



THE HALFERNE BODHIS

By Darrin Snider

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Chapter One

Sheng admired the assortment of foliage in the waiting room, reaching out to touch various specimens to determine which were real, which were artificial, and which were holographic. In the end, he decided that most were artificial, with only the simpler, more pragmatic plants in the rear, slightly beyond or above a normal person's reach, being holos. The three he identified as real were unremarkable varieties of philodendron, quite common and requiring very little maintenance to keep happy. It was a practical choice, and while they were too few to make their air deodorizing and purifying efforts felt, he imagined that, subconsciously, he would know the difference if they were removed and replaced.

"Domante thanks you for waiting and is ready to see you now," the pleasant, disembodied voice of a female said from all around him.

The door to his left slowly opened, making no sound as it did so, and he casually walked through it into an ornate office lined with replicas of classic paintings, sculptures, and an array of overstuffed couches and armchairs. Already familiar with the routine, he selected the couch directly in front of the large wing-backed chair and sat down. As he did, a holodrone lifted itself off its station in the corner, noiselessly sped to a position directly above the chair and began projecting the image of an attractive, professionally dressed woman seated directly in front of him.

"Vidas, it is so good to see you again," she said, crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap.

"Hello, Domante," Sheng said.

"So, I see you found employment since we last spoke. How is the job going?" Domante was aware of Sheng's disdain for pointless small talk, so he appreciated her moving straight to business and knew the question was meant professionally, and not socially.

“It’s fine,” he said leaning back in the couch, pretending to be relaxed. “I’m assisting a family with various chores around their farm: feeding animals, loading barges, and rebuilding an old stable so they can eventually expand their herd. In exchange, they provide me with food and a small room.”

“You make no wages then?”

Sheng shrugged. “I have no real need for money. We’ve discussed this.”

“Yet, you take on jobs meant for machines, and surround yourself with dirt, mud, and animal excrement.”

“The family are traditionalists, honoring their ancestors in how they run the farm. The house has most of the modern luxuries however, and there is a Phrame-interfaced terminal in my room that I am free to use.”

“And do you?”

“Of course. Despite my knowledge of antiquated farming techniques, my personal ethics are still contemporary.”

“Are you merely subjecting yourself to the toil and unpleasantness of manual labor to honor them?”

“I’ve always preferred the honesty of manual labor, but you Earthers leave me very few options to choose from.”

“Yes, we’ve spoken of your time in the ministry, which you left in order to pursue the life of a migratory worker.”

“That’s not why I left,” Sheng corrected her, knowing full well she knew all of the details with perfect clarity. Why was she so obviously trying to bait him?

Domante smiled. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry to bring it up. I am curious to know if you’re finding Earth more tolerable now that you have found employment.”

“I am enjoying the work tremendously. I am not enjoying Earth any more than I was before.”

“Then why do you remain here? You have the financial means to leave whenever you wish.”

“You know why. We’ve been over this. It’s been the focus of most of your questions for the past two months.”

“I understand this. You must understand that it is my job to monitor your progress. Hearing a progression of answers to the same questions over a period of time provides a baseline--”

“Yes, I understand,” Sheng cut her off.

“I sense you are becoming agitated. Does this happen frequently?”

“Only when I’m talking to you,” Sheng snapped.

“So, you feel the treatment is working then?”

“I don’t feel any different after a month of taking your drugs, if that’s what you mean.”

“The drugs do not control your feelings. They merely help clear and relax your mind so that you can better understand and deal with your feelings. You must still do the real work.”

“I fail to see what work I can do that will help me.”

“Do you still? Then perhaps we are using the wrong treatment, or perhaps your problem is not psychological.”

“Six weeks ago, you assured me that it was and that you could help me quite easily.”

“I honestly believed that. You, however, present a number of deviations from baseline that I had not accounted for.”

Sheng laughed at her careful phrasing. “I came here because Earth has the best technology and the best medical facilities. To answer your earlier question: I remain here because after traveling to almost two-dozen worlds, I am convinced that what I seek is here.”

“You have said previously that you do not know what you seek. Have you re-evaluated this position?”

Sheng exhaled, defeated. “No.”

“Have you heard the voices lately?”

“No.”

“Any voices?”

“Only those that I expect to hear.”

“Do you want to hear the voices again?”

This was a new question, and Sheng thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said at last.

“Is it so difficult a question?”

“Not the question. What it represents.”

“Can you explain this line of thinking?”

“It’s not so much the voices as what they represent. The mystery is maddening. Do they want something? Is there something they’re trying to tell me? Is there something I should be doing? Will they stop and go away peacefully if I figure out their meaning and origin?”

“Your answer implies another side.”

Sheng nodded. “When I was young, I was convinced I was hearing the voices of the divine. I joined the ministry because that’s what I thought they wanted me to do, but nothing changed. They seemed oblivious to what I had done. There was no approval, no rejection, no change, no clarity.”

“You have stated previously that you were never able to interpret what the voices were saying. You said it seemed to be a foreign language, but you never had luck interpreting or translating its meaning.”

“Yes. I tried several linguistic databases and translation matrices.”

“You’re certain it was language you were hearing, however.”

“Yes, there were repeated sounds, definitive vowel/consonant patterns, and emotional inflections.”

“Do you remember the words?”

“Some of them -- the phrases that were repeated frequently.”

“Can you give me an example?”

Sheng though for a moment, then in a completely different tone of voice muttered, "Oh'JOAK oak NO rasud nah neeAH AY laik pa."

Domante closed her eyes and considered the sounds. "Vaguely Asian?" She offered. "Trans-Himalayan? Possibly Karenic with hints of Kuki-Chin."

Sheng smirked. "You're a linguistic expert now?"

"I wouldn't say expert."

"You're faster than the translators I had dissecting it."

"They were probably more thorough in their analysis. I was merely guessing based on my initial impression." She brushed off the unspoken accusation with a quick change of subject. "What did you do when you left the ministry."

"Mostly, I just traveled from system to system, learning, helping people whenever I could, and most of all researching paracusia and non-stimulated auditory perception in as many places as I could. I was obsessed with finding out what they were and what they wanted."

"In this research, you no doubt learned of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, Theron's Disease, Kenanyahou Syndrome--"

"-- and any number of psychological conditions which I was definitively proven not to suffer from by multiple specialists. On the other hand, I also learned of Gandhi, Jeanne d'Arc, Thomas Aquinas, Carl Jung, Admiral Hiyate Shirakawa and other great people who may have heard similar voices."

"Or they may have just as easily been afflicted with the conditions I mentioned and simply not diagnosed. Did you learn anything significant in these studies?"

"Obviously not, or I wouldn't be here."

"At what point did the voices leave you? Or, more precisely, when did you stop hearing the voices."

"I'm not sure. About five years ago, or so. They gradually became less and less frequent, until one day were just gone."

"Was this before or after you learned of Gandhi and the others?"

“Before.”

“So, your fascination, I would even say defense of those people you mentioned, is out of a sense of kinship with them.”

“You mean to imply I think I’m the next Gandhi or Thomas Aquinas? Hardly, Domante.”

“Tell me, you were in the ministry for four years, and you’ve been to over two-dozen worlds since then in various capacities doing various jobs. You’ve no doubt met many people. Friends, co-workers, charges, parishioners. Do you still correspond with any of them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They have their own lives. They don’t need to be burdened with mine.”

“They’ve told you this?”

“No.”

“Do you find people difficult to relate to?”

“Sometimes.”

“So, you are lonely.”

Sheng thought long and hard about this. It was a statement. It was not a question. She didn’t require an answer.

Domine leaned forward slightly and pursed her eyebrows in thought. “You see those famous historical people and, in your mind at least, you make them into people like you, not knowing anything first-hand about their experiences beyond what you read in ancient texts. To you, they are a substitute for a peer group.”

Sheng considered the words for a moment. “That seems a far-fetched theory you have no basis of understanding for.”

“What understanding would I require to make that observation?”

It was Sheng’s turn to lean forward now. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to spend years being certain you were having daily one-on-one conversations with God, only to find out that it was just

voices in your head that nobody could explain? Did I miss God's message? Did I somehow displease him that he abandoned me? Was it someone else? Were they even aware me at all, or was I eavesdropping? For better or for worse, it consumed me for years, and then suddenly it was gone, without explanation. I'm not sure anyone can understand that kind of loneliness."

"Can you pinpoint the exact moment you lost your faith?"

"There was no exact moment. When the voices stopped, I kept talking for many months. Gradually I began to accept that they were no longer listening."

"I was referring to your faith in people. The faith that drew you to seeking yourself in historical figures rather than people here and now? You had a wonderful record of finding and helping people when you were in the ministry--"

"You keep coming back to the ministry. It was merely one of a dozen jobs I've held in my life."

"It was the only one you put any real effort into. All your jobs since that point were merely different forms of labor that required no extensive knowledge or preparation. I suspect they were the first jobs you came across that didn't require a commitment of time or education."

"They all benefitted someone. They were all service to a community or a cause."

"Yet they were different. The ministry is a service to a community, but it does so by helping individuals. Essentially, it was a service to each person's soul."

"Either way, I am still a servant for the betterment of society. That is the goal, isn't it? I'm just more efficient in how I do it now."

"But, you no longer function with people. You don't relate to them the way you did in the ministry."

"I relate with people just fine," Sheng protested. "I relate to them as flawed paintings, as hollow statues that constantly multiply, and for every one of them that I fix, two more appear in even worse condition. Surely someone in your profession has seen this. It's a trap, like your drugs. You can't fix individuals. You can only lead by example to show them how to fix themselves."

"Do you see this as what the voices did to you when they left?"

Sheng scowled, showing disdain for the first time.

Domante continued, not waiting for an answer. “Do you see me as a hollow statue?”

“Are you even a real person? I assumed you to be an AI construct. This is Earth after all. Isn’t why almost everything here is done via holo? Isn’t the point to conveniently blur the differences between reconstructed personalities of the deceased, from artificial personalities, from living flesh and blood personalities?”

“We like to think we’ve grown beyond seeing any distinction between those three.”

Sheng laughed genuinely. “Then you ARE an AI.”

Domante tried her best to maintain a professional guise and not look offended. “You seem very certain of that.”

“Perhaps I relate better to people than you assume.”

The district of Kaunas was called “Old Town,” and had borne the name for centuries. Sheng exited the pedestrian underpass to brick streets and the classic architecture of an ancient church. He marveled at it again, as he did every time he walked past. So much detail and majesty, formed by human hands as a testament of love to their creator. For them, there was no doubt. For them, it was nothing more than every able-bodied person in the village coming together to create something. There was no hubris or pride in any individual’s work, there were no plaques demanding tribute to the patrons that sponsored each individual fresco or statue. It was centuries before anyone even tried to identify and credit the individual artists. This was something created by a community to serve a community. In the centuries since, sites like this were increasingly a thing of rarity.

While the buildings were preserved in their original form, they had been taken over by a variety of contemporary businesses. He walked several kilometers down the tree lined Laisvės Alėja taking note of each restaurant, boutique, antique store, and museum. Overcome with curiosity, he popped into one advertising itself as a tea house, and treated himself to a shot of excellent vodka, followed by a cup of delicate lavender and vanilla tea. He correctly guessed it was an Indian variety, based on his short time studying the varieties available on Earth. While they had Indian teas on the colonies he visited, the

flavors changed subtly during transport, and even if a hearty specimen was transplanted off-world, the differences in soil, air, and water often made it indistinguishable from its original Terran lineage.

Having enjoyed his tea, Sheng made his way up the street to the funicular that took him from ground level up to the transit station, where he could catch a transport back to the farm where he lived, for now. To his left, he saw the faded red rooftops of Old Town, flanked by the sparsely lit by streetlamps and the odd headlight from a transport, and gently hugged by the mighty Neris and Nemunas rivers. To his right, rising defiantly from the fog, were the modern towers and skyscrapers of Kaunas proper, surrounded by air traffic the way bees circled a hive, sterile and remarkable, blocking out the stars with arrogant illumination. There were few places on any world where one could so clearly witness the bloodless battle of tradition and modernity in one view like this, and it sickened Sheng to watch.

He exited the funicular, walked half a kilometer to the transit station, and stood patiently in the departure gate, waiting for the transport to arrive. Public transits to the surrounding farms were not nearly as popular as they once were, so while it was dusk, the only other people present at this particular station were a small group of five men, all college aged and dressed in slightly shabby overcoats. Sheng watched as one took note of him and pointed him out to his four compatriots. After no less than ten seconds of debate, they all began to move towards him. Sheng feared the worst.

The smallest one, and obviously the leader, shouted something at him in a language or dialect he didn't quite understand. The boy's tone and intent were obviously hostile, however.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," Sheng said, instantly betraying his foreign accent to his assailants who smiled and nodded to each other.

The leader repeated his phrase, this time slightly slower, accentuating the CH and CK sounds with bits of spittle. Sheng had spoken Earth standard, and his colonist's accent was not thick enough that they would not be able to understand what he was saying. This was intentional belligerence.

"Look, if it's money you want, I have no hard currency. In fact, I have nothing of value on me. There's little point in trying to intimidate me. I'm hardly worth your effort or the risk you're taking in public like this."

This angered the smaller man, who responded by shoving Sheng, the surprise of the sudden move making him stumble backwards a couple of steps. At least this confirmed they understood what

he was saying, they simply chose to pretend otherwise. Sheng pulled his hands from his pockets, holding them out to his side, palms open to emphasize that he was unarmed and carried nothing of value. The smaller man growled ferociously and leaped at him, pulling him to the ground. Sheng managed to twist and land on his left arm, ensuring that at the very least the impact did not knock the wind out of him. With his right arm, he attempted to push the boy away, but was met with a series of painful blows to his back and side.

Eventually, he gave up attempting to resist, and the boy leapt to his feet, motioning for the other four to join in. Sheng rolled onto his stomach and buried his face, unwilling to put up any kind of a fight, but also unwilling to give them the satisfaction of seeing him wince in fear or cry out in pain. He simply laid there, taking blow after blow, kick after kick to his body and head. After a while, his senses numbed to the assault, and each one became slightly less impactful than the previous.

Through it all, in his mind, he saw God watching him. He saw the Son on the cross, which became the basis of a new faith, and the Son the prophet, leading his followers on the Hijrah, fleeing persecution and death. He saw Abraham and the Lamb, which proved to be the shared history that was the basis of a unity between the three largest religions. Then he saw Buddha, laughing at him from atop a pile of treasure; Narayana, bearing a glittering mace in one hand and a flower in the other; and Akal Purakh standing majestically and defiantly as he looked on. They were all there, but even now, none of them spoke to him.

As he continued to endure blow after blow to his body, he opened his eyes, hoping beyond hope that someone was coming to his aid by now. Through the red haze and sparkling stars of pain, he only saw a single brick, discarded and lying next to the terminal building, unnoticed by his attackers, and just out of his own reach.

Chapter Two

He awoke from the darkness of a blissful sleep to find light painfully stabbing at his eyes. After a few seconds, the light dissipated and the form of a man's face gradually came into focus. He blinked several times to clear the fog from the corners of his vision.

"Mr. Sheng, can you hear me?"

"Just Sheng," he managed to say.

He attempted to turn his head to make sense of his surroundings. He was lying on a table in a small, brightly lit room, approximately two meters by six. Three people, two men and one woman, were standing over him dressed in the familiar garb of paramedics. He attempted to sit up, but found he had no control over his muscles.

"We have you in a stasis field," the man explained. "It will be a few more minutes before your bones have knitted. You're a very lucky man."

"Am I?" Sheng asked, exhausted.

"Three broken ribs and a fractured collarbone, the rest is all bruises and minor contusions. There's no internal damage as far as we can tell, and we've just about managed to heal everything except for a mild concussion from several blows to the head. We'd like your permission to transport you to a medical center where they can run full scans."

Sheng winced and sighed in exasperation. "I'd really rather not go through all of that."

"Certainly you have that right, but I'd still recommend we check you for any kind of brain injury."

"I used to be a class D medic," Sheng explained. "I know the symptoms of a concussion. I'll deal with the headache and watch for signs that's is more serious."

The medic frowned. "Is there some reason you're refusing treatment, Mr. Sheng?"

"Just Sheng. And no, I simply prefer to be treated by my own personal physician," Sheng lied, hoping they didn't check his medical file and see that he had no personal physician.

The medic regarded his two colleagues for a moment and shrugged. “Very well. There’s little we can do if you refuse treatment. The rest of your injuries will be healed up in just a few minutes, though I’m sure you understand you’re going to be extremely sore on top of the headaches for the next several days. I can give you something for the pain--”

“I can deal with the pain, but I will discuss analgesic options with my personal physician if it becomes more than I can handle.”

“Oh, we can assure you it will,” the female medic said.

“There are many types of pain. Some can be quite therapeutic,” Sheng retorted.

All three medics regarded him with confusion. Finally, the first one spoke again. “There is a security officer outside who wishes to speak with you about the incident. If you’re up to it, I can send him in now.”

“That would be fine. Thank you,” Sheng said politely.

The two male medics left through the door at his feet, and he realized he was in a mobile medical transport, and no doubt still at the transit station where he was attacked. The sun had gone down while he was unconscious, and he wondered how long it had been.

A tall, wiry man in a security uniform walked up the ramp and entered the transport, taking a seat next to him. “Mr. Sheng,” the man said in an affable tone, “I’m Constable Žukauskas. I just have a few questions for you.”

“It’s just Sheng. Go ahead, Constable.”

The constable pulled up a datapad and began reading. “You are Mr. Vidas Sheng, age 29, born on Kuutar, residences on seven different worlds, former Minister in the Church of the Expanding Word, currently on special Visa, living and working as a farmhand for the Ažuolas Vasiliauskas family in Rašnava.”

“I am.”

“Witnesses say you were accosted by five youths, late teens to early twenties. Do you have any idea who they were?”

“No, I don’t,” Sheng admitted. “I was merely waiting on a transport home. They were here when I arrived.”

“Did you get a good look at them?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent, could you describe them for me? Let’s begin with the first one who approached you.”

“To what end, Constable?”

“Well, with your description, we can run them against video surveillance of the area and hopefully get an idea of who they are and where they went after they attacked you.”

“That’s unnecessary,” Sheng said, shaking his head as much as the stasis field would allow.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“It is unnecessary to identify them. I will not be pressing charges. I forgive them.”

The security officer shook his head in disbelief at Sheng’s words. “Sir, a crime was committed. Regardless of your forgiveness, justice must be served. Surely you can see this.”

“I carry nothing of value on me. I was not robbed. I was not seriously injured. I see no need for justice,” Sheng’s said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t understand. Is there something more here that you’re hiding from me? What is the real reason they attacked you?”

“I’m not hiding anything. As for why they attacked me, perhaps you could ask them, but it won’t change the fact that they did. Perhaps they were angry. Perhaps society failed them somehow and they were looking to take it out on someone. Perhaps, I just happened to be an easy target in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

There was a sequence of tones on the console next to the medic, and Sheng felt the stasis field release him. He quickly attempted to sit up. His ribs and arms achingly protested, and his head began to throb with pain. He did his best not to show it outwardly.

“Sir,” the Constable said, almost as a plea, “I am tasked with keeping order in this part of the city. If those boys harm anyone else because you refused to help me apprehend them—”

Sheng’s voice was flat and emotionless, with just a hint of frustration, directed at the officer. “I forgive them, Constable. I have no other obligation, either to you or to anyone else. If you do go back to the surveillance videos and find them, and you do end up apprehending them for some crime in the future, I suggest you ask them why they did what they did. If they choose to answer you, then listen. If they do not, then perhaps you should educate them. Either way, I consider my part in the matter closed.”

“Mr. Sheng, if you would just listen—”

“Just Sheng,” he smiled, not letting his annoyance show. “I have stated my position, Constable. Do you have any further business here, or is it sufficient that I invite you to contact me at my home should any more questions arise?”

The officer pursed his lips and regarded Sheng for a moment as if he were somehow guilty of a crime. “No, sir. If this is your firm position, then you are free to go.”

“Thank you, Constable,” Sheng said and gingerly rose to his feet, feeling his way out of the transport and back down to the same departure station he had been standing at earlier. He noticed the faintest remnant of what must have been a sizable pool of blood on the ground next to where he stood – the only evidence that anything had occurred.

Sheng was disheartened to find the house lights still on when he arrived at the Vasiliauskas homestead. The personal transport that drove him from the station to the farm dropped him off at the edge of the property, as it often did when he ventured to Kaunas, and he made the long trek along the machinery track between the modest barley field and the slightly larger beet field. Before he even reached the ancient wooden fence that surrounded the house and barn, he saw Lina, Ažuolas’ wife standing on the porch, arms crossed in obvious displeasure.

“Vidas,” she said, sympathy oozing from her voice, “You should have called. We would have taken the car and picked you up in Kaunas. There was no need for you to take the transit in the condition you are in.”

“I’m fine, Lina, just a bit of a headache,” he lied. The pain had gotten steadily worse since he left the medics.

“I don’t understand what the world is coming to. Robberies in broad daylight? Not one person tried to help or come to your aid? They could have killed you!”

“They’re just angry kids. The Phrame doesn’t appeal to them anymore, so they’re out looking for a thrill. They’ll make great colonists someday once they learn to temper all that passion and emotion.”

“You say that like you know them.”

Sheng waived her off and rubbed his aching temple. “I know the type. I’ve seen it on a half-dozen worlds. It’s rare to find it on Earth anymore.”

“Still, it doesn’t forgive what they did to you. People can’t just—”

“It doesn’t forgive; therefore, I have to.”

“You and your stubborn, aloof ways. They could have carved you up like a Sunday roast and you would just lie there, making excuses for them as you bleed out, saying nothing because you don’t want to be a bother to anyone.”

She opened the door and motioned Sheng inside. He stopped to carefully wipe his feet before he entered. On the surface, the house and most of its furnishings appeared to be early 20th century, right down to the wooden floors and hand-woven rugs. Sheng knew most of the furniture and structural materials to be contemporary reproductions, however. Having worked on assembling prefabricated shelters during the early settlement days of the colony on Dianmu, he had become fascinated with ancient carpentry techniques. He was disappointed to find that Ažuolas had almost no knowledge on the subject, other than a keen awareness of what was antique and was an illusion in his house, which had been in the family since the days of the Northwestern Krai.

They entered the kitchen, which was a curious mix of ancient and modern. A wood-burning stove was flanked by both a modern food dispenser as well as a conventional refrigerator. Lina went

immediately to a warming drawer under the stove and removed a steaming bowl of stew which she garnished with a generous hunk of bread and handed to Sheng.

“If you’ll forgive me saying so,” she said, “I worry about you.”

Sheng nodded, “You don’t need to. I’ve been on my own for years now.”

“You mean you’ve been alone.”

The word stuck with him, and he imagined it was making his head throb even more. “Is this where you give the speech again. The one about finding a wife and settling down?”

“You realize a burden shared is a burden halved.”

“Psalm 55:22,” he smiled. “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken. But you, God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of decay; the bloodthirsty and deceitful will not live out half their days. But as for me, I trust in you.”

Lina nodded in appreciation. “So, you didn’t forget everything from your old profession.”

“I don’t forget anything from any of them.”

“Except what it was like to believe, I’ll bet.”

“That’s the one thing I can never forget.”

“Then why are you trapped in an empty soul?”

“I don’t feel trapped.”

She filled a glass of water from the dispenser and sat it down on the table next to him. “You are a very frustrating man, Vidas Sheng.”

“So I’m told,” he smiled and took a sip of water. The coldness made his head throb again. This time he winced in surprise. “I’m sorry to be such bad company. It’s been a long day. Do you mind if I take this back to my room and lie down?”

Vina nodded, “Just remember to bring your plate back in the morning. This old house still attracts insects if you’re careless with food.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sheng smiled. Vina could not be more than five years older than him, though she still acted as if she was mother given the chance. He carefully grabbed his bowl and glass and made his way down the short hallway from the kitchen to the back of the house where his room was.

The room, barely more than nine square meters, was completely undecorated and contained only a bed, a chest with all of his clothing, and a small desk with four books. A computer interface, built into the wall over the desk was the only visible modern convenience, though the plumbing in the small water closet was contemporary, as was the lighting and climate control. Sheng put his dinner on the desk, and slowly laid down on the bed, his head still throbbing.

“Adas, how about some music?”

The screen on the wall lit up with several options, and a disembodied male voice said, “Certainly, what would you like to hear?” The accent was not regional, but instead mimicked Sheng’s own, which he always thought was a nice, familiar touch, but he wondered what the AI would do if Ažuolas or Vina walked in a tried to talk to it now.

“Do you have a preference, or should I choose something?”

Sheng stared at the ceiling thinking for a minute. “Something Asian,” he said at last, “trans-Himalayan.”

“There are 135 distinct styles—”

“Just pick something relaxing,” Sheng cut off the long-winded history of Northwest Chinese musical styles of the past 2000 years.

Instantly the room was filled with the wailing of a male Tenor. Sheng had almost protested that by specifying “classical” music, he had really meant “orchestral,” and certainly nothing with vocals. He found himself instantly enchanted with the voice, however. It soared up and down through multiple octaves in a scale that reminded him of Middle Eastern music. Most surprisingly, while the voice carried tremendous amounts of passion, he couldn’t tell if the singer was happy or sad. He continued to listen for several minutes as the tension continued to build, verse after verse, showing no sign of relenting or peaking.

“Adas, what am I listening to?”

“This is Sufiana Kalam, the traditional music of the Jammu and Kashmir region of southwest China, though the form itself dates back to 14th century Persia. Do you not like it? I can change it.”

Sheng thought about the language – nothing like the voices had spoken, despite Domante’s suggestion, but not completely dissimilar. He listened more intently, trying to pick out any familiar phrases. “What is he saying?”

“A direct translation is difficult. The intent of the style is to convey complex mystical concepts using as few simple words as possible, but I suppose it roughly translates as a man simultaneously reconciling and contrasting his romantic love for his partner, his paternal love for his child, and his spiritual love for his creator, while seeing aspects of all three in each of them.”

Sheng continued to listen for a few more moments listening to the wails with the context given by Adas, but still it sounded like a cognitive dissonance of joy and pain. Eventually, he wondered if that might be the point, and a sharp, stab of pain went through his head.

“I need to sleep,” he said at last, rubbing his temples. “How about some white noise?” Then he remembered a trick he’d learned during a bout with insomnia years ago on one of the colonies he served on. “Do Earther’s still broadcast on radio bands?” While there digital broadcasts via the Phrame or other data networks that could deliver perfect fidelity, he had been told there was something tranquilizing about the harmonics and artifacts of magnetic interference in a radio broadcast.

“There are hobbyist groups and historical reenactors that build transmitters and receivers or reconstruct antiques. Would you like me to sign you up for a nearby club?”

“No, but can you receive those transmissions and play them for me?”

“I am not equipped with such primitive equipment, but there are several virtual SDR’s that I can tap into and relay for you.”

“That would be fine.”

“Do you have a specific frequency you wish me to monitor, or should I find an active one?”

Sheng thought for a moment, trying to remember which frequencies his friend said had the desired wavelength for inducing sleep. “I don’t need actual signal, just the natural static of an open frequency. Try 14 kilohertz.”

“14 kilohertz,” Adas confirmed. There was a soft buzzing and a hiss of static with occasional crackles as the signal was interfered with by everything from weather to fluctuating magnetic fields of modern equipment near the transmitter. It was wild and unpredictable, so much better than flat white noise. Most of all, it was sound that was familiar to Sheng, and he grinned slightly at the nostalgia.

After a few minutes, however, the noise became shrill and off-putting as his headache still loomed in his mind. “Try 42 kilohertz.”

“42 kilohertz,” Adas said. The buzz dropped down several pitches, and the hiss became slightly warmer.

This was more like it. Sheng sat and listened for several minutes, feeling his mind drift with the patterns within the waves. Ten minutes later, he felt himself drifting off to sleep, but still too intrigued by the noise to succumb. “Let’s go to 132 kilohertz.”

“132 kilohertz,” Adas said. The buzz vanished; the hiss became something like the crashing of ocean waves on a beach. Now the only interference came in tiny, barely audible snapping sounds that he imagined were bubbles popping as the tide. Finally, his consciousness, abated.

Chapter Three

It had stormed all day, which for Sheng, was both a blessing and a curse. The blessing was that once the animals we fed and tended to, there was very little work that could be done on the fields, so Ažuolas had been kind enough to give him a much-needed afternoon off without Sheng having to make an excuse about the lingering headache from the previous days' encounter. The curse was the sudden drop in barometric pressure, which only served to exacerbate the throbbing in his temples.

To take his mind off of his problems, and to purchase a strong pain reliever than could be found in the Vasiliauskas house, Sheng set off for Kaunas as soon as he was dismissed. Having purchased his new medication first-thing, he went for a walk in Old Town, this time stopping in a small family-run corner café near the town square, where he dined on a delicious, if slightly-overpriced western-style sandwich. As he sipped at a cup of herbal tea, forgoing the local honey that was customary, the feelings of dread began to creep in.

What was he doing? Lina had been right, he was traveling with an empty soul, completely consumed and obsessed with finding something that he not only could not identify, but also something that he was not entirely sure even existed. Now, he was working for room and board, taking no wage, and gradually spending what meager savings he had on rides into town for sandwiches and trinkets. At this rate, he would be broke in a matter of months and unable to leave Earth if he wanted to. Why was he doing this?

He had trapped himself in a vicious cycle of vague details with no real purpose. Since leaving the ministry, he had traveled to a dozen worlds, seen more than most people would see in a lifetime, and genuinely did a lot of good for people, but he still had no real purpose – he had merely convinced himself that he had one. He had not built anything of permanence, and if his goal was to lead others by examples of kindness and virtue, then those lessons had fallen on deaf ears.

Why hadn't Domante caught on to this the first time they spoke? Or had she? Would he have listed to her if she pointed it out too quickly, without even knowing him yet? Was the point of the sessions to push him in to realizing it for himself? He desperately wanted to ask to her now, but he knew requesting another session not twenty-four hours after leaving her office would be nothing more than an admission of helplessness, and a victory for her that he refused to grant. He hated that he bore such hubris, not to mention a distasteful prejudice toward synthetic personalities.

He was at least self-aware enough to know that he was, and had been, severely depressed for quite some time, and he was steadily sinking deeper. Domante and Lina were both right: he was desperately lonely, he was directionless, and if his encounter with the thugs yesterday and proven anything to him, he was completely apathetic to his own existence – completely prepared to give up his life, if it wasn't an inconvenience to anyone else.

He suddenly became terrified.

Unable to call Domante, and unwilling to confide in either Lina or Ažuolas, he ran through the list of people he knew that he might be able to talk to, if nothing else to take his mind off the sudden malaise that was washing over him like the torrent of water circling the sewer drains outside the café. Not surprisingly, the number of people he knew on Earth could be counted on his fingers, with a few to spare. One likely candidate did come to mind. Sheng checked his watch -- 1500 hours. It was possible he just might be able to catch him.

Downing the remainder of his tea with one painful, burning gulp, he flashed his ID to the tabletop terminal and left a generous, if undeserved, gratuity for café staff. Then, pulling his hood over his head, he ran out into the torrential downpour and headed up the street. He crossed six blocks, sticking close to buildings and awnings whenever possible to minimize the amount of water his shoes took on, until finally he found himself at the pedestrian underpass that lead from the central greenspace of the Laisvės Alėja, underneath the large, modern market fashioned out of the façade of several historical buildings, to exit on the far side of the main thoroughfare, bypassing what little ground traffic still remained in Old Town.

The underpass was well-lit, and a modern drainage and pumping system kept it dry and warm compared to street level. Several alcoves along the half-kilometer route housed everything from popup food stalls to musical acts to art displays. Sheng found what he was looking for at the halfway point. A wide opening in the walkway that housed several benches, tables, potted trees, and chessboards.

“Vidas!” a man shouted from one of the boards.

Sheng smiled more sincerely than he had in days. “Mykolas! I was hoping I would find you here.”

Mykolas Petrauskas was one of the first people Sheng met when he arrived in Kaunas. In fact, it was Mykolas that gave him his local name of Vidas, intended to make him seem less of an outsider and

help him find employment faster. It was Mykolas who first put him in touch with Ažuolas Vasiliauskas, whom he described as a good man at heart, though a bit dim-witted when it came to running the family farm he had suddenly inherited. Finally, it was Mykolas that recommended Domante to him, though he assumed – or at least pretended to assume – this was to help Sheng better adapt to his new life on Earth, and not as a precursor to discovering the truth about the voices, or at least what mental illness he suffered from that had gone completely undetected by physicians and psychiatrists on a dozen other worlds.

“You have time for a few games then?” Mykolas asked, gesturing to the beautiful hand-carved pieces lined on the board in front of him.

“Do I have time for another lesson, you mean? I’m afraid I haven’t played at all since I last saw you, though Ažuolas has been trying to goad me into a match.”

“He’s a strong player. You should take him up on it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I’ve known the rules of the game since I was a boy, but I’ve never played seriously, with any thought behind what I was doing. That is, until you showed me just how unskilled I really am.”

Mykolas winced in distaste. “Don’t beat yourself up about that. People around here spend their whole lives playing this game. It’s like breathing and lovemaking to us. You’re a smart man, Vidas. With a couple of months of serious study, you will be holding your own easily. I believe this about you.”

“Thank you, Mykolas.”

“Just remember: pressure on the center squares, develop pieces early, look for checks when you are behind, trade and simplify when you are ahead. After that, it’s a very simple game.” He gestured for Sheng, playing white, to make the first move.

Sheng quieted his mind, grateful for the distraction that he hoped this would be, and confidently moved the queen’s pawn.

Mykolas smiled slightly and responded with a mirror move. The two continued to trade pieces in silence for several turns. As Mykolas instructed, Sheng busied his mind studying the purpose behind every move his opponent made, then analyzing his own options in counter-play. Checks first; then

attacks; then opportunities to create pressure on his opponent's positions. Mykolas called this the holy trinity of the game –80% of the time, it would be the best answer; the other 20%, it was still pretty good.

Suddenly, contrary Sheng's best predictions, Mykolas ignored an offer to trade bishops, and instead moved his king-side rook's pawn. This stopped Sheng in his tracks, forcing him to rethink what he was planning. In his mind he backtracked several moves, looking for a mistake, but found nothing.

"You're perplexed by that, aren't you? I thought you might be," Mykolas laughed.

Sheng nodded. "I don't see the purpose of that move. What about your holy trinity of chess? That pawn doesn't attack or pressure anything."

"You're right, it doesn't. Yet," Mykolas offered. "That is a very specific move against a very predictable set of moves. Its purpose is to loosen up my position and provide me with options on that side of the board later. It's a line of play generally only used against people like you, who play the Catalan."

"Play the what?"

"The Catalan opening."

"I have no idea what that is."

Mykolas laughed again. "It's a fancy name for the way you move your pawns on the queen's side, then develop your king's side, bringing the bishop out backward."

"I do that?"

"You do that every time, my friend. That's why I've concentrated more on helping you with your middlegame. The Catalan is a solid opening, and you even play most of the alternate lines and variations properly."

"A solid opening," Sheng repeated, confused.

"Yes, many masters play only the Catalan opening."

"I didn't even know it was some textbook thing. No one ever taught me that. I just develop pieces in a way that seems natural. I had no idea I was so predictable."

“Well then,” Mykolas laughed, “you’re a natural. At least at the Catalan. Your middlegame is dreadful though, which is why you’re always down at least four pieces at the end.”

The two played for three more hours, not talking about anything but chess. By the time the sun was going down, Sheng was grateful for the distraction from both his life and his headache, and for what he assumed would be a significant improvement in his game going forward. As he made his way back to the transit station, where he had been attacked the day before, his headache grew steadily worse. He reached the platform, half expecting some kind of catharsis that would relieve him of the burden, but the storm had even managed to wash away persistent blood stain on the platform.

Twenty-four hours. That was all it took. If he had died during the attack yesterday, there would no longer be any trace of his existence, no proof of anything he had done, no one to remember him after just one day -- washed away by the storm. He almost let it happen, or at least did nothing to stop it from happening.

The image of a brick crept into his mind. There had been a brick yesterday. He was certain he’d seen it at the end, just out of his reach. It would have only taken the slightest effort crawl to it and grab it. Would he have had the strength to use it? Would he be able to raise his hand against another person, even in defense of his life? He decided it didn’t matter. The brick was gone, if it had even been real in the first place.

He rubbed at his temples, now worse than ever, and almost wanted to scream in frustration at the persistent pain, but he knew no one would listen.

Forty minutes later, Sheng stumbled into his room, exchanging only the minimum pleasantries with Ažuolas and Lina that etiquette would allow, trying desperately not to betray his condition the entire time. Having satisfied the immutable laws of politeness, he staggered back to his room and collapsed on the bed.

“Adas, open the radio transmitter,” he groaned.

“Certainly, what frequency would you like to monitor?”

Sheng shrugged. “Ah, let’s try 42 kilohertz.”

“42 kilohertz,” Adas confirmed and the room was filled with the warm hiss of white noise. The pitch was wrong, however, and Sheng quickly grew frustrated.

“That’s not it. Let’s try something higher. How about, 132 kilohertz?”

“Certainly. Here’s 132 kilohertz.”

The pitch shifted downward to a deep rumble. Sheng imagined the pain in his head subsiding ever so slightly. It would not be enough to allow him to sleep, but it was relaxing enough that, combined with the knowledge that the pain would double if he were to sit up, he lost the urge to take more of the pain medication he had purchased earlier.

“You seem distressed,” Adas said in a concerned tone. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Sheng thought for a moment about confiding everything in Adas, then decided that taking advice from one AI psychoanalyst was probably more than enough. Why had he ever thought he would find the answer to his problems on Earth? “Yeah, you can give me an alternative to the Catalan,” he finally said, purely as a joke.

“Certainly,” Adas said, “the most obvious choices would be the sequence of prime numbers, or as a spicier variant, you could try the Mersene primes, though that leads to fewer results within the radio spectrum. Fibonacci is another viable choice as there are--”

“I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying. What do prime numbers have to do with chess?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were talking about the famous chess opening. I thought you were talking about radio frequencies.”

“Okay, what does the Catalan have to do with radio frequencies?”

“The frequencies you have chosen to monitor over the last two nights, 14Khz, 42Khz, and 142Khz, correspond to the 4th, 5th, and 6th values of the Catalan series of numbers.”

“I see.” Sheng felt his heart skip a beat at such an odd coincidence. “What do the numbers represent?”

“There are many applications for the Catalan series. Most commonly, they represent the number of triangles, n , that can be cut from a polygon with $n+2$ faces.” As if he knew Sheng would have

difficulty grasping the concept in his physical state, Adas displayed a helpful animation on the monitor above the desk, showing a twelve-sided figure being cut into ten triangles. “Alternatively, they also correspond to the number of rooted, trivalent trees with $n+1$ nodes. Also, the number of ways one could dissect a hypothetical staircase of n stairs into n rectangles. There are many other real-world analogues, but the actual equation is one over n plus 1 times 2^n choose--”

“Okay, stop, stop,” Sheng interrupted, head no throbbing at Adas’ exuberance. “So, this is a sequence of numbers that occurs naturally, you’re saying.”

“In a manner of speaking, all sequences of numbers occur naturally. This one is a relatively simple sequence to grasp intuitively, if I understand the intent of your question.”

“And you’re saying I used this sequence last night as well as tonight, when I thought I was pulling random numbers out of the air both nights? How is that possible.”

“There are many possible explanations, including coincidence. However, the most likely one is that you encountered that series of numbers at some point in the past and it stuck in your head at subconscious level.”

“I don’t remember seeing any numbers recently.”

“At a subconscious level, it does not necessarily have to be a recent exposure. It could have been years ago. Nor does it necessarily have to be a visible representation of the numbers. Perhaps you saw something pictographic and worked the relationship between the numbers out in your mind. Possibly you simply heard the sequence of numbers somewhere and remembered them.”

Sheng stopped for a moment at that suggestion. Coincidence was one thing, but the reference to hearing had triggered him somehow. “Using the Catalan series, tune to the next frequency in the sequence.”

“429 kilohertz.” The static changed shape and color in his mind, but didn’t bring him any great revelations.

“Move to the next one.”

“1 point 43 megahertz.” This was a completely different sound in structure and color and as the spacing between each consecutive frequency became wider and wider, the signal picked up interference from different sources as the distance between waves grew shorter and shorter.

“Keep going,” Sheng said, fascinated with what he was hearing.

“4 point 832 megahertz.”

The pain in his head suddenly grew stronger, even though the noise itself was growing less intense. For some reason he had a very strong image of intersecting lines with a pale-yellow tinge in his mind. “This shouldn’t be having any physiological or neurological effect on my body, should it?” he asked.

“No,” Adas confirmed. “This is a simple acoustic representation of the electromagnetic wave as it passes through a radio receiver. The frequency is more than one hundred thousand times faster than the neurons in your brain are firing, therefore any effect or interference would be immeasurable. As for physiological effects, again, you are merely listening to an acoustic representation. Even if you were exposed to an actual RF field at this frequency at sufficient magnitude, you would likely feel nothing stronger than a bit of heat and possibly mild itching from stimulated nerves.”

“Move to the next frequency in the sequence.”

“16 point 796 megahertz.”

The noise changed pitch again and continued to fade as the pain continued to increase. The imagined lines became a bolder shade of yellow now. “Why do I get very different sensations of pain every time you change the frequency?”

“It’s possible there is a subsonic harmonic or undertone that is triggering motion in your inner ear fluid, though it is more likely to be a psychosomatic or imaginary response.”

“Next frequency, please.”

“58 point 786 megahertz.” The yellow pain began shooting out sparks of bright white. The noise, if there was any, was almost imperceptible at this point. Something familiar, almost nostalgic tickled at the back of his mind.

“Keep stepping up the sequence every ten seconds,” Sheng could barely form the words through the pain.

“208 point 012 megahertz.”

He heard only a small hiss with a high-pitched tone.

“742 point 9 megahertz.”

The hiss began to warble; the tone dropped several steps in pitch.

“2 point 6744 gigahertz.”

The warble became more pronounced as the tone almost took on an almost musical aspect.

“9 point 6948 gigahertz.”

The warble began to break up into irregular patterns, and he thought even detected a warbling in the tone now.

“35 point 3577 gigahertz.”

A synchronicity between the tone and warbling static became noticeable, they were definitely related. For the first time, he noticed his headache had been rapidly subsiding over the last minute, replaced by a warm numbness, like frostbite.

“129 point 6447 gigahertz.”

The static was beginning to take on an almost organic quality. Combined with the tone, it almost sounded like ... whispers.

“Stop!” Sheng shouted, completely overcome with emotion. There it was -- a sound he hadn’t heard in years, or at least something very close to it. He lay there, eyes closed, listening to it for several minutes. Was this it? Finally? Had it really been this easy to find after all?

“Oh’JOAK oak NO rasud nah neeAH AY laik pa,” one of the voices seemed to say, plain as day. It was so familiar to him that it was as if he had found an old holo recording of his youth and was rewatching his life for the first time in years.

“That! Right there!” Sheng shouted at Adas. “Where is that transmission coming from? What is that language?”

“I don’t understand what you’re referring to. There is no transmission.”

“Yes, right here, you said it was 129.6447 gigahertz.”

“And then you said to stop, so I broke connection with the receiver.”

A chill went over Sheng’s body. “You mean you’re not playing any sounds right now?”

“No, I’m not.”

“And you don’t hear any voices other than mine?”

“I do not. Mr. and Mrs. Vasiliauskas are currently in bed reading. Neither has said a word in the past nineteen minutes.”

“Oh, my God,” Sheng whispered, against five years of better judgment and convincing himself that God had nothing to do with them. He couldn’t deny it though. The voices were back.

Appendix

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/techno culture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speedwriting first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

Links

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nanowrimo.org/participants/djaysnider

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Bibliography of Works in Progress

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