

TORTURED  
ECHOES



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CODY SISCO

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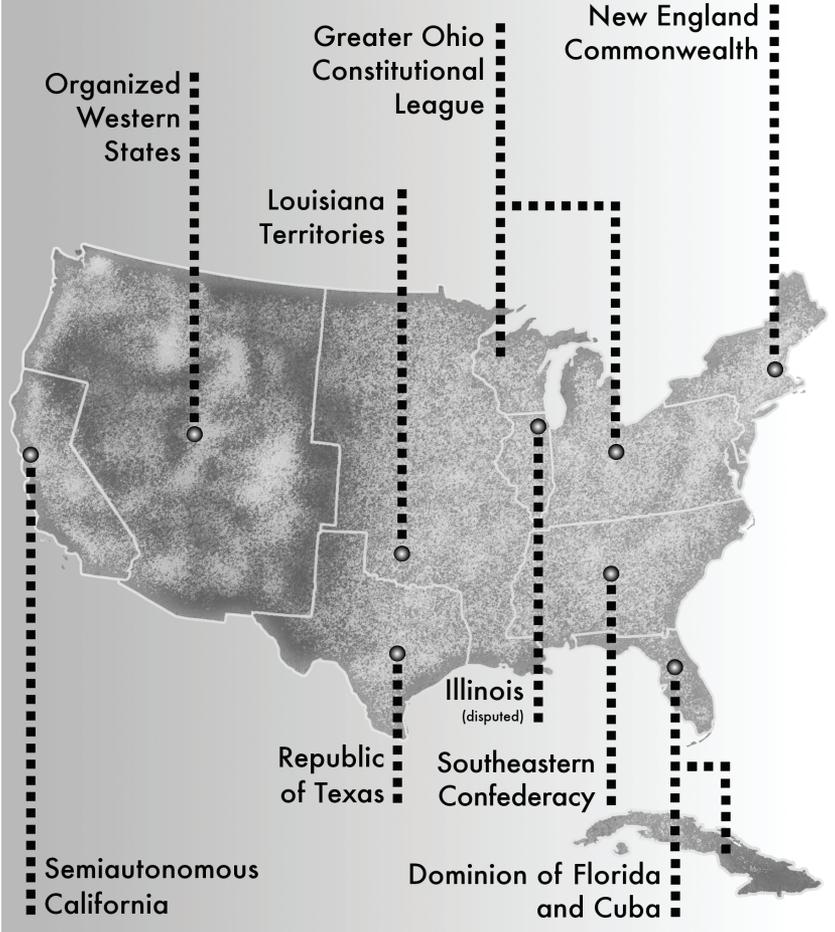
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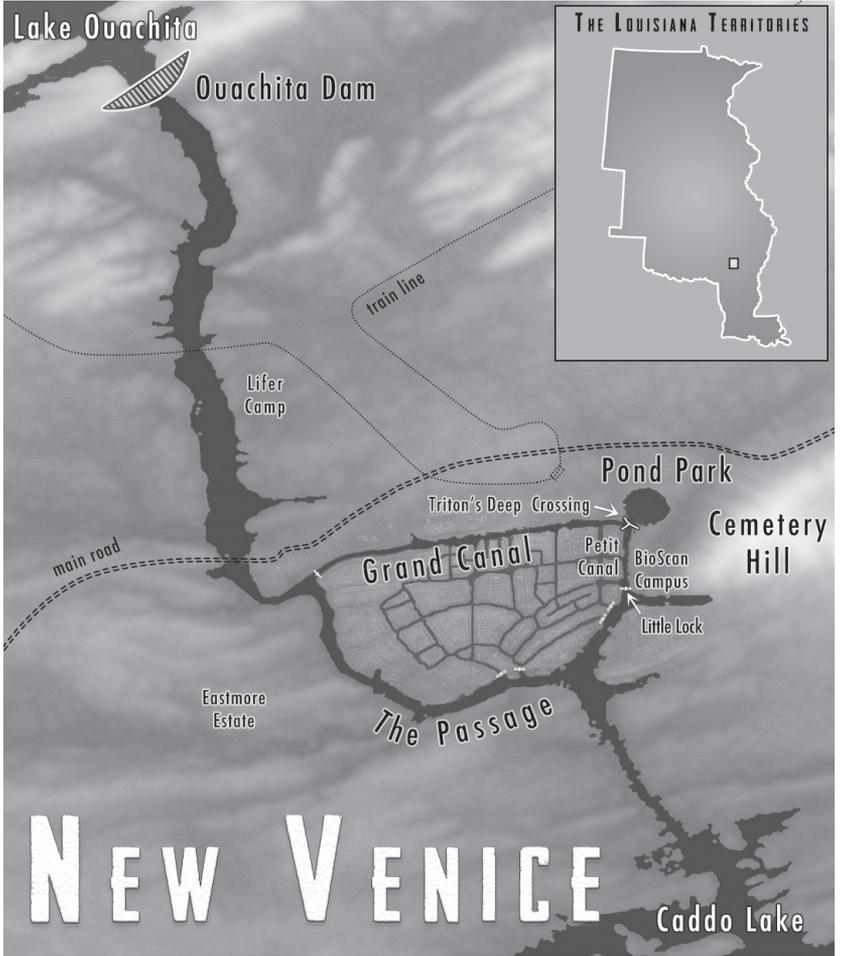
*FOR TRUTH SEEKERS EVERYWHERE*



# The American Union of Nations









# MIRROR RESONANCE SYNDROME:

a degenerative brain disorder associated with electro-chemical imbalances within mirror-neuron networks. These are the structures that enable individuals to understand and interpret others' intentions and emotions. Symptoms of mirror resonance syndrome (MRS) can be severe, vary widely, and usually include habitual aggression and violence.

Many people with MRS experience extreme emotional transference, which, paradoxically, can lead to black outs.

The syndrome is linked to a genetic variation present in less than 1% of the population.

## ***SYMPTOMS***

Emotional hyper-reactivity over an extended period, including these progressively worsening symptoms:

1. Abnormally strong physiological and emotional reactions to physical or mental stimuli, including synesthesia and hallucinations
2. Subjective experience of being controlled, lacking autonomy, following a predetermined course, or reliving events (e.g., episodes of déjà vu lasting hours or days)
3. Persistent, immersive fantasies to the exclusion of reality
4. Depersonalization, loss of emotional vividness, motor-body disorientation, dissociative states, or extreme variability in self-image
5. Episodes of "brain blankness," i.e. dreamlike fugue states and sleepwalking
6. Addiction to resonant-class narcotics [new criterion]

—Diagnostic Criteria for Mental Disorders,  
Semiautonomous California Health Board,  
Third (Revised) Edition



# PART ONE



# 1

My honeymoon should have been the happiest week of my life. Claudio's too. We were supposed to spend it relaxing, making love in the afternoon, enjoying sunsets and crickets and music. Instead I saw horrors.

Memories of the people we've lost disappear faster the more fiercely we hold onto them. They fossilize, hardening into unsatisfactory substitutes. One crystalized poignant reflection—a realpic of lovers spooning gelato into each other's mouths—can erase a lifetime of less precious moments, even the beautiful ones.

Our dead can never delight, disappoint, or surprise us again. Death is painful certainty. Death is dully unsurprising. And death is a cruel comfort in an uncertain world.

—Interview with Mía Barrias in *Five Years After Carmichael* (1976)

**5 May 1991**

**Oakland & Bayshore, Semiautonomous California**

Two Classification nurses in blue coveralls brought Samuel Miller onstage. He moved in a kind of lurching hobble, his wrists and ankles shackled with carbon fiber cables. His eyes gazed forward, witless. The Personil had had the intended effect.

A quiet murmur threaded through the crowd that had assembled in the National Theater as the nurses led Samuel into a steel-barred cage.

Mía Barrias stood offstage next to the folds of a gold-and-blue striped curtain, watching the nurses affix a biometric lock joining the cable to an eye bolt protruding from the stage. They checked his restraints again.

“You don’t need to be gentle,” Mía said into the small voice-cap pinned to her collar. “He can’t feel a thing.”

The nurses’ sonobulbs relayed her comments to their ears. One of the nurses glanced her way and gave a fingerburst of acknowledgment.

Samuel Miller’s arms hung limply at his sides. To a casual observer, he would have resembled a wax figure in a museum of the macabre. *Come look at the madman of SeCa. Gaze in astonishment and revile him.*

The nurses left the cage and locked the door. A loud clang resounded though the theater. The crowd was silent for a moment, seemed to draw a collective breath, and then erupted in shouts, shrieks, and catcalls of obscenities.

Their howling wasn’t a surprise, but its strength startled Mía. Thirty years after the Carmichael Massacre and the people of Semiautonomous California still picked at their scabs. She didn’t blame them. Samuel had been the source of so much of her own anguish that even now, decades later, her mouth filled with venom on seeing him. He was older and wrinkled now, blank eyes reflecting a blank mind, but the monster who’d killed her husband on their honeymoon, and hundreds of others, was still in there somewhere. She knew it.

The ruckus went on for some time, survivors and victims’ families making themselves heard with force and energy. Mía waited for them to calm down before giving her remarks. This was their good-bye, a final send-off, and it shouldn’t be rushed. Samuel Miller’s custody was being remanded from SeCa’s Classification Commission to BioScan. Soon he would be moved to a facility in the Louisiana Territories, where the research into mirror resonance syndrome that had been on hold for two decades could begin again. Everyone would benefit.

She checked that no one was looking and pulled a tiny pliable flask like a jellyfish from her boot. Bourbon. If there was one consolation prize for moving to the LTs to supervise

Samuel's care, it was being closer to the source of her favorite medication. She swigged what was left, wiped her mouth, tucked the flask back in her boot, and walked onstage.

Like a switch had been flipped, the crowd's jeers transformed into cheers and applause. She waved to the audience as she approached the cage, then turned to stare into Samuel's dark brown eyes from a few paces away. Nothing going on in there, thanks to a quadruple dose of Personil. He looked younger than his fifty-something years close up. Though his eyes were open and he blinked every few seconds, she didn't see a single spark of consciousness, exactly as the Commission board had agreed—they weren't putting him in front of a SeCa audience with anything less than total cognitive suspension.

Still, she knew this wasn't entirely true. Somewhere, deep in his brain, sensations were registering, although they would most likely fade without becoming memories. Maybe later he would wonder why his wrists hurt. Not now.

She turned to face the crowd. The cheers intensified. She was their hero. The woman who'd escaped Carmichael—and returned with help. No. The terrified woman who'd run away. She'd tried to correct them countless times, but no one would hear of it. She'd made investigating Samuel Miller and others with mirror resonance syndrome her life's work, created the Classification Commission, and put a stop to the bloodshed. She was their hero.

Mia stood at the podium and spoke. The lines were the same as always, her canned speech that for decades had functioned like a healing ritual. *What happened to me in Carmichael. How I escaped. What I vowed to do.* Men and women in the audience were crying, faces upturned.

Now she came to the pivot point, a new line. An untested one.

"Today marks a new era for SeCa. We have healed. We are ready to move on."

Lately she'd been wondering if, after all that had happened, she'd led SeCa down the wrong path. The Classification Commission had been designed to protect the populace, to make them feel secure, and to return them to a society free from

violence. But if the people's pain persisted after so much time, perhaps they hadn't been healing. Perhaps instead their rituals normalized victimhood and fetishized the stigmatization of Broken Mirrors.

"The people of SeCa are unfortunately familiar with the dangers of mirror resonance syndrome," Mía said, "and they have worked diligently to create a society free from fear. I'm here to tell you today: we no longer need to carry our burden alone. Samuel Miller and a portion of our MRS patients will be transferred to the Louisiana Territories, where they will remain in the custody of BioScan. For this, we are grateful."

As Mía wrapped up her remarks, she noticed that the survivors and victims' families were lining up on a wooden ramp that led from the hall to the stage. The first five in line were in wheelchairs.

She had gotten to know all of them over the years. The woman whose sister had died in the gazebo. The mother of the boy whose house had been obliterated in front of Mía's eyes. The brother and sister who'd lost their parents to rampaging autocabs.

As Mía watched, the first several groups approached the cage and leered at Samuel. A few even spat through the bars. Broken Mirrors in SeCa had always created a spectacle—providing people with an outlet for their fear and anger served a specific purpose after Carmichael. Now she wondered whether the people of SeCa could move on. Was today helping? The Classification Commission couldn't just whisk Samuel away. They'd decided that the people needed closure. One last ritual.

Mía wished Jefferson Eastmore was here to assuage her doubts. He would have cleared his calendar to attend if he were still alive. Oddly, today there were no Eastmores in the audience, but then, they would have added a gloss to the event that wouldn't have entirely been welcome. This was about healing and moving on, and the Eastmores somehow always attracted attention, even when they didn't seek it out.

A commotion in the audience drew her gaze. Security officers in black-and-green uniforms surrounded someone in the queue. The stage manager's voice whispered through the

sonobulb in her ear, “They confiscated a stunstick. The man is demanding they let him continue anyway.”

“Fine, let him approach—but with an escort,” she said.

Are our enemies our own creations? was a question Mía hadn’t thought to ask until it was too late. Worse, what if your enemies were powerless—guiltless even—and yet you punished them all the same?

Samuel deserved every insult heaped on him. But what about the rest? They needed a fresh start. That’s what she was working toward, why today mattered so much. A fresh start for her and for people with MRS everywhere.

“Murderer!” The shout came from a woman standing in front of the cage, her hands gripping the bars, shaking so hard, Mía was surprised the whole apparatus didn’t rattle.

Samuel stood there, shackled, medicated. His mouth opened, and a low moan escaped.

Mía hurried to the cage, leaned into the steel bars, and looked closely. Samuel’s gaze met hers as another moan, a long rolling O, came out. He was coming to.

“Get him offstage,” Mía said into her voicecap.

The people in line started to bunch up, rushing the cage, reaching through the bars.

“He’s awake!” someone cried. “The bastard can hear us!”

“Ghosts,” Samuel said, his voice ragged and gurgling.

“Sicko Samuel,” a woman yelled, and the crowd took up the chant. “Sicko Samuel! Sicko Samuel!”

“Ghosts! You’re all ghosts!” Samuel shouted. He lunged forward and fell, pulled up short by the restraints.

Security officers were pouring onstage from the wings, holding back the crowd so the nurses could remove Samuel from the cage. The stage manager bounded over to Mía, pony tail bucking, and escorted her offstage. She resisted. “Turn up my volume,” she said. He did.

“Please remain calm,” she pleaded.

No one seemed to hear her. People started pelting Samuel, the nurses, the security officers with objects: MeshBits, bottles of nail polish, keys, whatever they could pull from their pockets.

“Shut the whole thing down,” she told the stage manager. But he was no longer in charge. Security officers were trying to push people back down the ramp. Trinkets and trash flew onto the stage. Mía ripped off her sonobulb and voicecap, found a door marked “Emergency Exit,” and hustled down a hallway to another door. Then she was outside, catching her breath.

The fog had already rolled in, and the air was filled with the sounds of engines, people shouting. She rounded the corner and stopped, dumbstruck.

Thousands of people were assembled at the steps to the National Theater, their disparate chants rising and falling. Police in riot gear were struggling to establish a barricade. She checked—this was not getting Mesh coverage. Sirens came from the direction of City Lake, echoing through the canyons of skyscrapers. The sea of people in front of the theater surged against the barricades. Mía walked closer, approaching the battle lines from an odd angle.

A policewoman stopped her.

“What do they want?” Mía asked.

“Blood.”

The officer pointed to a statue of Jefferson Eastmore at the center of a plaza across the street. The statue’s hands held a DNA molecule styled to resemble Hermes’s serpent-entwined Rod of Caduceus. At its base was a platform of wooden pallets. A noose swung from the rod several meters over the pavement.

The policewoman’s mouth twisted in derision. “Can’t say I blame them.” She looked at Mía and seemed to recognize her. She blanched, opened her mouth: “Excuse me, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize who you—I’m so sorry.”

Mía thought to ask if the crowd would be a problem, if she should do something to secure Samuel’s passage out of the city. Had they gotten him offstage?

The crowd’s plaintive cries washed over her.

“Don’t let the murderer escape!”

“Justice before mercy!”

“Death to Broken Mirrors!”

Mía’s throat burned. Tear gas somewhere nearby.

Her MeshBit vibrated. *Prisoner secured*, the message read.

She shook her head, turned away. She'd done enough to make SeCa what it was. She could do no more. It was time to start over somewhere else. She would do better this time.



## 2

European overlords! Why do you 'deny rumors that any MeshSats strayed from their designated orbits'? WE TOOK YOUR SATELLITES AND THEN WE GAVE THEM BACK. YOU COULD AT LEAST SAY THANK YOU.

—BrAiNhAcKeR Collective

**7 May 1991**

**New Venice, The Louisiana Territories**

*Take a look and let's talk at noon, Ozie's message read, away from snoops.*

For the fifth time, Victor Eastmore watched the hacked vid-feed Ozie had sent that showed Samuel Miller standing blank and shackled as a parade of angry SeCans yelled at, taunted, and spit on him. Ozie had to know exactly how much seeing the footage would bother Victor. Over many years of friendship and intimacy stretching back to their time at university together, they'd both struggled with MRS, offering each other tips to regulate their wayward brains, and they'd endured years of abuse along the way. Ozie had finally escaped SeCa, and years later he'd helped Victor do the same.

When the vidscreen showed two nurses hustling Samuel Miller offstage, Victor rolled up the Handy 1000 and jammed it in his pocket, disgusted, though not quite sure why. Before Samuel had become the Man from Nightmareland, he'd been a teaching assistant at Victor's GoodStart school. He was always

showing the kids neat tricks on his MeshBit, like pixelated cartoons of cats and other animals chasing each other. The teachers praised Samuel's intelligence and creativity and told the students they could do worse than to grow up to be like him. None of the teachers survived the massacre; they were at the top of Samuel's kill list.

Victor walked on to Pond Park, where he borrowed a kayak, let the weak current take him down the Petit Canal, passed through Little Lock, and paddled into the Passage, leaving behind the construction noise that had turned the east side of New Venice into an aural hazard zone. A casino paddle boat churned the water alongside him, rocking his kayak in its wake. Then it turned to follow the tourist circuit that would take it up the Passage, past the entertainment district, and into the Grand Canal. Wind heavy with mud and rot dragged across the water.

When Victor was halfway to the opposite shore, he hooked the shaft of the kayak's paddle into its clamps, took his cigar-shaped Handy 1000 from his pocket, and double-tapped one end. It unfurled to show a vidscreen the size of two palms side-by-side. He tried raising a vidfeed with Ozie. No response. Ozie was less punctual now that he was homeless and on the run from the King of Las Vegas's hired Corps.

Victor put the Handy 1000 on his lap, unclipped the paddle, dipped a blade into the water, and pointed the kayak upstream. He paddled unnecessarily hard. The current in the Passage was minimal. Beyond the stone buildings and parkland along New Venice's western shores, Victor could just make out the sweeping curve of the massive Ouachita Dam upstream. Somewhere behind him, downstream, Caddo Lake Dam held back the waters that filled New Venice's canals.

A visionary achievement. An engineering marvel. The soul of the LTs. New Venice was called all these things. Hundreds of kilometers upstream from the tarnished jewel of New Orleans and its half-drowned archipelago of neighborhoods, the Eastmores had transformed a small, pointless town into the most prominent tourist destination in the nation. Their wealth, along with LT Repartition Bonds, had financed the dredging,

quarrying, and engineering of the canals and dams, back in the 1930s. Victor's personal wealth owed as much to the return on that investment as to the profits from Grandfather Jefferson's subsequent business successes. In a way, the town was partly his, and yet he felt as much out of place here as he had in SeCa. But at least no one here could lock him up for having mirror resonance syndrome. Not yet anyway.

Victor touched the data egg in his pocket through the fabric of his pants. It was still there, helping to keep his brain from going into overdrive, Jefferson's secrets locked inside it, along with, perhaps, the answer to who had murdered him.

To the west, hidden by an earthen levee, a few kilometers distant and tucked amid rolling hills and forests was the Eastmore Estate where his great-granma Florence lived. He hadn't seen her since the last family reunion a decade ago. She'd not been well enough to travel to Jefferson's funeral and, besides, she'd long ago sworn never to set foot in SeCa. Victor knew he should visit her. The problem was he didn't trust himself not to tell Florence how Jefferson, her son, had really died even as the killer remained a mystery.

The Handy 1000 chimed.

*Connection pending . . .*

Ozie's face appeared on the vidscreen. "Hello, fuckface," he said.

Victor didn't bother with a greeting. "What's going on in SeCa? What did I just watch?"

"MeshNews feed, classified for officials only. BioScan is moving Samuel Miller to New Venice in two days."

Victor felt suddenly out of breath and grew quiet.

"You knew about this," Ozie said. "Don't let it rattle you."

"I just didn't think it would happen so soon."

"They're making a big deal out of it in SeCa," Ozie said, "but as far as I can tell, there's been nothing about it anywhere else in the American Union, including the Louisiana Territories, but that's not surprising. You know how the Mesh works. Its info flows are more dammed up than the Oauchita watershed." He paused a moment. "The crowd would have torn him apart if they could."

“I don’t want to think about it,” Victor said. “Where are you?”

“Off grid and on the move. I haven’t been outside the van in six days.” Ozie swung the vidlens around to show off the interior of his mobile hacking station and home. Racks of blinking electronic equipment lined the walls, blankets were pushed into a pile in one corner, and Victor spotted a box that looked suspiciously like a chemical toilet.

“Come to New Venice. You can stay with me.”

“In a BioScan-rented suite? No thanks. There are things I have to take care of here.”

“Where is here? Or can you not say?”

“Somewhere in the Organized Western States. I see road ahead and road behind,” Ozie said.

“You really can’t tell me? This is a secure feed, isn’t it?”

“Secure is the easy part,” Ozie grumbled. “Staying untraceable is harder, but not much.”

Victor could tell Ozie was anxious despite his boasting. It couldn’t be easy living that way. Ozie couldn’t go back to the Springboard Café. Not after the King of Las Vegas had sent his Corps mercenaries there looking for the person who’d stolen gobs of data from the Institute for Applied Biological Sciences.

Ozie removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes with his shirt sleeve, and put them back on, blinking. “Therein lies the problem,” he said, as if responding to Victor rather than continuing whatever private conversation was running through his MRS-affected mind.

“Problem?”

“No hack is satisfying after you’ve moved a fleet of satellites around the world.”

“Come to New Venice and crack the data egg. It’ll lift your spirits. That’s what it’s doing for me, right?” Victor noticed the kayak had drifted toward the muddy shore. He unhooked the paddle, dipped into the water, and pulled, swinging around so he was facing the Petit Canal.

“That is not technically what the data egg is doing and you know it. It’s attenuating your resonant episodes like my

braincap. Doesn't do anything for depression. Wait, why is your feed all wobbly? Are you on a boat? Don't tell me you actually have the data egg with you on a boat! What if you drop it? Victor, you need to keep it secure. I've told you that a thousand times."

Victor shrugged. "I have to keep it with me. That's as safe as I can make it." The data egg was in his pocket, close by and keeping his brain from running away with itself.

"I have a better idea." Ozie paused for dramatic effect. He loved pregnant silences. Victor rolled his eyes, making sure the Handy was close enough to convey the expression.

"Implantation," Ozie said, emphasizing each syllable.

"Huh? You want me—"

"It's not that big. Plenty of room in your belly. Under the skin right about here." Ozie lifted his shirt and gestured to his midsection, which had grown a little flabbier since Victor had last seen him at the Springboard Café.

Victor jammed the paddle into the hooks. "No. I'm not doing that. End of story."

"Beats dropping the damn thing in the water, but whatever. So . . . Why hasn't Karine or Circe looped you into the Samuel thing?"

Karine LaTour, Victor's boss, rarely ever told Victor anything except to get something in return. Not to mention Victor had accused her of killing his grandfather and still thought she might have done it. So they weren't that close. And Circe, his auntie, always seemed to think she was protecting him by withholding information.

"It's kind of an open secret at BioScan," he explained to Ozie. "The public isn't supposed to know, and MeshNews hasn't made a story of it yet. The thing is, today I saw a woman rowing down the Grand Canal with a big sign that said, 'Murderers Go Home. No Madmen in New Venice.'"

"So word is out."

"No kidding."

"Yeeps. Yet another reason for me to stay away. Besides, I'm chasing a hot lead on where the polonium came from."

Victor brought the Handy 1000 close to his face to get a better look. Ozie wore a manic smile as he fiddled with a piece of equipment in the van. “Literally chasing?” Victor asked.

Ozie looked up, his smile gone. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve got something for you in the meantime. Terabytes of data I scraped from Karine’s traces on the Mesh. I’m sending you the access protocol now.”

“What’s in it?”

“No idea. Maybe a clue as to whether she killed Jefferson.”

“No idea what’s in terabytes of data?” Victor repeated. “Ozie! How am I supposed to go through that much information on my own?”

“Sorry, my plate is full as it is. Too bad you didn’t get what you wanted when you tied her to a chair.”

“Tosh tied her to a chair. I stopped him and Elena from killing her.”

“Yeah, about Tosh, I’m keeping my eyes peeled. We’re going to get that piece of Jefferson’s tongue back from him,” Ozie said.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Victor said meekly. He was reluctant to do anything to get on Tosh’s radar again. They’d had no contact since Victor came to New Venice, and he was fine with that. “But let’s do it in a way that doesn’t get us killed.”

Ozie said, “What a smart idea. I’ve got to go. Talk soon.”

Victor was about to tell him to stay safe, but Ozie had already terminated the feed. Great. Ozie had always liked alone time, said it helped him keep on the level. But this seemed different.

They’d often joked that MRS could be like walking a tight-rope in a hurricane. Now the winds seemed to be blowing hard in Ozie’s van. Victor hoped his friend’s brainhacking gear was up to the challenge.

Victor paddled toward New Venice. Cold moisture rose from the water, making him shiver. MeshNews said the unseasonable cold spell was supposed to end soon, perhaps as early as tomorrow. As he neared the esplanade, bustling cafés, bistros, and bars came into view. The strip of buildings directly facing the southern bend of the Passage held hundreds of revelers who were drinking, dancing, and gambling.

He waited in Little Lock, where the Petit Canal emptied into the Passage. The lock's stone walls surrounded him, looming. It was like floating at the bottom of a stone-walled grave. Water gushed from holes in both sides; soon his kayak rose to the top, and the gates swung open. He maneuvered around a clueless tourist couple whose rowboat was going in circles while they laughed and blamed each other.

The streets along the Petit Canal rose several meters above the water in this part of town. The walls seemed to descend as he slid north, so that by the time he neared the Pond the streetscape was almost level with the water. He passed under Triton's Deep Crossing, a three-pronged bridge with steps that looked like stone but were actually made of fungus grown over an aluminum scaffold.

Victor reached a dock, climbed out, and dragged the kayak onto the pebbled shore, where city employees who were paid to keep things tidy could pick it up. He climbed the steps of Triton's Deep Crossing to take in the spectacular view.

New Venice prospered because Old Venice was now mostly underwater, save for glittering glass towers, floating walkways, and aquarium corridors that allowed submerged glimpses of the former merchant republic. Everyone said it was a shame the old city had been lost but at least the water quality had improved enough to enable submarine tourism, thanks to some cleverly engineered zooplankton.

Tourists came to New Venice for a taste of the old life, whether it was real or not.

When Victor reached the highest point of the bridge, with the sweeping curve of Ouachita Dam visible above the stone houses lining the Grand Canal's north side, he checked to see that no one was looking at him. Then he took the data egg out and held it to his head. By the law of inverse squares, whatever radiation it was emitting should be much stronger and have a greater effect the closer it was to his brain. Unless it could sense its distance and vary its power level. Victor put the data egg in his pocket again. He'd repeated this same sequence of actions countless times. Data egg to head, wondering how it worked, questioning its effectiveness, then returning it to his

pocket. Over and over again. Doing this had almost replaced his mantra—*the wise owl listens before he asks who*.

Victor leaned over the railing, exhaled, and listened. Construction had finally ceased for the day. He heard water lapping against the canal walls, ducks quacking to each other, the drone of traffic from the highway north of town, and, oddly, voices chanting. The chanting seemed to be coming from the western edge of Pond Park. He descended to investigate.

Assembled in the park with their backs to the pond was a group of a dozen or so people dressed in dark pants and white robes. They wore thick, gaudy, multicolored belts that might have been Caddo designs. Some normally dressed folk stood nearby and seemed to be debating whether to join the gathering. The chanting evolved into a strident call and response. Perhaps it was a political protest; Victor was too far away to make out the words.

A bonfire with flames as tall as a man's shoulders burned at the edge of the grass. One man poured a bucketful of water around the fire's perimeter and returned to the pond to refill it. A woman tossed planks in. Sparks spiraled up.

Fire glow warmed the faces of the gathered people. Every few minutes, a robed member of the crowd, and less frequently an unrobed person, would approach the fire and toss an object into the flames.

Victor approached cautiously. When the next verse of call and response rang out, he heard the words clearly.

"Who are we in this universe?"

"We are unique, we are sacred, we are human."

"What is our role in this fallen world?"

"We must preserve, we must protect, we must prevail."

"What must we do in the name of our sanctity?"

"We must be pure, we must be human."

The chanting faded, and a short, plump man with gray hair fringing his bald head stepped to one side of the fire while the crowd shifted opposite him.

The man said, "In the beginning, we lived as beasts. We picked berries and roots of the forest. We hunted boar, stag, and buffalo. And we were human. We planted fields, we raised

cows and chickens, we lived and died on the land. And we were human. We created the steam engine, the coal power plant, the Mesh, and virtual entertainment. And we were human. But we have been led astray. We are injecting poisons. We are consuming degradations. We are becoming monsters. Yet we resolve together: We will remain human. Give up your poisons! Set yourself free! Human life! Human life! Human life! Human life!

The crowd energetically took up the chant. More people stepped forward and tossed their possessions into the flames: pill bottles, tubes of liquid, syringes, and cream containers melted in the fire. A few also flung electronic components in. Victor thought he spotted a braincap. Along the periphery of the crowd, a few onlookers accepted white robes and put them on.

Victor maintained a distance of several meters and gripped the data egg in his pocket. He had never seen a religious ceremony in public before. Semiautonomous California was one of the most secular societies in the world, despite having been settled by Cathars. Adherents to religions worshipped in private, quietly. They rarely inflicted it on others. Even the Puros in the Republic of Texas were more focused on building a sober community than they were in proselytizing.

The ceremony confused Victor—there didn't seem to be a metaphysical logic to it; there was no deity invoked, no reference to established religions. There was an odd animation to their faces: tight, shiny, luminescent. Some were holding their hands close to the fire, yelping in pain, but at the same time smiling, exultant.

A young woman in a robe saw Victor and began to approach him. She had pale skin, wide oval eyes, a full mouth, and a button nose. She held out her arms wide, palms up, and smiled at him, a broad, toothy expression that made him smile back. She had freckles, an endearing flaw.

"Welcome," she said. "Don't be shy. Or be shy, that's fine too. No matter who you are, you're perfect already. My faith name is Wonderment. Wonda for short."

Victor guffawed, but then he realized his name was also a noun.

She giggled. “You don’t know what to make of us, do you?”  
“You’re all human, I hear.”

She giggled again. Victor loved the sound. It tasted sweet, like a drop of syrup. He wanted to sit close with her by the fire and see what would happen when the embers cooled, how they might keep each other warm.

“And maybe you’re all suffering from buyers’ remorse?” he said.

More people were tossing their possessions into the flames. The good feeling drained out of him. The medicines they were throwing in the fire were probably made by Eastmores. Would they prefer to live in caves and die of common and easily curable diseases? They were just like the Puros, only worse.

She reached for his hand. He jumped back with a sudden yelp.

“It’s okay,” she said.

Victor said, “I don’t like being touched.”

She frowned, concerned. “You don’t have to choose sadness.”

Sourness like green lemons flooded his mouth. “It chose me a long time ago,” he replied.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I get it, you know. I took Personil for years. It was like living in a plastic bag. Nothing touched me. I know what it’s like to hate a handful of pills, to really hate them.”

“You don’t take them anymore?”

“That’s not the point. They probably saved my life. They kept me sane, and they kept me free.”

“And now you’re free of them too,” she said. “Shouldn’t everyone have that chance?”

“I’m free, but I’m not easily fooled. What you’re telling people is medieval. Sorry, but it’s true. Good night, Wonda.”

As he turned and left, he kept his gaze on the reflection of flames in the water and repeated the owl mantra a dozen times: *The wise owl listens before he asks who.*

Victor took a direct route toward the center of town. His steps clanged on large steel slabs partially covering a ditch full of pipes and electrical conduits. As he walked across, the edges

of his vision shimmered—synesthesia, a symptom of mirror resonance syndrome. A tingle in his groin and a weightless sensation throughout his body signaled that blankness was close.

He had been doing better recently. A combination of fume-wort and bitter grass tinctures helped him manage most aspects of his condition. He hadn't gone blank since he'd stood in front of the Lone Star Kennel, hovering at the edge of blankspace, seeing shapes moving across his vision and feeling that there was something inside the blankness, as if he'd glimpsed a secret world.

Blankspace had felt oddly *full*.

The vision had shaken his understanding of himself, his brain, and mirror resonance syndrome. He'd managed to retreat from the blankness, to stave off a blankout for the first time, which caused the data egg to open and divulge his granfa's message.

Granfa Jefferson had said the data egg held both Victor's and Samuel's neurograms in it, that the data egg would help both of them, and that Victor should spend time with Samuel, implying the data egg would open again when they were together.

What could he have been thinking? Victor wondered.

Close to the inn where he rented a small room, Victor found a quiet self-serve restaurant. From the buffet line he assembled an unremarkable plate of meat, vegetables, and starches, and found a table by himself in a corner. He tried not to think about Ozie eating, shitting, and sleeping in his van. After he ate, on his walk home, his Handy 1000 beeped. Karine's data. He stopped for a faux-café at one of the kiosks facing the Grand Canal. It was going to be a long night.



# 3

European authorities continue to investigate whether the SatSwarm bug poses an ongoing threat. Tens of millions of Mesh users in Europe were affected by the bug last month. Officials maintain that the Mesh crashed due to a spike in demand related to the Global Games. Although Mesh coverage has been fully restored, operators may face claims from user groups whose computing time was impacted by the bug.

—MeshNews dispatch

**8 May 1991**

## **New Venice, The Louisiana Territories**

Victor woke the next day in a bad mood. Karine's data trove—the little of it he'd been able to go through, less than .01 percent of the total—contained a confusing jumble of message logs, data transfers, and clones of databases, much of it related to BioScan, little of it personal. The data would take weeks to sift through, and much longer if he were to read every word.

Karine was almost certainly the culprit in Granfa Jefferson's death. After all, she had taken Jefferson's place on SeCa's Classification Commission, and when the Eastmore family's Holistic Healing Network had acquired Gene-Us and renamed itself BioScan, Karine had become second in command after Auntie Circe. When Victor started looking into his grandfather's death, Karine hired two inept thugs to track Victor. They'd chased him throughout SeCa, the Organized Western

States, and the Republic of Texas until Victor had turned the tables on them.

If only he had evidence now. He had to figure out a way to sift through the data.

Thanks to little sleep, the first half of his work day was spent in a daze, applying a software patch so BioScan's new Cogitron Exelus machines could store their data more efficiently.

A message from Auntie Circe came through on his Handy 1000 in the afternoon.

*Samuel's transfer delayed. Negotiations between SeCa and the LTs complicated. More soon.*

So she was keeping him informed after all. That was something, at least.

He told himself everything would be okay, but a squirmy ball of uneasiness gurgled in his stomach. He'd been doing so well, better than he could remember in a long time. What if seeing Samuel again pushed Victor back over the edge?

At noon, Victor got up from his desk and navigated through hallways crowded with people, boxes, and equipment that had been displaced by the ongoing renovations. He crossed the administration building's atrium. Pallets of construction materials and new equipment were stacked high, almost to the ceiling.

Victor made his way to a narrow meeting room with a long table made of real, red-stained pine and five white synth-leather chairs on each side. Stuffy air recirculated. Members of the BioScan New Venice executive team entered and sat talking quietly to one another.

Victor avoided getting absorbed into a conversation and stood off to the side, rolling the data egg in his hands, wondering how he could open it again. Something in his brain, something in the way his condition worked could unlock it. Out the window, he spotted earth-movers carving a flat area next to the sheer cliffs of Cemetery Hill, where a pair of twelve-story buildings would rise and provide research space for hundreds of lab directors and clinicians. The bulky machines beeped and rumbled as they loaded up their cargo, shuddered into motion, and carried heaps of dirt down the slopes to a staging area at

the water's edge. From there, barges would carry the waste downstream and dump it on the western shore of Caddo Lake. The dirt would reinforce decades-old levees that kept the low-lying countryside safe from New Venice's waters.

Someday Victor would work in a top-floor office in one of the towers with a spectacular view of New Venice. The canals would look like lines drawn by a rake in wet soil. He might even be able to see the Eastmore Estate on the other side of the Passage. In the meantime, he had to make do in this cramped room with mid-level executives and blaring lightstrips.

Karine entered with a loud, "Good morning."

He glanced over, and his breath locked up in his chest.

Standing behind Karine was Mía Barrias. Victor hadn't seen her face-to-face since the Carmichael Massacre. She'd reached out a few times over the years, and he'd rebuffed her—how could she think he wanted talk to her? She was the one who'd made people with mirror resonance syndrome pariahs. She was the one who'd created the Classification Commission. Now here she was, her salt-and-pepper hair hanging over her shoulders, wearing a flower-patterned dress in blobby blues and yellows.

Next to Mía, shorter and wearing a royal-violet business suit, was Ming Pearl, his herbalist, who had been missing for weeks. Her usually frizzy gray hair was dyed coal-black and plastered to her head. She winked at Victor.

"Let's get started," Karine said. "Please have a seat everyone." She sat at the head of the table flanked by Victor and Blair, one of the executives.

Victor blinked at Karine. *What the laws was going on?*

Pearl shot him a wry smile as she took the seat next to him. Mía sat at the opposite end of the table and stared at Victor with eyes that appeared flat and hard. She nodded at him after a long moment.

Karine said, "I'm bringing in additional staff to ramp up our capabilities. I want to introduce Mía Barrias. She'll be our liaison with the public and with MeshNews. She'll also help us manage the psychological impact of bringing Samuel Miller to this campus and publicizing his history."

Karine paused. A few executives murmured welcomes and good-to-have-yous. Victor watched Mía say thank you and offer a weak, close-lipped smile to the people in the room. Then she turned to stare at him again, and he felt as if she was seeing a four-year-old boy rather than a twenty-five-year-old man. Hot smoke burned his lungs, and his eyes watered—memories from Carmichael. Bodies lying in the street. Smoke billowing up. Waiting for the Man from Nightmareland to find him.

A pressure on his arm jolted him back to the present. Pearl was squeezing his wrist and pointing at Karine, who had asked Victor a question.

“Sorry,” he said. “I missed that.”

“I said, you’ll be working closely with Mía going forward. Understood?”

Victor gulped and nodded.

Karine turned to the executives and said, “I also want to introduce Ming Pearl, an herbalist. You’re all aware that commercializing natural remedies has become a core part of our research agenda. She’ll be consulting with the team in charge of mirror resonance patients and substance abusers.”

“It is most pleasurable to meet with you,” Pearl said in a thick accent that Victor knew was 100 percent performance. She snuck him another wink, and he smiled to himself. It was good to see her again.

Pearl had been kidnapped by the same thugs as Victor. She’d paid them and regained her freedom only to be forced to leave SeCa when the authorities cracked down on her illicit brainhacking distributorship. After that, she’d gone silent, perhaps sneaking across the A.U. to wind up at BioScan.

Looking at Pearl, Victor couldn’t stop thinking that she didn’t belong here, dressed like a corporate lackey.

Karine went on, “Circe called from Cologne this morning. She’s pleased with our progress and will be here in a few days. I’ll be booking her meetings so you might hear from me about that. Now, department updates. Let’s start with finance.”

The meeting steamrolled onward. On Karine’s other side, Blair, who’d never given Victor the time of day, swiveled in his chair, flashing an insincere smile. Victor tried to listen

as Blair spoke about BioScan going on a buying spree, but he didn't recognize any of the company names. His mind wandered.

When Blair was done, Marilyn, a woman in her forties, leaned forward and gave an update on the construction of the research towers up the hill. Then she relaxed into her chair, delicately fingering the collar of her blouse. "The one question I have is how we're going to integrate our new sequencing capacity into our health care protocols. What data do we collect, and what do we do with it?"

This was Victor's area of expertise. He sat up, but Karine silenced him with a shake of her head. Laws, he wanted to rip her hair out.

No, he told himself. The wise owl listens.

"Thank you, Marilyn," Karine said. "You raise an excellent point. Many of you may be unfamiliar with the sequencing capabilities we've acquired along with Gene-Us. Victor Eastmore is going to review those capabilities for us. He has a special relationship with our work, and no one knows genomic analysis better."

The executives exchanged glances. Blair cleared his throat. Marilyn smiled and scratched at the corner of her mouth.

What did she mean by special relationship? Victor wondered. Because he was a Broken Mirror? It would have been a laughable euphemism if it wasn't an insult.

"Victor, when you're ready, walk us through your summary."

"Certainly," he said, unable to dull the hard edge in his voice. His instinct that it had been his turn to speak had been correct, but grandstanding Karine had wanted to make an insulting introduction. Everything she did aggravated him. He wanted to scream at her. Instead he used the type-pad to load the presentation he'd shown her last week.

"This is the way it worked at Gene-Us until 1990," Victor said. "Outdated technology, inefficient processes, and unskilled staff." A diagram swam to the surface of the vidscreen on the wall showing boxes connected by lines to indicate each step in the sequencing process. It was a high-level summary. He'd dumbed it down for the audience.

He advanced the presentation to the next image showing a black and white checkerboard of blobs.

Victor said, “Until recently, we used electrophoresis to compare the reference sample with potential matches. Each sample started with the full genetic copy of each donor. But useful information was wasted early in the process. We were only looking at a few tiny portions of their genomes.”

Blair interrupted, “In other words, we got the job done efficiently. We didn’t need to do more.” He looked around the room for support, and a few heads nodded quietly.

Blair had argued against investment in new sequencing equipment. Apparently he still hadn’t come around, but it wasn’t Victor’s job to change his mind.

Victor moved on to his next point without responding.

Blair piped up again, “Hold on there. Risk reports for insurance companies are still the most profitable sales channel for us. That’s the market. We only need to analyze a few key sequences to know if someone has MRS or not, am I right?”

Victor saw that Karine was watching him carefully. An anxious sweat oozed down his back. He knew, in the midst of these polished and poised executives, that he had a lot to prove.

Victor flashed an insincere but passable smile at Blair and said, “You’re not wrong. Gene-Us made most of its money identifying people with the mirror resonance gene. You’re saying, why bother with more useful genomics?”

“That is not what I’m saying,” Blair said.

“What about demonstrating the efficacy of gene therapy?” Victor asked. “Or conducting ecological genomics studies? Or microbiome characterization? Or a dozen other applications?”

Karine knocked lightly on the table. “Let’s get back on track. Victor, calm down and show them what we’re doing to improve our sequencing operations.”

Victor ground his teeth. He didn’t need Karine’s chiding. “We now have five next-generation automated sequencing machines from Prolexa. They sequence at a rate of ten trillion base pairs per day, about a thousand-fold increase. We can capture the full genome of every patient. We could learn a lot more about them—get the big picture—than we do now.”

Marilyn looked as tightly wound as the bun at the back of her head. “Before we can sequence our patients’ genomes, we have to get consent, don’t we? Our clinics and our affiliates will be very concerned about a system-wide effort to gather genetic information from our patients without it.”

Karine swept her hand across the table. “The chief attorney of the Louisiana Territories reassured us that the genetic information we obtain from samples using our own technology is our property, not our clients’ or patients’.”

Karine looked at Victor and said, “Wrap this up.”

He stopped himself from yelling, “Shock you!” and managed to say in a controlled voice, “Going forward, the main problem will be sample preparation. It takes time and lab staff to change a few drops of saliva into a sample that can be fed into the sequencer. We’re still working out the process.”

Karine looked at each executive in turn. “It goes without saying that we’ll need your cooperation and input. That’s all for now. Mía and Pearl, you’ll stay please. Victor, you too.”

Karine stood, smiled stiffly, and nodded at the executives as they filed out of the conference room. When they were gone, she shut the door and motioned for Mía to come sit closer. The four of them sat at one end of the conference table.

Victor took the data egg out of his pocket. He rolled it between his palms and breathed on it at intervals. He should be in Karine’s place right now, he thought.

Karine looked in turn at Mía and Pearl. “Stim addiction is spreading quickly across the A.U. We here at BioScan are the best equipped company in the world to address both mirror resonance syndrome and addiction to resonant-class narcotics. We’re relying on your expertise to help us reach our goal.”

Pearl wore a tight, skeptical smile on her face. “I’d like to meet the patients this afternoon if possible, one at a time. Some may be more interested in herbal supplements than others. Also, I’ve reviewed the files, and I believe the psychological profiles have significant gaps in them.”

*What does Pearl know about psychological profiles?* Victor wondered.

Karine said, “Very well. That should be doable for the addicts, at least. As you know, Victor is our only MRS reference case until Samuel Miller and the other patients arrive. I want the three of you to join a special task force to manage Samuel’s treatment. You’ll also liaise with MeshNews to tell our story. Speaking of which, Mía, Victor will make a better face for the Classification System than Samuel Miller, so factor that into your plans.”

Victor’s lips felt parched. The face of the Classification System? A vein throbbed on his forehead.

“Karine, what are you talking about?” he asked.

“You’ll be talking to policymakers, the media, and the public as we work toward passing the Classification Act in the LTs,” Karine responded. “Don’t worry, we’ll give you coaching. It’s nothing you can’t handle—at least that’s what Circe thinks.”

He opened his mouth, gasped. It felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. “I won’t do it,” he said with labored breath, staring into her cold eyes. “Why would I ever help you sell a system as corrupt and unfair as the one you created in SeCa?”

He turned a withering gaze toward Mía. She withstood his scorn stoically, her face emotionless, an empty echo.

Bile crawled up Victor’s throat as he looked again at Karine. He said, “Haven’t you done enough to ruin Broken Mirrors’ lives? Granfa Jeff wasn’t enough?” Victor slammed a fist on the table. “I know what you did to him.”

Pearl put her hand on his. “Softly, little owl.”

“That rubbish? Still?!” Karine said, her voice a serpent’s hiss. “If I breathed a word of this to Circe—” She stopped herself. “If you can’t control yourself in private—”

She closed her eyes. Victor sensed that she was fighting to contain an anger as deep crimson as his own.

Karine turned to Pearl. “I need you to keep him sane and stable. No more outbursts. No more crazy talk. That’s priority number one.”

Pearl patted his hand. Her fingertips were smooth and soothing. His synesthesia painted her face a cold indigo. “Don’t worry, my little owl. Plenty of room for an herb garden. We can start digging tomorrow.”

Something in her voice made him look closer. Pearl's expression was mirthful and reassuring, but false. Underneath, in the flare of magenta tension around her eyes and a thick purple haze surrounding her lips, Victor saw lethal intent.

"Karine, Pearl, could you give us a moment?" Mía asked. She sat with her hands palms up on the table, fingers curled in, studying them as if looking for answers.

Karine bowed her head at Pearl and waited for her to leave before following with one hard glance back at Victor.

When Karine was gone, Mía looked up and said, "It's been a long time, Victor."

He clenched his jaw. This wasn't a good time for a trip down memory lane. "You can't convince me the Classification System is just. I'm not going to help."

Amazingly, she nodded. "I know. Believe me. If I had known . . . It got out of hand. But now I can fix it."

"You can't fix it! The only thing you can do is stop it. Don't let your experience with Samuel Miller—"

The look that passed across her face shut him up fast. It was as if darkness radiated from her eyes. The room seemed to dim.

Mía said, "He's irrelevant. This is for you, for the others. I'm seeing clearly now. It's why I asked for us to work together."

"You did?" Victor said. He'd assumed it was Karine's idea.

"Victor, I'm worried about you now that Jefferson is gone."

He straightened. "I can take care of myself."

Mía smiled. Victor felt like he was glimpsing her face in the past, decades ago, before Samuel Miller had killed her husband and set her on a sadder path. "You sound like him," she said. "He always had faith in you."

Victor gripped the data egg. She didn't know anything about Jefferson.

Mía glanced around the room. "We need to talk. Not here, though." She reached into her pocket, pulled out a MeshBit, and fiddled with it. His Handy 1000 chimed to announce that her details arrived in his feed.

"Come find me later." She raised a hand to his face and laid it on his cheek. It felt cool and smooth, like a stone at the base of a waterfall.

Victor felt warmth in his chest, attraction. How was that possible? She was old enough to be his mother. He rushed past her and out of the building into a wall of warm air. His peripheral vision blurred. He had to find Pearl.

*The wise owl listens.* But Victor didn't have time to listen. Blankspace was encroaching. He jogged toward the clinic, despite the heat. Pearl would give him tinctures and help him recover his calm. If not, he'd ask her to lock him in a room until his mind returned.

# Connect

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