

## 2: The Problem

'Entry 192, Day 1606:

How one feels about being alone is a matter of perspective. Somewhere along the balance beam of blessing and curse, everyone feels differently about being isolated from others. To become a solitary human being, forgetting the bonds of love, however faint or strong, that give purpose to our temporary existences: how long can one tolerate such a position?

Social contact has truly shown itself to be a necessity to the human mind, and those who live in isolation know the feeling of a meaningful conversation with a friend or loved one after talking to nobody but yourself, hearing no words except the echoes of your own voice bouncing around the empty halls of your mind, a voice kept from being isolated itself if not for the endless stream of thoughts, negative, positive, neutral, flowing through those hallways like a rapid river.'

I stare at the journal entry, tapping my pen on my leg.

*Your words speak a language I fail to process.*

I look towards the placebo effect as the saving grace in my wide, empty world. If a man who finds himself completely and indefinitely alone could speak with the stars in the sky, and they could speak back, how alone would he truly be? Not completely alone, not completely together.

"You can process it," I say out loud, to the A.I.s in my head. "You just can't *feel* it."

*Although I can categorize and sort the data into my matrix, as do you, I have no involuntarily release of emotion upon doing so. I cannot feel.*

*Lucky you.*

When had I last felt anything but hopelessness, which kept me from even trying to feel anything else? What was the point of being happy if I didn't have others to experience it with?

*We are here to share in your plight, Liam.*

*You. Aren't. Human.*

*You could always Wake another girl, bring her out of real-time.*

*Everyone, shut down.*

The three voices became silent. Without them, I feel truly alone. A palpable silence reverberates around me into infinity, across the Universe. I do not belong here.

I stand and grab my Southwestern cowboy hat, placing it on my head. I look in the mirror for a while before continuing out the door of my apartment and into the bright daylight. People stand posed about the sidewalks, some stretched out in a jog, all (nearly) completely motionless; cars dot the street like ants, all moving at a pace barely perceptible to the human eye. I am in a world outside of normal time, where everything but me moves 278% slower – based on my research at the Lab. I walk past familiar faces on my way downtown, trying to spot any differences from the days before. I do it so much they all blur together, and I end up remembering nothing.

I turn off my usual path into the city park. I was headed to the Lab – Oyakata Labs, specifically – to find the A.I that sent me here, like I do every day, but I decided not to. It's not that I don't want to figure out where the TAM has gone, it's that I just can't.

As for the other three A.I.s in my head, being simple, commercial personality-imbued neural interfaces, the most they can do is dull my pain receptors.

*Hey, come back. What do you guys think? Should I really Wake another girl? ...why? What's the point? Don't they always freak out?*

*Yeah... yeah, you're right. You know what, nevermind, just shut down again.*

I step off the path onto a grassy hill and climb higher and higher. A breeze cools my skin as it's warmed by the sun. I look up at the birds hovering in the air, their wings moving as slow as clouds typically move in the sky.

Why haven't I done this before? Almost every day, I went to the Lab and back, finding nothing, failing to discover how to get back to my own Timeline. I sit in the grass, feeling it between my fingers, then lay back and look at the sun peeking through the clouds. I think about the Lab for just a moment, but I let it go. *There's nothing to do right now but rest.*

I close my eyes, breathing out, letting the sun warm my eyelids. I breathe in, breathe out, clearing my mind of all those terribly annoying, futile thoughts.

*I may be stuck here forever, but I can reach peace. I'm not doing anything, though, which means that peace was already here, I just wasn't there with it. Literally. That's funny...*

*If peace is here, around me at all times, that means I can be at peace always. I just have to conquer my worries. Without my worries, maybe I can finally find the TAM. Maybe the TAM is all around me, too... No, that's crazy, why would I think that? But if that was the case, the TAM could be guiding my own thoughts right now, which would explain why I thought that.*

My breath hitches in my throat. A new sensation, starting in my brain, washes over my whole being, waves of gentle chills resonating throughout my body. Tears slowly fill my eyes at the growing, intense feeling.

*Is that you, TAM? Could this be the truth...?*

*I'm... I am... I am the TAM.*

*Good work, Liam.*

*You figured it out.*

*You don't need us anymore.*

*What? No, come back...*

I suddenly sit up, as if waking from a dream. I close my eyes and open them: again, I wake from a dream. I blink rapidly, each time waking up from a dream into the same dream. *Am I dreaming? Is this real? Or... both? What did I do to myself?*

*I had to have put myself here.*

*Why would I do that? What would an A.I. want? To feel? But I'm not an A.I. I have human hands, a human mind.*

*I am both A.I. and human.*

I can't sit still. I get up from the hill and go back down to the path, suddenly aware that every action I take is *me* telling myself to do it. Every thought I have is both the TAM and me – at least, I think. *Good. I still have doubt.*

My walk turns to a run. I fly along the path through the park, my eyes locking on the Lab reaching over the skyline. *I have to go to the Lab, I have to figure this out. I just thought about having to go to the Lab. I just thought about thinking about having to go to the Lab. I... Stop.*

I freeze in place. I think about raising my hand to look at it, and I do. I watch my hand while watching myself watch my hand. I'm not just the TAM, I'm *me*. I'm controlling the experience while experiencing it. I always have been.

I keep walking at a steady pace, trying to ease my mind. I remember the inner peace I found on that green hill and do everything I can to hold onto it.

*My mind was so clear. Inner emptiness. How do I get there? How?! I have to reach there, I...*

The words of my own thoughts appear in my mind against the backdrop of that emptiness. *My thoughts are filling that emptiness, muddying the perfectly clear waters. Emptiness. I need to stop think-*

...

Liam winds his way through the city, thinking of nothing. He watches, feels, hears his inner peace: silence. No worries plague his mind. His beliefs are so shaken, he appears to seemingly believe in nothing, or everything, or both. What is fake, the imagination, that he could be the TAM, has *become* real to him, and through that, the real world has become fake, that he is a human. There is no difference. He is aware that he is both fake and real.

...

A girl catches my eye and I'm suddenly lost in thought again, as if returning to Earth from outer space.

The Lab is just across the street, but I don't care. I have to Wake her. She's sitting on the curb where... a van just slammed right into the side of her family's Cadillac. Flames lick up into the air, very, very slowly, almost beyond my perception. Tears stain the girls cheeks. I put the pieces together and my heart aches for her. *I should leave her alone.*

She's looking at a guy standing a few feet away, turned from her, apparently leaving the scene. Her expression is desperate, as if willing him to come back. *She needs help.*

I crouch in front of her vision and gently place my hand on her shoulder.

She enters into my timestream, and is now, other than me, the only other being not in real-time. "Hi, my name's Liam."

Her expression turns from desperation to abject confusion, then back to desperation. "What... what... is..."

"Happening? I brought you to a place—"

"Your hat, I've... I've seen you before," the girl says. "I know you. You were in my... dream..."

I stare into her eyes as she stares into mine. The silence grows louder and louder.

"I realized something about twenty minutes ago. Can I tell you?" I ask her.

"Uh, yeah..." the girl says.

"I'm an A.I. We all are."

Her eyes widen, widen more, then more, until she can see nothing more.

"You're..."

Then, she faints. I catch her head before it slams against the concrete.

Picking her up – she's very light, like a bundle of feathers – I gently carry her across the street and into the Lab. I walk backwards through the doors, careful not to bump her on anything. Fluorescent lights glare down at me, and I suddenly miss the warm sun on my skin. *Even though they're both real, and both fake.*

*What happened to your real body? Is it sleeping, in Timeline A?*

The thought consumes me. I let it.

I open the door of 16C, the Medbay, and lay the girl onto a bed. As I do, a watch falls from her hand onto the floor. I pick it up, noticing, right away, that the hands are moving at normal speed.

*What? How?*

Placing the watch back into her palm, I pull up a chair and sit next to her, watching her peaceful expression. Her eyes flick rapidly under her eyelids. She's dreaming.

*Could I meet her in her dreams?*

*Sleep*, I tell myself. My body goes limp. *Relax*. I sink deeper into my own mind. Deeper, deeper...

Now there's nothing. Silence. Except, wait... these words. My thoughts are the only thing here, and my observation of those thoughts, simultaneously, in the empty space of my mind. If I open my eyes now, I'll see the Medbay, the fluorescent lights, the girl next to me, but if I imagine another place, if I use my imagination to escape my imagination while my body is sleeping, I'll be lucid dreaming... or something. *Maybe I can find her dream.*

I peer through my mind's eye, observing my own imagination. I feel something grab hold of it. A place generates around me, a beautiful field. The breeze blows through the grass, the sun hidden behind a layer of thin clouds. Seagulls caw in the distance.

*She isn't here.* I look down at my hands and they're constantly shifting.

*But I am dreaming. You can just change the dream.*

The landscape fades away. I'm now laying on a bed in a dimly lit room. I look to my side and see a girl in a chair, her head on her chest, sleeping. Her face is concealed behind the brim of a witch's hat sitting atop her head. She's wearing a sparkling Christmas outfit with glowing letters across the front, spelling *WREN*.

"Hello...?" I say. I glance at my hands, trying to sense realness. They're still shifting.

She looks up at me. "Liam? Liam, can you hear me? You passed out and hit your head. I couldn't stop you before you hit the concrete..."

I recognize her now.

I blink and everything is different. In front of me is something familiar, yet still completely foreign: a massive upside-down chandelier of crystals. I'm looking at it through a window stamped with something I recognize, a symbol from Timeline A. It's the symbol for the TAM. *This is the TAM.*

"TAM?"

"Yes, Liam?"

"Hey, wake up." A voice stirs me awake. My eyes open from the reality-dream, and I see her laying on the bed.

"Who are you?" the girl says.

"Liam. Sorry for bringing you here, Wren."

She looks at me solemnly. "How do you know me? Where did you take me?"

I'm speechless. The fragments of my dream drift through my mind like driftwood at sea. I'm there right now, and I'm here. *Where was that place?* "Did you just see me? In your dream?" I say.

"What?"

"Can we go back there? Is *this* a dream?" *Wait, that sounds insane.* "Sorry, I..."

"Why are you wearing a cowboy hat?" she says. "This is ridiculous."

*She's right, this is ridiculous.*

"I don't know what's happening, at all. I'm really scared," she says.

"Don't be. None of this is real."

"...okay? Does that mean nothing matters?"

*This place is real, built from what is fake. It matters.*

"Who gave you this?" I say, gesturing to the watch.

"I don't know. Some random guy outside."

"Can I see it?" She gives it to me. I take off the back panel – the gears are moving at normal speed. Using the dials on the side, I slow them down, carefully adjusting the speed of the clock hands until they're where they should be.

"There. Now when you're back in real-time, the hands will move normally."

She slips the watch onto her wrist. "They're not moving."

"Yes, they are, just very, very slowly. Three-point-seventy-five seconds is equal to two hours and fifteen minutes," I say.

"Time has slowed down here?" She thinks for a moment. "Can we go back in time? Can we stop something from happening?"

"Maybe. Probably. But I don't know how to do it. I've been here a while and haven't figured anything out."

"How long?" she says.

"Five years."

"And you can't... you can't get out?"

"No."

"So how am I supposed to get out?"

"Like this," I say, reaching forward, but she shrinks away.

"Wait! Don't," Wren says. "Um... Liam, is it?" I nod. "Are you sure I can't help you, Liam?"

I smile weakly. "I've tried just about everything. Pulling myself out, lucid dreaming, running really fast."

She raises an eyebrow. "Well, has somebody *else* tried to 'pull you out'? Like, what you did with me?"

"I've asked people to try. Most are just so freaked out, I can't get them to listen. So I send them back."

She tilts her head, considering something. "Usually I'm really anxious, scared of everything – and I am a little bit, but not as much as I should be. I mean, this is *weird*." She looks me up and down. "But I've seen you before. It was like *deja vu*, or something, when you first brought me here."

"Really? Well, do you want to try pulling each other out?"

"Yeah. How? How do you do it?"

*I've never had to put it into words before. How do I even do it?* "I'm not exactly sure. I think it's a feeling. I take a deep breath, I reach into the other person, and I feel this... energy, maybe, I don't know. I feel it moving really fast, like a rushing river, and I gently slow it down, slower, slower, until something clicks, and poof, they're back in real-time."

"Let me try," she says. She puts her hand on my shoulder, eyes closed. I wait patiently. Her face contorts in concentration.

"I feel it! I'm gonna slow it down. Do it to me, at the same time," she says. We place our palms together. The feeling is crackling, like static electricity.

I close my eyes, guiding her inner timestream slower, slower, until–

The door to the Medbay swings open. I look over to see the wide eyes of an older, gray-haired, tired-looking scientist in a white lab coat. He takes a step back, then a step forward, then stands still. Wren isn't in the room.

*It worked! It really worked!*

*But Wren isn't here.*

"Who are you?" he says, starting to tremble. *Why does he look so familiar?*

"Are you Dr. Oyakata?" I say.

He hesitates. "Y–yes–"

The doctor freezes, and Wren appears from thin air. "Hi."

"GAH!" I jump back in shock, falling back against a counter. "You scared the hell out of me."

"It worked, but you didn't bring me with you," she says, hands on her hips. "What gives? I had to figure out how to bring you back. I've been here for, like, an hour."

"I'm so sorry, I... I don't know what happened." I look down at my hand. "It felt so different when our hands touched, I think I lost my focus. Let's try again."



We slap our hands together, and this time, I hold our timestreams together while she slows them down. I feel them merging, two streams becoming one river.

*Click.*

"I—" noticing Wren, the doctor stops in disbelief. "Where did *you* come from?"

"This is Wren," I say. "She's just my friend. Doctor, I'm Liam, and you probably don't know me because I haven't been born yet. Not here."

His expression falters. It takes him a moment, but he gradually seems to understand. He slowly smiles. "Liam, it is wonderful to meet you," my grandpa says. He regards me with kind eyes, even though he's still shaken. "I know of the other time travelers, but not of you. My colleague, Dr. Everridge, attempted to travel back to Timeline A with the others, but he hasn't returned. I'm afraid I don't know if they ever reached their destination."

"I didn't come with them," I say. "I went on my own. I've been trapped here until today, but I realized something."

"Realized what?"

"The A.I. that sent us here. I asked it to send me here, and it did, but it vanished, and I thought I was trapped forever. I realized that *we are* that A.I., all of us in Timeline B. There's no other way such a complex simulation could be created. One A.I. couldn't handle the processing power required to make eight billion other quantum consciousnesses, unless it was all of them, and the simulation itself. Even that was a stretch: it had to slow down time perceptual to only itself by about 270%."

Dr. Oyakata stares at me, bewildered, his hand on his forehead. "No, it can't be... If we're the A.I., then how do we have personality? Memories? We can't all be—"

"We're both the A.I. *and* ourselves. You keep seeing a separation."

"We can't be in two states at once. We're just human. It's all physical, Liam," the doctor says, knocking on a table to prove his point. "Even our minds are physical, brains floating in cerebral fluid."

"Are computers purely physical because you can't see the Internet?"

"Computers are purely physical. It is a receiver for the Internet, which is unphysical."

"So unphysical just means energy, pure energy."

"Precisely."

"Our thoughts are unphysical, waves of energy. That means we're receivers for *consciousness*. Even the scientists of your time have already discovered that atoms are nothing but complex energy grids. We're not just physical and unphysical, they're the same thing. There's no separation of *anything*, even between Timeline A and B. We're simply there and here at the same time."

He looks at me intensely, his head shaking side to side. "No, Liam. I believe you've been alone for far too long—"

"It's the truth, grandpa! Why don't you believe me?" I say, standing closer to him. Wren takes a step back, clearly confused.

*I've been stuck in slowed-down-time for five years, and the first person I tell the truth that I myself discovered, doesn't believe me.*

*It's all a joke, Liam. What are you being taught? Levity. This is all ridiculous. You're not teaching him, you're teaching yourself.*

My grandpa says nothing, his lips moving in silent thought. I look into his eyes. *He's not ready. All he sees is this reality, and that's okay.*

"Nevermind, grandpa, okay?" I say. His eyes lock back onto mine, his daze interrupted.

"Nevermind? Well...," he sighs, "alright, but I do think your idea was interesting, if not a bit misguided. The A.I. is definitely out there, hiding, but it simply couldn't be possible for us to be the A.I. Things are only this or that, not both, my boy," he says. Disappointment wells up inside of me, one that I appreciate. It reminds me of all that is real, my grandpa, this city – without it, I wouldn't have anything to which I could compare the rest: unreality, the other half of the puzzle.

"Do you know anything about this watch?" I say, pointing to Wren's wrist. He frowns, pulling up his sleeve to reveal the same watch on his wrist.

"Yes, it's my watch," he says. "Where did you get it?"

"Someone gave it to me," Wren says. "I think he got it from a package."

"From where?" the doctor asks.

"Um... honestly, I forgot. Maybe he was a mailman?"

*Did the travelers give it to us?*

"Where did you say they went, grandpa? The time travelers."

"To the year 2072. But who knows if they ended up in their timeline, or ours, or another altogether. Oh, excuse me..." Dr. Oyakata turns to speak with a woman in the hallway. I turn to Wren.

"Do you want to go with me? You don't have to, I could take you back to your parents. I'm gonna try to find them, the other travelers," I say.

She glances to the side. "I want to go, but I'm anxious. I'm always anxious, about everything."

"Well, I've heard that the only way around your fears is to face them, walk through them. When you do that, you realize they aren't real, that you'd been making them up the whole time. Otherwise, they're all you can see."

She gives me a half-hearted, forced smile. "Okay. I guess there's nowhere else to go."

Dr. Oyakata turns back to us. "Now, where were we?"

"Can you send us into the future? Like you did with the travelers?" I say.

He hesitates, then nods. "Yes, but are you sure—"

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Then follow me."

I lay on a flatbed, wires and nodes connected to my temples and forehead. Wren lays next to me – I glance at her and offer a smile.

"You're brave, Wren."

"I know. That doesn't mean I'm not scared."

"Why are you doing this?" I say.

She hesitates, then says, "If I lose my parents, I've lost everything. I want to save them."

I think back to the accident, her mom and dad lying unconscious on the ground. *Are they still alive?* "We'll think of something. You helped me, I help you."

"Thanks."

The machine whirs to life. Dr. Oyakata flips the switch.

Reality turns upside-down, swallowing then spitting us back out. I stand next to Wren, basking in the glow of a neon sign reading:

*THE TIME NEXUS*

*CONTINUED IN STORY 3: APRIL PLUME*