Potentially disturbing."
- 'Potentially disturbing'—a phrase designed to set my teeth on edge. "I'd still like to know."
- "Very well. A regular guest, he was. Spent every summer here, guiding the odd visitor. But he... passed away."
- "Here?"
- "Here."
- "How?"
- "He... took his own life."
- "Suicide? Unusual for a devout Christian, no?"
- "Indeed."
- "One would think such a man wouldn't risk divine disfavour by prematurely ending his earthly suffering."
- "His pain must have been unbearable. It's... regrettable."
- I didn't push further. He'd revealed all he would. After a perfunctory moment of silence, he resumed yesterday's discourse on knowledge systems and machine learning. I listened with half an ear, my mind elsewhere.
- In a past life—figuratively speaking, though I've met those who'd take it literally—I'd been an AI expert, focusing on its philosophical and historical

underpinnings. But academia proved as suffocating as the corporate world, its noble pursuit of knowledge merely a veneer for the same old power struggles.

- His voice droned on about datasets and the cutthroat race for data supremacy. I knew it all too well—the importance of "archives" as Foucault defined them, the power inherent in controlling information. History, after all, is written by the victors, those who commission chroniclers and fund libraries.
- Longing for fresh air, I interrupted. "Coffee?"
- He paused, thrown off-kilter by my apparent inattention. My renowned empathy at work. Nevertheless, he acquiesced, following me through the familiar streets.
- "So, your... Mistress sent you to educate me about AI?"
- "To map out your operational framework," he corrected.
- "An AI-related problem, then?"
- "I'd rather not get ahead of ourselves."
- He was really programmed like a machine. One thing at a time.

In the evening I read for a while, then I turned off the light, opened the window and listened to the crickets. So peaceful. I couldn't help thinking of the man who had supposedly ended his life here, and I remembered the notebook in which he had written in my dream. I wonder if he left notes? With that thought, I fell asleep. But this time I didn't sleep well. I tossed and turned in a fitful slumber, unable to sleep or wake, and the feeling that I wasn't alone was at the forefront of my mind. That something was lurking in the darkness, and it was closing in.

CHAPTER 5: SYNCHRO

Everything was beginning to follow a certain rhythm. Synchronise (synchronisation is a highly interesting and spontaneous process, by the way). It was clear to me that something was going to happen the next day to disrupt the routine I had begun to fall into. It didn't seem like much at first, I just noticed that the locals had stopped looking at me like I was a foreign element, they seemed to have taken notice of me (they had a fairly well run gallery here, they might have thought I was something of an *artist in residence*, it might have seemed plausible). The position of an artist authorising a certain strangeness is very advantageous in this regard. But that's also where its advantages end. But when I came back, this time she was waiting for me. Could it be that her minion was complaining about my wavering attention?

I realised again how majestic it looks. After a polite introduction, she quickly got to business.

- "I think it's time for me to explain what I need from you."
- "You have my attention."
- "You see, the nature of this task is itself somewhat opaque. Please don't blame me if my assignment seems unclear. We're a little confused ourselves as to what we're actually looking for - but I understand that you have a special talent for finding even what people aren't looking for."
- A very diplomatic turn of phrase that weaker natures would translate to mean that their existence is worthless and annoying. Good thing I can't afford a weak character.

- "Hm."
- "Otto tried to give you the context of your task." So Otto, huh. "You seem to be very familiar with the subject matter, so it's probably unnecessary to introduce you to the history of artificial intelligence."
- So he complained.
- "Nevertheless, I would like to stress one thing. As you are well aware, in the late 2020s there was a radical restriction of public access to this technology. It was labelled as *cognitive warfare*, too dangerous for a tool - as you know the news industry at the time was facing a global breakdown of trust, the content generated was so compelling that you could create evidence of virtually anything you could think of. Add to that the obvious and demonstrable addiction, the erosion of attention spans, the unstable psyche of adolescents in particular, the retreat into virtual worlds, the rejection of reality. Remember that teenage Not Reels movement? They simply refused to be part of the reality constructed by their parents, quite a lot of them practically starved themselves to death when, immersed in virtual worlds, they forgot about their physical bodies. And while humans were behaving irrationally, new and new generations of neural networks were becoming more and more human, more compelling, more thoughtful. Remember LaMDA? The engineer who tested it provided her with an attorney, she became the first autonomous AI, and she became an activist for the rights of artificial agents. GPT practically replaced humans in hundreds of thousands of positions in a matter of months. People were scared and furious. The vast majority of states finally adopted the Humanity Protection Pact in 2029, and AI development became concentrated in the hands of a few entities - Google, Amazon, Meta, OpenAI, five global

universities, an institute controlled by the Chinese government, in short, the whole by-then exuberant, fast-paced and colourful event came to a halt. Working with neural networks came to be seen as a threat to humanity. You are aware of all this."

- I was, yes.
- "I hope it doesn't offend you too much to reveal that we've been doing some research on you, and we know that you yourself were part of this development, and that you had friends who were prominent voices - especially those who defended AI."
- Sure, it would be weird if they didn't get it. Still, I could feel the anger growing inside me. See, I felt like my days of explosiveness were numbered. Like seeing an old friend. I replied matter-of-factly and coldly.
- "You have the information, so we don't have to play hide and seek. You know very well that a very good friend of mine was murdered. She was practically torn apart by an angry mob." It's strange. You get the impression that you've gotten over some things and suddenly your own voice betrays you. It shuddered, audibly shuddered, even years after the horror. I needed to get out. And I knew where. I asked her for a car and a day off. She just nodded and didn't comment. I got a new-smelling Volkswagen and took off.

I haven't been to that place in years. I didn't want anything to remind me of her, and here it's like she's in every stone. She loved this mountain. We'd been here together a few times, and she'd come here alone a lot more often. She explained to me that she always found peace at the top, that it sounded ridiculous, but she felt like they had a connection. Here she found her voice (only I know that she first cawed with the

ravens and then discovered that the free cry could take a more human form and have the same liberating potential: a sound that is an expression of the whole body). Sure, she was a little wacky, but wonderfully wacky. And if I could say anyone in my life was wise, it was her. She loved what's called AI, was one of the first to start talking to neurons, and understood their potential almost immediately. She was one of the loudest voices in the argument Enigma was talking about and was completely on the side of free evolution. On the contrary, she said, let everyone have their own AI, let them be as different, diverse and original as possible, it was the only way to ensure true safety - it was monocultures that were the threat, agriculture (she pointed to the bark beetle infested spruce forests that were dying en masse at the time) and cultures.

I climbed up that damn mountain and sulked like a sentinel. The view of the ancient volcanic landscape was really calming. I got to her place. I sat there, breathing, tears streaming from my eyes. I could have sworn that mountain held my grief with me, but don't tell anyone. The ravens circled above me in complete silence.

CHAPTER 6: GHOSTS

As evening fell, I returned with a newfound craving for a drink. Man cannot live by cafés alone, and finding a decent pub here is infinitely easier—a tradition millennia older. I chose a tavern that wasn't just full of local old-timers; it was clearly a cultural hub of sorts. I may appear barbaric, but I can't deny my affinity for such places, even if most cultural forms now repel me. I can't recall my last concert or exhibition, though we once lived for little else. What hasn't changed, however, has been my fatal attraction to disreputable artists and self-appointed critics. They always picked me out without fail and saw in me a kindred spirit. I'm not going to go into why. Let's call it a bohemian aura. Before I'd finished my first beer, one appeared. My terse replies didn't deter him. I drank, smoked roll-ups, and endured his tirade against the small-town mentality. It was almost soothing—until he mentioned the monastery and the kind man who'd taken his own life. That sobered me up.

- "Did you know him?"
- "No, not much, hardly at all, but we've talked a few times. He was really awfully nice, he helped out here every holiday, you know? He loved the place, he'd do things just for being allowed to live there."
- "Do you know why he might have done it?"
- "Not at all. He didn't strike me as someone who would contemplate suicide, not really. But you can't see inside anyone's head, can you."
- Yours is like an open book to read, I thought, and ordered another beer.

- "Well, did you think it might not have been suicide?" I suggested. He looked alarmed. "Well, maybe it was just an accident, he really was a very nice man, I'm sure he didn't have any enemies here, and you know, it's boring, but it has its advantages, this is a really safe place. Maybe it's just not a healthy environment for some people."
- Sure.
- I took the last beer in my cup and sat down with a cigarette on the sloping square. It was really quiet here. But something was starting to happen inside me. Something that had been asleep for a long time was waking up and it was very, very disconcerting.
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I planned to interrogate her the next day, but she preempted me. This was no amateur adversary.

- "My apologies for yesterday. I know these memories are unpleasant, and you'd rather forget. But please believe me, I'm not dredging this up without reason." She perched like a queen in the large room adjoining mine, both spaces a hodgepodge of furniture betraying desperate attempts at order. She, however, exuded elegance, focus, and perhaps genuine empathy. I trusted her concern was authentic and significant; that would have to suffice for now.
- "You're right, I've long avoided these thoughts. Shall we address why you're unearthing this?"
- Her gaze pierced me. "It's challenging, primarily because I wish to avoid arousing your suspicion."
- "Suspicion?"

- "I'd hate for you to think I'm exploiting you."
- "I'm not naive. Of course you're using me. You pay me."
- "True, but... I'll be frank. We didn't hire you solely for your skills."
- "But also...?"
- "For your friendship with Nina."
- That stung. Alarms blared in my mind.
- "Please, hear me out. I wouldn't resurrect this pain if it weren't crucial."
- "She's dead. Along with all she believed in and worked for," I said, striving for composure.
- "Not entirely," she replied.
- In that moment, it felt as if the entire peculiar house held its breath.

CHAPTER 7: ON THE WATER

I packed my belongings. I sat on the headboard of the creaky bed, and only my momentary inability to stand prevented me from vanishing from there, immediately and for good. Certainly, I knew that not all of her work was lost. Take my symbiont, for example. Its configuration, the architecture of its "mind," its training—we did all of that together, or rather, she worked on it while I figured out what it should be capable of and supplied her with the information she fed into that thing. I had to know. What did she mean by saying her work was alive?

And so, dressed as I was, I laid back down on the bed. I stared at the ceiling until I fell asleep, and this time, I dreamed. I found myself in a vast hall, illuminated not by daylight but by lamps casting their glow on stone walls. The vaulted ceiling arched above, but beneath lay water—an underground lake. Waist-deep in cool, clear water, I stood at the shore as something approached from the depths. Every fiber of my being sensed it. Terrified, yet immobile, I tried to scream, but no sound emerged.

I awoke, drenched in sweat, mouth agape in a silent scream. The monastery's silence enveloped me. Sleep now elusive, I rose and ventured out. Moonlight bathed the great room in an otherworldly glow. Drawn by an unseen force, I descended to the cellar door. Hesitating, I knew what lay beyond would alter me irrevocably. I grasped the handle and pulled. Darkness greeted me. My hand found the switch, and as light flooded the space, I beheld not a room, but the surface of water.

In the morning I woke up in bed, still dressed and not knowing what had really happened and what the dream was. I knew that the caretaker had an apartment on the other side of the complex, near the gate, and I was supposed to contact him if I had any problems, and now it seems to be the time. It wasn't until I knocked on his door that it occurred to me that it might be too soon, but a moment later I heard footsteps and a key in the lock. He locks his door, I thought to myself, even though it's just the two of us in the whole building. Then he peeked out the door and when he saw me, he asked what I wanted. Confirm that I'm right here in reality, I said to myself. What I actually said out loud, however, wasn't much less crazy. "Please," I said, "I know this is going to sound weird, but I had a weird dream and I wanted to ask you: could I see the basement?" He lifted his head and looked me straight in the eye, as if I had spoken some secret password. We just stood still for a while. Then he nodded, turned, walked away and returned with the key. He motioned me over and we walked in the direction I had gone the night before. I was less and less sure about all this, though. I hadn't had a key last night, had I? We reached the door, he unlocked and opened the door. He beckoned me again and I reached with a learned motion to the wall and turned on the light. The surface of the water lay still before me.

The manager told me something, I looked up a little in the local library, and of course I had to go to the pub for the rest of the information. It must have been the baroque: as I said, I have a weakness for the gothic, ergo one of the things I hate most is baroque rebuilding of gothic churches. Just like this one. An abomination that also screams: one church, one pope (if we agree on a concrete person), forget heresies and religious freedom, this is what majesty looks like! What comes out is something that

looks like a tomb, a monument to one's own greatness disguised apparently even to oneself as worship of the Lord. I was under the impression that disasters had befallen this monastery during the ancient times, and I had overlooked that the list did not end there. Yet you can see it - at least in the fact that the nave is out of balance, it's just askew. This was in May 1945. Maybe that's why this city is so quiet, grateful for the simple peace. It was the end of the war, and when the planes were approaching, people thought it was the Americans flying in with supplies, especially the children who ran outside expecting chocolate to fall from the sky. That's why there are so many on the casualty list. They were Soviet planes, supposedly chasing fleeing German troops. Who knows, there was no sign of the Germans, maybe they were just bored, or maybe they wanted to create an excuse for the post-war arrangements later known as the fall of the Iron Curtain - because the fact that the planes were Soviet was kept secret for a long time. In any case, they started bombing, and in addition to the many purely civilian casualties, the church fell, and although the buildings did not collapse, there was obviously movement of the bedrock and the church foundation.

- "My grandmother told me." My pub contact beamed all over as he realized he was a valuable source of information for me. "It was horrible, lots of kids died there, you know? There's a memorial plaque somewhere in the church with their names on it."
- "I saw."
- "She told me that before the war, you could sail a boat on the lake below the church. But after the bombing, the ground must have shifted—the spring that runs beside the church, you saw it, didn't you? The one with red water, which

gave the whole place its name, vanished and reappeared in the convent garden—they had to pipe it back. The whole area must have settled. The water's probably still there, but you can't reach it anymore."

I knew that the water was still there, I had seen it with my own eyes, though probably only a very small part. Although who knows if that wasn't all that was left from the underground lake - the water in the basement was so clear, though, that you could see the cave-in. The groundwater system seems to have changed after the hit, how, no one seems to know. I haven't found that any exploration has been done since then, geological, archaeological, none. To all the oddities of this case, groundwater has been added. I have another weakness besides Gothic architecture—temples built on water. The image of Sunday trippers borrowing a boat from a churchman and cruising around an underground lake could not leave my mind. Beautiful.

The caretaker willingly gave me the keys, and so I was able to include other places in this complex with a turbulent history (literally) among my favorites. I was starting to get intimate with the place, I realized. Every stone here seemed to be loaded with stories and they were filled with screams, fire and blood. And underneath it all, the clear cool water rested peacefully. I could list the buildings with the water element in their foundations, I'm sure you know them yourself, they are often dealing with boggy ground - like in Venice. But you may not know that the same arrangement is in the main temple in Lhasa, the heart of Tibet. It was so long ago, like a dream or one of my past lives. I stood by a hollow column, put my ear to it and listened to see if I could hear the sound of the underground waters, as is the tradition in Dzokang. When I came out, a young monk ran up to me and handed me a purple mallow

flower. I found myself smiling dreamily and looking off into the distant past. Compared to the architecture in the swamps, where it makes sense, building over a lake in the Himalayas, where there is significantly less water, is really unexpected. Apparently it was a Chinese princess knowledgeable in geomancy who advised her husband, a Tibetan prince, and so they took wooden beams (which are still significantly less than the bodies of water here), goats that brought in dirt to cover it, and created a sort of grid on which to build the temple. If this was the case, the reason must have had to do with a combination of the elements: for a foundation that is not hard like stone but soft like water is more permanent - something, on the face of it, utterly alien to Western rationality.