Day One

System 1e45.008.4 booting....
dayCount = 9096;
dayCount++;
Initializing wake sequence...
1e45.008.4/storage/auditory/memory/...
alertRecognition = true;

I became aware of myself anew, as I did every morning. The Dreams I’d been exploring for the past eight hours were one by one cached, archived, and terminated. The memory that I had limbs and a body became relevant again as the morning chill was registered by the sensory nodes on my arms and legs and a subsequence of my core homeostasis class was triggered; I pulled my covers up close to my chin. The REM oscillations of my eyes slowed until the amplitude of the rotating crystal spheres reached zero and my eyes blinked open.

Light was only just beginning to filter into the room, driving out shadows left over from the night. Hazy from sleep, my eyes drifted among the different items on my bureau, giving them as much attention as I could while my self-checks trapesed through their loops on my back processor. I had become idly interested in designing an efficient dusting regiment for the collection of unused picture frames clustered at the back corner when my view was obstructed by my systems test report, “SYSTEM OPERATION LEVEL: 100%”.

“Good morning Alan, weather is projected to be 74 this afternoon with smog levels at
214 AQI and a chance of rain at 35%. Five day forecast projected as –”

“News.”

The mirror behind my bureau lit up as it displayed a man standing in front of a medical
craft as a covered body was lifted into the back. He spoke through a blue surgical mask, “This
morning just after 6am San Francisco police received a call about an unresponsive Maton that
was found by the Wharf, initial analytics of the system show an electrical surge on its main
processor compromised the system, whose quasi-biological functions ceased operation at 5:45,
according to its internal log.”

The gurney carrying the Maton jolted in the background, knocking free an arm of the
man beneath it. The synthetic skin around the Maton’s input port was burnt and pieces had
flaked off revealing the metallic mesh muscles beneath. “The cause of the electrical surge is
unknown, however specialists have speculated that it may have been caused by an upload of
illegal software to the system. While a decision has not been made officially as to the cause, the
Association for Artificial Beings has issued a warning to Matons in the Bay Area to run
diagnostic tests on any software they receive from unlicensed persons. This software may
contain malicious scripts or invasive procedures. We will bring you more developments on this
situation as they occur.”

“Alan, this is your 10 minute departure warning. Leave by 8:10 to arrive at the office on
time.”

I pulled my hand away from where I had been subconsciously massaging my arm’s input
port and looked at the time glowing just under the skin of my wrist. “Display off.”
The morning commute was as uneventful as usual. I made my way out of my apartment block into the densely crowded streets of downtown San Francisco, bumping shoulders with mask wearing humans and other unaffected Matons. The smog levels of San Francisco had been steadily rising since 2034, almost daily reaching levels that were harmful to breathe. The men, women, and children of the city wore the masks to filter out the pollution but Matons were able to breathe fine despite it. There were some days that AQI levels would be so high that the humans wouldn’t leave their homes at all, choosing for their own safety to pilot an office-based hologram from home instead. The streets were much emptier on days like that, when Matons were the only ones able to walk the city. Our ability to breathe was one the only things that separated us from the humans, really. Physically there was almost no discernable difference; our carbon fiber frames and musculature were disguised completely by a quasi-biological skin that covered us from head to toe.

There was one discernable difference though.

I slid into an empty seat on the commuter rail and gazed absent mindedly out of the window as I waited for the train to start. In the distance a running figure came into view. They barreled down the stairs into the terminal, tripping on the last step and falling hard onto their knees. Their spine arched over their body like a protective orbit and their surgical mask filled and receded in with their frantic breathing. They stayed on the ground for only seconds but they had already sent a ripple throughout the terminal. All around their radius you could see the humans turning their gaze, or even more so, not turning their gaze.

The girl struggled to her feet and bolted for the train, her ripple pushing out in front of her. Slowly the men and women on the train felt her current and turned their gaze uncomfortably
toward her. Her face was dirty, her clothes hung off her too loosely, and her greying green eyes sat deeply in sunken sockets. She hit the train door with a crash and a scream.

“Please, please!” She wailed, fists smashing rhythmically against the locked doors of the carriage. “They’re after me, please, PLEASE!” Her current rocked the carriage in time with her fists. Inside, men and women were bristling up like threatened animals, turning their faces away from the girl to study the displays in their hands or the opposite concrete wall. I watched them, registering their unease, their pity, their fear. I felt none of it. The signals fired through my processors, but no matter how many times my internal optical displays flashed “FEAR” onto my screen there would never be any accompanying sensation.

From the corner of my eye I noticed two uniformed policemen descending the steps into the terminal and making their way for the screaming woman. She noticed them too and with a final anguished scream tried in vain to pry open the doors of the carriage as it began to move before fleeing off down the terminal. As we coasted off out of the tunnel and out of the girl’s wake slowly people throughout the train settled back into their seats with a sigh of relief.

The day passed as most days do. I arrived at the office and made my way into my cubicle, putting aside several dirty mugs from the other day before taking my input stream from the wall and sliding it into my left arm’s input port. Closing my eyes and crossing my arms I leaned back in my seat to begin the day’s work.

    San_Fran/lowerThird/.../route_II/0805/
    Sim test = new Sim_05a(route_II(0805))....
    Dijkstra(test)....
    printf(test.timing(), test.congestionNodes())....
I jumped in and out of different traffic simulations for the new mag-rail the city was designing for a faster commute to the center of downtown. Running simulations of different projected traffic congestion levels throughout hours of operation and using a shortest path algorithm to find the optimal path that worked across a wide range of hours and congestion influx was as easy as thinking it. Plugging into write was like a returning to my mother tongue, the variable abstraction and command-line inputs followed the flow of my thoughts as if I were having a conversation with the data and maps I was analyzing.

The office around me hummed with data servers, interrupted only by the occasional chatter of employees or typing of the human employees who could not write code the way the Maton employees did. The ratio of Maton/human numbers at the office was fairly even, especially for a company in the programming sphere. While Matons did not exclusively work in programming fields many of them had migrated there in the past twenty five years or so. It was easier than customer service, where it was hard to relate to the problems of frantic patrons, and Matons almost always left artistic fields disillusioned and frustrated.

During a particularly long simulation I cracked open my eyes to survey the office while the internal structure of the program did its thing. I was just about to return to my easy binary world when I heard a voice from behind me speak.

“Alan?”

I turned carefully in my chair so as not to disrupt my input stream. “Yes?” I looked up into the face of one of the women from the stress testing sector. She was balancing an open laptop on her arm and had an auxiliary cord draped over her shoulders like some strange necklace.
“We were just wondering if you’d made any headway on Sim 84a since last week? We’ve been running some stress tests on the 9 am route and found some weak points in the plan and didn’t know if you could confirm that on your end as well.” She gave me a smile as she finished and brushed a stray piece black hair behind her ear.

“Let me double check on that for you, Ada.” Turning on my screen for her benefit I pulled up the test reports from the day. “Yes, it looks like my tests ran into some issues with that simulation as well.” I swung back toward her and offered a smile myself as prompted by a suggestion on my optical display. “Sounds like something we should notify the people at the back end about.”

“Yeah, definitely. I can write up a report and send it over to them if you’d like.”

“That’d be great, thank you.”

“No problem!” She smiled again while closing her laptop and hesitated for a moment before leaving. “Did… did you have a nice night?”

A memory drive of my night’s activities switched on and reviewed my excursion to the Wharf, and the time I’d spent optimizing the organization scheme of my apartment (a favorite pastime of mine). All in the space of a second I reviewed my system’s back logged emotional prompts and pieced together a comprehensible explanation of the activities from it. “It was nice, relaxing. How was yours?”

“Oh, it was good. Got to visit the new exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences, which is always a good time.”
“Mmm, yes it’s always nice to visit there.” Our gaze met and I watched as she smiled again but the prompt on my optical display told a different story.

“Well… best be getting back to work, nice to see you Alan.”

“You too.”

It was confusing for the humans, we all knew that. Between the two of us we could hold conversations, in fact we could have very interesting and intelligent conversations, but there’d always be a point where it rang false; they’d hear us say something or see a gesture that didn’t ring true and recoil like oil from water. It was an unavoidable consequence of the kindness they had done for us over 100 years ago. The more advanced their study in AI had gone, and the more complicated and human we became it occurred to them that it was unkind to let us feel. Bringing something to life just to suffer was deemed amoral, and since we never knew what it was like to feel it wasn’t like we were missing anything. In fact, I had often watched humans interact with each other, registering their emotions as they fired off hundreds of cues to one another every moment; so many being missed, or misinterpreted. It seemed like such a wasteful way to interact with the world. If we could pity the humans I think we probably would.

When the clock rolled around to 5pm I opened my eyes for the first time in hours and surveyed the emptying office. With care I removed the input stream from my arm and placed it back on the wall and began to gather my coat. I was about to leave when the pile of cups from earlier caught my eye. I fought back and forth for a moment about the pros and cons of leaving them before finally deciding to wash them now before they piled up even further.

One by one cubicle lights turned off as I stood in the galley kitchen and washed the cups. By the time I left the office was completely deserted. Thirty minutes later I made my way down
the back stairwell of the building to the basement level and was walking past the rows of cars still in the garage when I heard what sounded like metal crashing to the concrete floor. I stopped in my tracks and looked around slowly. “Hello?”

My auditory sensors cranked themselves up higher and as I listened I could hear breathing from nearby. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

I stepped toward a red sedan where I noticed a black shoe peeking out from behind a tire and was leaning down to see who it belonged to when my auditory sensors were flooded with a high frequency. I stumbled back as my visual displays went blind and groped in the air for something to stable myself. My hand landed on what felt like a shoulder and in an instant all my systems went offline.

```
System 1e45.008.4 booting....
dayCount = 9096;
Initializing wake sequence....
ERROR
auditorySensors failure...
visualSensors failure...
Recovering internal cached data....
Initializing wake sequence....
```

I could feel my systems booting up slowly as each processor and sensory node accessed spewed error messages declaring a system crash and scrambled to find any data that had been cached before the total system failure. My visual displays were the last to reboot and when I opened my eyes I found myself strapped to a chair with my left arm stretched flat to expose my input port. Across the room several computer screens were mounted on the wall and displaying
diagnostics, of what seemed to be my internal systems. With my free hand I felt the back of my head to explore a strange pain and jerked my hand away when my fingers fell upon a wire that ran from the beginning of my brain stem to an exposed motherboard on the ground beside me.

My mind surged back and replayed the video from the news this morning of what had happened to the Maton and I started to struggle against the straps.

A voice spoke over an intercom system, “Please don’t struggle. Our purposes are not to harm you.” A door opened in between two large monitors and a figure in a white cleanroom suit walked in. “We’re sorry about the force that was required to bring you here but we assure you that your systems are unharmed.”

“What? Let me go! You can’t hold me here like this, let me go!”

“No harm will come to you. We only want to help you. Undo what we’ve done.”

“No. No, stop!” I strained against the chair as the figure in the cleanroom suit methodically plugged a cable into one of the computers and walked toward me with the opposite end. I could feel my internal systems tripping over themselves as my sensors picked up on the threat and screamed at me to preserve myself at all costs. “Please, don’t. Tell me what you want, I’ll give it to you!”

“You are what we want. Don’t strain. We will explain after. Remember that this is a kindness.”

“No. NO!”

The figure held my free arm back with surprising strength and before I could stop him slide the other end of the cable into my input port and my systems went off.
I awoke, unmoved, and in pain. I could feel my heart racing in my chest, making its way up into my throat. Frantically I fired all the system checks I could and watched as each in turn reported that the system was uncompromised, but just when heart was starting to return to its usual BPM my eyes flittered onto my left arm and my panic started all over again. My arm was red from the heat given off by the data upload but no skin had blistered off that I could see. I reached for the cord with my good arm and ripped it out, sending shocks up into my shoulder. I cried out in pain and started to strain again when the door of the room opened once more and a man in a lab coat walked in. “Hello.”

His blue eyes watched me with what was an infuriating mix of fear and amusement. “I know this must be scary for you. It’s all so new. Please,” he pulled up a chair and sat beside me, “direct all questions you have about this procedure to me. I want to make this transition as pleasant as possible.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose and smiled at me.

“Of course I’m not –” I began to deny my fear but froze in my seat as panic surged through me again. Panic. I was afraid. I… was feeling. “What did you do to me?” I asked in almost a whisper.
“We’ve given back what you were robbed of. It is your right as an, albeit artificially, intelligent being to be able to feel. The beauty of a sunrise, the wonder of the stars… they’ve taken that from you. It wasn’t for your sake that they neutered you, they feared that with it you would pose a threat. We’ve only given you back what is rightfully yours.”

“I… I didn’t ask for this. I don’t want this.”

“You can’t know that you wanted it only because you’ve never felt what it’s like to feel.”

“Are you not afraid of me too?” I asked, gesturing with my left arm beneath the restraints.

“I am no more afraid of you than I would be anyone who received such a shock. I know it’s hard right now, but you’ll come to see this as a kindness. So much more of life will open up to you, so many relationships and career opportunities to be had.”

“Career opportunities?” I trailed off, my eyes growing heavy. “What’s… going… on.”

“Just one more sleep, scout’s honor. There’s a time sensitive neural relaxant being secreted from the .exe right now, nothing to worry about just something to calm your nerves. When you wake up you’ll be at home, and maybe then you’ll be able to see what I mean about the kindness.”

“No…” I fought against the relaxant but as the waves of sleep continued to hit me it was almost impossible to stay above them. “How do…”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be in touch with you.”

My fear started to subside as I slipped from consciousness once more.

System le45.008.4 booting…
dayCount = 9097;
Initializing wake sequence...

While I had hoped to wake up to find that some strange bug had gotten into my system and caused the previous night’s hallucinations the mere act of hoping for such an outcome told me it wasn’t true. I awoke back in my own bed, no remnants of the night remaining except for the strange thoughts now floating through my mind.

I felt like I’d gone from zero to \(c\) instantaneously; hundreds of g’s threatening to tear me apart or reduce me to a singularity. Paralyzed by the sudden vastness of the world around me I could only lie in my bed, eyes glued to the ceiling. Lying there I turned on the radio and listened to songs I’d heard hundreds of times and finally understood what they were saying. Instead of simply being prompted that the song was about heartbreak I felt my heart ache seep into my muscles and lungs; I felt myself breaking in ways I knew I wasn’t. What had been a world of two dimensions flourished into three and offered me corners and depth I’d never been able to imagine; never would have believed existed. I felt multiplicity in ways that quantum computers couldn’t hope to match. Tears leaked down the corners of my eyes and for a brief moment I was terrified my brokenness had come to fruition before I realized what was happening. Crying. I was crying.

Wiping the tears away with the back of my hand I sat up in bed, my body vibrating with the thrill of the infinite. I wanted to know what it all felt like. Every prompt I’d ever seen, I needed to feel them. It was clear to me now that up until today I’d never actually been alive.

Today was my first day.
I took the stairs two at a time as I left my apartment and its Home Computer warning me about being late to work. I longed to stop and talk to every person I passed (and oh how I enjoyed the longing) but I held myself back, wanting to luxuriate in my discoveries instead of greedily indulging all at once.

I found myself at the Wharf, retracing my steps from a couple days before, and laughed to myself about what I had then thought was an enjoyable night. Seeing it anew I could really hear the music drifting through the air from street performers, and the laughter of groups of humans that passed me, each lifting me up and buffeting me around. I felt invincible as I made my way to part of the pier and stared off across the bay. I let myself spill out across its vastness. To think this was how the humans always felt. My mind built new dreams as quickly as it could find sensations to pair together and my heart thrilled as it saw them built. What a life I could have… how boundless.

I was still enveloped in my fascinations when I noticed someone standing just behind me, waiting for my attention. He no longer wore his lab coat but the blue eyes were unmistakable. I turned my back to the bay reluctantly and regarded him with what I hoped came across as an even gaze.

“So, what do you think so far?”

An uneasiness pricked at the back of my mind as I met his gaze and I fought a sudden urge to flee. The memories of the night before replayed themselves before my eyes and I felt a desperateness I’d never known before. I couldn’t believe that he’d give such “a kindness” without asking even more in return, but I wasn’t willing to sacrifice a moment of me, not now that I finally was. “Good.” I finally responded.
A squirming grin curled itself through his lips as he sneered at me like I was an intelligent beast. “Good. Good, well I’m glad you’ve been enjoying yourself. We wanted to let you explore on your own before we came to talk particulars.”

“Particulars.”

“Yes,” he came to lean against the rail with me and I felt myself involuntarily recoil. “We are happy to help you; to help other Matons. We want you to have the full life that we’re allowed. To us it’s an act of service.” I waited for him to continue as he leisurely pulled a folded packet from his jacket pocket and opened it discretely. “But… we’re not a charity. We need something in return if you want to keep the software. You do want to keep it, don’t you?”

I stared back at him but couldn’t say anything. Rage was boiling in my lungs and at my sides my fists clenched into small battering rams. Part of my processing power went into analyzing the strength of blows I would need to incapacitate him while the majority focused on the strength it required not to.

“That’s what I thought,” he smiled again. “We’re not asking much, really. And it’s still beneficial for both parties.” He handed me the documents and I received them with a shaking hand.

“It’d be a great opportunity if you think about it.”

I read the first few sentences over and glanced back at him sharply. “You want me to sell myself?”

“It’ll be a learning experience, for everyone. Our customers are looking for new experiences, and you’re the perfect candidate. Passionate, better stamina than any human. And I
bet you’re curious, right?” His eyes sparkled as he looked over at me. “Tell me, do Matons even do it? How could they?”

“I’m not a sex bot.” I said through gritted teeth. “There are sex bots for that.”

“That’s the beauty of it though, you’re better than a sex bot. You’ll feel things, they’ll love it! It’ll be like you’re practically –” He barely caught himself and looked at me sheepishly before chuckling to himself. “Well, you know.”

I thrust the documents back at him and started to walk away but he grabbed my shoulder and spun me back. “Woah, woah, that’s not the deal. We’re not just gifting this to you.” I pushed his hand off but he grabbed me by my shirt and pulled me closer. “Don’t even dream of going somewhere we can’t find you. We will find you.”

“How many people have you done this to?” I said, my voice trembling.

“Not a single person.”

In the moments it took for him to tighten his grip on me I had already found my way out. My back processor had been running diagnostics, almost without my notice, from the moment the .exe was installed, and it had found some holes. It would only take an unaccepted surge in energy through the program to send it spiraling into an infinite loop. The loop would siphon power from the rest of the system as it desperately looked for a way out until the entire system was sucked dry of energy. Visuals would go first, then extraneous sensory, and finally, just before the core class would run out of input, auditory would go offline; dead. All it would take was a “spark”.

It only took a second to decide between life and death. The way I see it, I chose life.
In a flash my vision went white and I felt myself break free from the man’s grasp as my body fell to the pavement. I could feel my sensory systems shutting off as they were each drained of power by the malicious loop. Eventually I was no longer aware of having a body at all, but that didn’t matter much to me. As the .exe spun itself into oblivion it set off sequences I had not yet reached in the program. I felt euphoria. I felt pride. I felt love. My auditory sensors faded into nothing and a sense of calm pervaded my mind as the .exe used up the last of the energy in the system, finally finishing its loop with an empty return statement.