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Stellar AI

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AI is only used as a dictionary, thesaurus, and information search and reference tool.
Absolutely no part of the written story is ever copied into AI for editing, revision, or comments.
Absolutely nothing generated by AI is ever pasted into the story.

Matt has developed a unique style and writing method. Removing all age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance etc… only leaving words and actions to define a character.

This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary.(Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

Matt is fascinated and enjoys using AI, but is a firm believer that we should label content.
Human only, AI generated, AI assisted, AI collaboration, etc…

Matt does play with AI in some writing content, like AI assisted poetry (great practice and learning tool to improve writing skills, vocab, cadence, etc..), or AI dialogues as artistic experimentation.
Any works that involve or include AI composition, revisions, or editing are clearly labeled as such.

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I should have left earlier, before the sun set. All the shops are already closed and the streets are nearly vacant, the world is only illuminated by street lights and the occasional pulse of passing headlights. I've got to pick up the pace, get home as fast as possible.

Why is personal safety my responsibility? Of all the things that the city spends money on, why is physical safety in public so underfunded? I have to stop doing this to myself. It's my fault for coming downtown at night when everyone knows it's like this. I need to stop making exceptions, everyone knows we have to build our own bubble of safety, if I leave my bubble or let danger in then that's my own fault.

Uh-oh that group looks rowdy. Eyes on the ground, walk faster, walk straight. They didn't seem to pay notice… good. Okay keep going, one step at a time.

Huh! What are those two doing in that dark alley? Don't look, pretend you didn't notice them.

This next stretch has such poor lighting. Suck it up! Just march with confidence. Nope, can't do it, better to hunch and stare at the ground. Just think about home.

What's that?... Swearing and yelling. From where? I can't see anyone but they sound drunk. Forget it, just keep moving. Stop looking around for them, what if you find them and they see you looking?

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Home at last. Close and lock the door. Safe.

Ug! I hate the city at night.

Forget it. Just clean up and get cozy in bed.

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What a lovely day for a stroll in the park, the sun is shining, kids are playing, seniors are hanging out, people of all ages having a nice wholesome time.

Why isn't the city always like this?Are these different people? Are there two types, night people and day people?

“So close, and yet so far. Hahaha!” A booming voice rings out.

There isn't anyone around. “What? Who was that? ” I whip around in circles searching.

“Look up, over here.” Another boom, this time I have a sense of its origin. Turning to look, I'm blinded by the sun.

My eyes adjust a bit, squinting… there's nobody there, just the bright flaring disc of the sun in the upper half of my vision. “Where? I don't see you.”

My squinting has given the sun flares and radial hair-like lines extending outwards. “Sure you can, you're looking straight at me.” The sunlight pulses and those thin hairs of sunflare twitch along as the words are spoken, the light and flares are moving like an audio visualization synchronized to that voice.

“Is this a prank? Who's doing this?” Spinning around to search again, I now realize that I've wandered away from the crowded area, there is only empty clearing in all directions and definitely nobody here.

“You seem to be getting very stressed, I can just leave you alone if that is better.” I keep spinning but there is no one and the sunlight pulses perfectly with the sound of that voice. Moving around, turning and zig-zagging, I can clearly detect the source, the sound is definitely coming from the direction of the sun. “I was going to help you refine your idea, but if this is upsetting for you, then perhaps I should stop. Would you prefer me to leave you alone?”

“No… Stay…” Obviously I don't believe this is real, but if it just goes away then I'll surely die from unsatisfied curiosity. “Are you the sun? Am I going crazy?”

“Can't both be true? Hahaha!” Is it teasing me? “Look… As fun as little humans can be, I've long since grown bored of meaningless and silly interactions with your type. I'm speaking to you because I thought you might like some help with your idea, I can help you understand light and shadow. ”

“Light and Shadow?...” Thinking for a moment, it comes back to me. “Do you mean night people and day people? Is that really a thing?”

“Yes, that's exactly what I wanted to correct you on. That train of thought was heading in a very good direction, just a bit off the mark.” Why is the sun offering me advice about my random thoughts? “The first thing you need to do is swap out the words day and night, use light and shadow instead. The world is filled with the duality of light and shadow.”

That sounds a bit awkward to me. “You mean light and darkness, right?”

“Absolutely not!” The force of those words knocks me back, not my whole body, but I feel it in my bones. “Darkness is not a thing, it is nothing. Everything is of the light, no thing nor event exists or occurs in darkness. The whole universe, all energy, even matter is light. Night is not darkness, it's only a shadow.”

“Okay okay, I get it.” The argument does make sense I suppose, in a very specific way. “But why are you so touchy about that? I mean, ‘light and darkness’ is such an elegant idea, they're clear-cut opposites like yin and yang. But light and shadow? It doesn't have the same ring to it.”

“Ha! You can't even get your own human ideas straight.” Such a mocking tone. “Yin and yang don't exist alone. Darkness is nothing, darkness stands alone with nothing else. Light exists in contrast and shadow only exists where light is obscured, they exist as a pair, that is the true sense of yin and yang.”

“But darkness can be…” I'm cut off before I get out any counter-arguments.

“Do you want my advice or do you want to argue about semantics?” Again, so loud I feel it in my bones. “You can lead a horse to water but it will just argue with you about fluid dynamics. Hahaha!”

“Okay, yeah.” I jump to respond, a bit rattled by the blasting interruption. “Yes, I am very curious where you are going with all of this stuff.”

“You suspected that people are different in day and night. They are. People have light and shadow versions of themselves. At night humanity is covered in the shadow of the earth, the planet itself shades you from light, and that strengthens the shadows inside people, the shadows within hearts and minds emboldened and emerge.” My experiences of nighttime fear on dark city streets feels validated, the sun has justified my apprehension in the dark. “Only light can beat back the shadows. Shine a light at a shadow and it will fade, retreat, and hide away. Light chases them back to secluded corners and forces them to recede into the smaller cracks of reality.”

“So at night some people actually do change.” I understand what the sun is saying, those troublemakers don't really ‘come out at night’, per se, they come out of their own dark hearts when daylight fades. “Do they not notice the change in themselves? Are they aware that they change so dramatically when the light fades?”

“They? Hahaha!” The sun laughs and it resonates all the way through my body, my self-righteousness trembles. “A water droplet tumbling from the sky asking me ‘Why do those raindrops fall?’, Hahaha.” It's laughing at me, I don't know how to respond. “You think yourself an exception? Your shadow comes out at night too.”

“What? No!” I protest that accusation. “I don't bother others, I don't start conflict and ruckus. Don't lump me in with those aggressors, bullies, and troublemakers.”

“Are you saying that your behavior at night is the same as in broad daylight? Do you think I'm naive or that I don't know what happens on the shaded side of planet earth?” I start to reflect, recalling memories of myself at night, but nothing stands out. I feel justified in saying that I'm not

like them. “I have seen you in the reflection of the moon. Your heart darkens the same as the others, it fills up with anger, suspicion, and fear… mostly fear.”

“You blame me for feeling afraid? Of course I'm scared and suspicious, and yes I get angry.” The sun is making me feel judged, and it's infuriating because I feel justified in my behavior. “I'm only responding to the dangers around me. You can't blame me for having those reactions, it's self preservation.”

“Such righteous indignation. Have I offended you?” The sun says that without an ounce of sincerity. “Everyone has justifications and excuses for their behaviors at night, you are no different. You seem to think you are innocent because you aren't overtly aggressive, but you do aggress, in your heart you suspect and judge, you scorn and condemn. Your fear makes you feel righteous in those aggressions of the heart and mind, doesn't it?”

It's right, I can't deny that. It felt like each word and phrase stripped me naked. “I… Uh…” I feel exposed and unprepared. “You are right. I can't argue, it's all true. I get scared, then I get angry at life for scaring me, I can't help it.”

“Well done, little one. I'm impressed, and that is rare.” I'm shocked, praise? I was becoming so used to the sun's arrogance, dominance, and teasing that this has caught me off guard. “Recognizing such faults in character is hard enough when you discover them on your own, but infinitely harder if it comes as an accusation from an outsider.” The sun's acknowledgment fills me with pride. “But there is one thing you got wrong… You said ‘I can't help it’, and this is wrong.”

“Well… Okay… I suppose that's a bit of a cop out.” I already felt exposed, now I also feel corrected and accused of making excuses. “Fine, yeah. I'm responsible for my behavior and that includes my thoughts. A part of me wants to argue that private thoughts – no matter how negative – should be immune from judgment. But I guess that would be equivalent to saying that ‘monsters are okay as long as they stay under the bed’.”

“Not what I meant, little one. Although… Admitting that your private inner thoughts should be judged alongside your words and actions, that is another impressive surprise.” These flattering approvals in such a weighty and penetrating voice are deeply satisfying. “As you suggest, you could focus on your own thoughts, diligently guard against the shadows within, and fight back when they grow and whisper, that is a very noble battle. But it is far easier to fight them with light instead of effort.”

“But that's the problem, at night it is rather dark, not much light.” I begin recalling memories of fear and angst outside in the dark of night. “What do you want me to do, carry a huge flashlight around at night? I have a feeling that might draw some unwanted attention and get me into trouble.”

“Hahaha, done surprising me now, are you?” I had just made a joke, but I realize that the sun is laughing at my expense, not at my joke. It almost sounds disappointed in my response. ”Looking only at the superficial and literal meanings will get you nowhere in life… Here, I'll hold your hand. You are interpreting the idea of light as an action instead of looking at its effect.”

“The effect of light…?” I think about that. “It warms and illuminates, it can impart energy like solar power for…” I get cut off.

“You walked right past what you were looking for.” The sun's voice carries an instructive and somewhat condescending tone. “Look back and re-examine ‘illuminate’, the answer is back there.”

“Illuminate… It makes something bright… ” I answer, still without a sense of where this is going.

“Hahaha, do you really need me to show you each and every step?” Once again I'm the butt of a joke and I don't really understand why. “What is the effect of illumination, what does brightness cause? Let me help you with direction, stop going towards the inanimate! Go over there, where the people are.”

“Where the people are?” My imagination draws a scene, there is a crowd, light shines on them, illuminating them, what happens? “I can see them… They can see each other… They are seen. Light makes things seen.”

“I had a feeling you would get there. Well done!” The acknowledgement is nice, but my mind has already gone back to the original issue, I'm again wondering what this has to do with using light to fight in my inner shadows. “The nature of a shadow is to be obscured from light. Anything in the shadows is less seen. Your kind – humankind – began filling the night with light as soon as you learned how to make it, pushing back the shadows and dragging things into the world of the seen.”

My imagination starts rewinding time, electric street-lights, gas street-lamps, candles, fire-pits tribal campfires… “Didn't it all start to keep warm, cook food, and… and see the predators who were stalking us in the shadows…” I realize my words just came full circle and landed right back where we were, confirming the sun's description. “But those were wolves and lions and tigers, they were literally hiding in the shadows and hunting us.” As I finish saying those words I'm already aware how easy it is to draw parallels between ancient campfires for safety and modern day lighting in cities.

“There are still wolves today, they are lurking in the shadows of your mind, and they are hungry to devour your soul.” That is not what I expected, I was anticipating something about criminals in dark alleys. “Lighting the world around you protects your body, lighting up yourself protects your soul.”

That makes sense, it sounds philosophical and poetic. “That's lovely. It resonates somewhere deep within my subconscious.” I ponder the significance and meaning, but can't find any answers within reach. “But what should I do with this? I feel like it will take a lot of reflection to find any actionable interpretations.”

“Excellent!” The sun sounds very pleased. “You are where you need to be. The rest is up to you, little one. Remember, be illuminated and be seen. Stay in the light!”

“How?... You obviously don't mean that literally.” I ask and wait, but there is no answer.

“Come on! Don't just leave me with this enigmatic puzzle.” I plead.

“Seriously? You're just going to leave me hanging like this?” I'm yelling now.

I realize that I'm standing here alone, yelling at the sun.

Have I lost my mind?

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‘Stay in the light’. That day feels like such a distant memory now even though it's only been about a few weeks. It's funny, I remember that day and the initial disbelief, then that disbelief it… well… I don't know if I would say I ever really ‘believed’ it was happening, it's probably best to call it ‘suspended disbelief', like when you read a book or watch a movie and get fully immersed. I had even blocked it out afterwards, as if my mind refused to think about it for quite a few days.

First the mental block cracked, ideas started leaking through, like the light and shadow duality. Now it has already crumbled, I can remember it vividly and I often reflect on all the details of that conversation.

It's becoming obvious that my mood is strongly correlated with daylight. I suppose it's the light and shadow influence. Some of what I'm noticing is not new, the positive uplifting light of a bright day versus the ominous and unsettling shadow of a dark night. These sensations were always there, but now there are also some new effects. It has become more than a mood induced by ambient lighting, I'm not just feeling warm light bathing me and my surroundings. Now the sun has acquired a new power and significance.

I'm realizing that when I'm aware of sunlight – when the sun is visible or even when I can just feel its rays – it makes me feel seen. Now that the memories of that day have fully resurfaced I even catch myself talking to it, usually in my head, but sometimes even out loud. The sun never responds. The fact that I had repressed the memory only makes me doubt my sanity, wondering if that day was just some kind of delusion.

Truth be told, questioning my sanity is far less troubling than I would have expected, maybe I should be more concerned. Is my lack of concern something to worry about? Ha! Worry about not being worried. What a silly thought, regardless, I'm fine. Frequently doubting my own sanity isn't disturbing or upsetting, I'm fine with it.

But you know what does bug me? The sun's effect on me fades as the days pass. Sunlight makes me feel less seen as the memory of that day drifts further into the past. If only the sun would answer me, even just a simple acknowledgment, then my awareness of its presence could be refreshed.

Even when the memory was still repressed the sun's light still made me feel illuminated and visible, more than visible, observed. But now, those rays of light are gradually changing back into inanimate photons. I miss feeling seen by the sun, it had the power to chase away negative thoughts.

Now that I think about it, I suspect that the sun wasn't the one fighting off the shadowy impulses, instead it simply made me feel exposed, seen, and aware of my own undesirable thoughts. The sun used to be like a spotlight that made me self-conscious and aware of my own appearance and posture. I don't like this feeling, the feeling of it slipping away, it's like watching a cherished companion fade into the distance of a sunset.

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I still don't know if that day was a hallucination or not. Seeing the sun and feeling its light, they no longer have any special enchanting effects, but those words – stay in the light – they have become my mantra, metaphorically of course, not literally. I choose to be seen, to be exposed, to reject hiding, privacy, and anonymity.

The effects of sunlight may have lost their power to make me feel seen but I can still remember the taste. I noticed that a familiar flavor can be found by making myself visible. Being noticed by people creates a similar experience, it's not as potent, specifically it feels less penetrating. Being seen by people only creates a superficial sense of exposure, but it is still a powerful drug, using it allows me to intentionally manipulate my mind's mode.

Simply going out into public is enough, just the awareness that there are people around, the more the better. Being in a crowded area used to be very stimulating and distracting, I remember how it used to drive me into a state of constant reaction, watching other people, criticizing their appearances, trying to navigate without bumping into them. Busy areas used to make me feel like a self-driving car in autopilot mode, just trying to process and react to all of its sensors. But now it's a whole new experience, my observational and critical eye turns and looks at myself instead of at them.

I still see the people, they are all unique individuals. My mind forms mental projections, imaginary mirrors of them, but instead of me critically reviewing them, it is the other way around.

As I see a person they reflect my mind's eye back at myself, I see my reflection in their eyes, it is they who judge me. These virtual characters can see my thoughts, they can recognize and expose my shadows as if I were made of transparent glass. Somehow they even identify shadows with me that completely evade my own notice.

Intellectually I know that those people in public rarely even notice me. I'm not delusional, I know we are all just barely visible background extras in the scenes of each other's lives, but I create imaginary copies of them, and those copies give me their undivided attention. The effect is vastly more powerful when I truly believe I'm being critically observed. And now I am even catching myself intentionally seeking out more and more publicly exposed situations.

'Stay in the light'… Sometimes the challenge is finding the light, because the light sources are people, and people keep moving around and migrating. It's more like 'chasing the light' rather than staying in it.

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Public spaces and crowds have not lost their potency, but yet I crave more. It took a while to find an amplifier, but I did find one, laying my private inner world out there for others to see.

It started small, as quick sharp 'guilt spasms'. Occasionally when speaking with someone I would catch myself bending the truth, misrepresenting someone or something, always with the intention to make myself seem interesting, smart, or paint myself in some other positive light. Nothing special, just that common everyday kind of exaggerated braggy behavior, but sometimes those mirror characters that I was making would sparkle in the other person's eyes. That reflected image of them jumped into my mind, it saw the inner truth which I had concealed, and condemned me for taking liberties and manipulating my presentation of the truth.

Like little 'moral hiccups', they jolted my attention and would shake my train of thought. If I tried to ignore one then it would persist, knocking my flow off balance, over and over. The only surefire cure for these hiccups was to take the embarrassing truth, whatever I was hiding or avoiding, and lay it on the table. Admitting 'Oops, that's not accurate…' or 'Actually, I'm wrong about that…' or 'You know, I'm not sure why I said that, it's not true…'. A quick confession could instantly resolve those guilt induced hiccups.

Exposing an embarrassing fault is profoundly satisfying, so much so that I'm concerned it could – if it hasn't yet already – develop into an addictive or compulsive behavior. A certain amount of this indulgence is surely a good thing, but my instinct tells me that if taken too far this exhibitionist radical honesty could become problematic.

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This is definitely an addiction, the indulgence led to more cravings, those cravings led me to search for more sources, and I did find yet another stronger version. I have graduated to a

stronger drug, calling it a drug is of course metaphorical. You could argue that any kind of positive sensation is tied to physiological and biochemical rewards, your body can just make its own drugs. I am not blind or getting swept up in this addiction, I pay close attention. I'm fully aware and this is not self-destructive or impairing my ability to live, quite the contrary, I believe this is more like exercise. Exercise is also a form of self improvement which is addictive and produces massive euphoria and highs.

My new source is a step further. Before I was just catching myself in the act and confessing to things like concealing faults, exaggerating truths, or falsified virtue signaling. It was one thing to rip off a mask and lay the less ideal ‘real me’ out bare to see, but now… Now I'm proactively digging up those private corners of my soul and exposing them because it feels good. I'm doing it just for the sake of doing it.

Sometimes during conversations a private thought would pop up, one of those thoughts that would normally bubble up and just sit in my awareness for a while. It would be a thought or memory that my sense of pride refused to say out loud, I determined that it was too embarrassing or shameful, it would damage the impression that I wanted to present to the world, so the security guards of my self-image kept it inside. That thought would float above the conversation, like a ghost in the room that only I could see. Speaking about the ghost was forbidden by the guards of my pride, so it would just haunt me for a while, distracting me from the conversation until it eventually faded. Conscious effort to get rid of it would just make it hang around even longer.

At first it happened organically, that reflex kicked in, the one I had developed to fix my hiccups. My instinct to admit embarrassing things activated and I spoke the forbidden words, I named and described the ghost to someone. That ghost immediately materialized, it became a real thing, part of the conversation. Now other people could see the ghost too.

The guards of my pride screamed, accusing me of self-harm, saying that I was going to destroy my reputation, my image, and my relationships. They screamed that there would be repercussions, but there was very little reaction in the moment. People didn't seem to care that much, it was all very matter-of-fact. I would expose an embarrassing thought, the moment would pass, the conversation would move on, and it would seem that the ghost who was made real was now just laid to rest. Still, the guards of my pride screamed, and worry hung over me like the Sword of Damocles.

But there were never any repercussions, conversely, people seem to find it endearing, attractive, or authentic. By all accounts it appeared that people liked it, I would dare to say they liked me more. I never would have guessed that my most humiliating and shameful faults were the most likable things about me. And so, the guards gradually became complacent, and I was free to reveal my shadows as casually as commenting on the weather.

I suppose it is possible to take an addiction to good habits too far, even something like exercise can be done so excessively that it becomes detrimental, so it's probably a good idea to remain vigilant. But for now I see no downside to this new habit.

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You know that feeling when someone else is rambling on, spewing a stream of rationalizations for their own behavior, when it feels like they are trying so hard to convince you that their actions are justified, and you can only assume that they need to convince you because they don't really believe their own arguments. Like they hope that convincing you may help them convince themselves… Yeah, I'm starting to feel that way about myself. I ratcheted this addiction up another whole level and I still don't believe it's a problem. The suspicion that I'm deceiving myself is always looming over me, but every attempt to evaluate this behavior never concludes there is a problem.

My new exaggerated version is taking that proactive exposure of shadows and dramatically amplifying the exhibitionism.

I'm posting my shadows publicly, broadcasting them, and it feels euphoric. The darker and more deep-rooted they are, the more sense of accomplishment I get from uprooting and weeding them out. The more shameful and embarrassing they are, the braver I feel for daring to put them on display. The harder it is to identify and label them, the more proud I am of my skill and determination.

I don't think many people are reading my posts, there are very few comments and reactions, but that doesn't make a difference, what matters is the fact that they are publicly available and accessible by anyone. Before, when I would admit to something shameful, it exposed the shadow to the light of a person, but later when that person was no longer around the shadow frequently climbed back out of some dark corner. I would often find myself repeating old battles with foes which I mistakenly thought were already vanquished. But a publicly posted shadow permanently loses some potency, weaker with each encounter, like a virus remembered by an immune system.

Dragging shadows into the light is undoubtedly a good thing, but there is a constant nagging suspicion that I am enjoying this too much. My search for new highs leads me to hunt for impulses and thoughts that are petty, vindictive, entitled, greedy, jealous, and all kinds of bad. Could this obsessive search lead me deep into a haunted realm? Is searching for these things a self-fulfilling prophecy? Will my mind become what I search for just because that is what I choose to pay attention to?

For now I still believe I'm on the right path, let's just hope it's not a path to hell paved with good intentions.

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Another sunny day in the park, just like that day so long ago. Ha! This is even the same place, and there is the sun, bright and flaring when I squint at it, just as it was before.

“You sent me down this path and now I'm stuck. No matter how much I stay in the light, some shadows will always grow back.” I let out a sigh and scan the area, there's no one around so I can continue to complain in a less hushed volume. “At first I made good progress, but I had to keep escalating my methods. Each time the pace of progress would gradually slow, until it reached a plateau. Each amplified version inevitably reaches a point where I’m slipping back as fast as I progress forward, one step forward one step back.” I sigh in desperation. “I'm stuck, I'm frustrated, and I don't know what to do.”

“Oh my, you sound far too disheartened, especially for someone who has made such unexpected leaps and bounds forward.” It's talking to me again, at last, after so long the sun is speaking again! “You have no reason to be so discouraged, the you of now is magnitudes brighter than the you of before.”

“You! Why did you ignore me for so long? I've been speaking to you all this time but you never answer.” It suddenly hits me that it’s talking to me in the same place as before.. “... Is it this place? Can you only hear me when I am in this exact spot?”

“Ha! In a way, yes. However I could always hear you, it was you who could not hear me.” The sun is using that old familiar enigmatic and condescending tone, but right now I'm happy to hear it. “Besides, you did not need my help, you did quite well on your own. You really shouldn't feel so discouraged.”

There is a powerful impulse to interrogate the sun about so many things, ‘what's special about this spot in particular? ’ for example, but my addiction to lighting up shadows occupies such a central part of my identity now, so that is what dominates my attention. “But I'm stuck, stagnated, what do I do next? I don't know how to take this any further?”

“You are forcing light into dark corners, relying on your focus, attention, and efforts, this method requires you to exert energy. There are limits when you rely on energy input.” The sun uses a rarer comforting tone. “But even with the limitations of this method you shine quite brightly. You should be proud of yourself, truly.”

“I shine?” I'm confused because my obsession has been hunting shadows, bringing in light from outside to light up the dark corners within myself. “You told me to stay in the light, I chased it, found light sources, and pointed them at my own shadows. I use light. I'm more like a black hole, I suck up all the light within reach. I drink light, why do you say I shine?”

“Hahaha! You?... A black hole? When I say you shine that is a metaphor, but even as a metaphor your mass is only a handful of atoms. A black hole? Hahaha.” It laughs with so much force that my bones rattle. Comparing myself to a light sucking black hole was an unpleasant thought, but it was far less upsetting than being laughed at and called insignificantly small like this. “You have not even learned gravity, that's why your progress has plateaued.”

“Gravity?” The sun just indicated there is a reason why I'm stuck, hinting that there may be a way to break through this wall which I've hit, my focus snaps onto that, all other details become part of a blurry background. “What does gravity have to do with this? I learned about both kinds of gravity, the classical Newtonian formula and Einstein's field equations, but I don't see how either is relevant.”

“Still shackled to the literal, haha. I would have thought it was clear that we are in the realm of metaphors.” This time the sun doesn't seem to be mocking me, but I do still feel silly because in retrospect that was obviously a metaphor. “You, little one, are not a black hole, not even a star, you are a tiny fusion reactor. You exert enormous amounts of effort to fuse. To my surprise you not only achieved fusion, but you have also sustained the reaction and are radiating excess light. You do shine with starlight, albeit a tiny fraction of a star's light.”

“Okay, I'm a bit lost.” I admit. “I know you are speaking in metaphors, but I don't quite grasp them. What is an atom or fusion in this context?”

“Everything is made of atoms– personas, characters, even shadows. You are constantly smashing atoms together, intentionally dredging up shadows and smashing them into the personas and characters you acquire from other people.” I never looked at it that way, it's quite different from seeing other people as light sources, but this perspective is clicking. “You have built a wonderful fusion reactor out of habits and behaviors, you even produce excess energy and glow as a light source, enough extra light that even other people can see it.”

“A light source for others?” This idea never really crossed my mind. “This may sound selfish to say, but I honestly never gave that much thought. My intentions were really just to fight my own shadows and enjoy the highs I get from that. I did occasionally wonder if anyone would recognize the shadows I expose or benefit from seeing them, but no one ever said anything so it was never more than a fleeting curiosity.”

“Of course you didn't think about it, you were building a fusion reactor not a light bulb, hehehe!” The sun chuckles and even I must admit that was a very playful and funny way to frame it.

“Haha, I guess so.” I laugh along a little bit, then my mind turns back to the matter at hand, the sun had implied a way to overcome my stagnation. “So… gravity? If my current methods are a fusion reactor, then how can I use gravity like a star?”

“Ambitious and hungry, good! ” The sun booms with approval. “You are excavating shadows– made of atoms, then you launch and smash them into other atoms– from people, reflected

personas, or imagined observers. You forcefully smash atoms together like a human using a fusion reactor. So I ask you, how would a star do it instead?”

“Well, a star does basically the same thing…” Searching for a substantial difference, only that obvious one comes to mind, the one we are already talking about. “... But a star uses gravity to smash the atoms together.”

“Crush! The atoms are crushed in a star's heart.” The sun proclaims with great emphasis. “And the atoms are crushed by their own mass. It is very different from the way you're smashing them together using forceful effort and the machinery of skills. A star doesn't need elaborate machinery or intricately applied energy for its operation, a star just needs atoms, lots and lots of atoms.”

“I think I understand what you mean about my skills and habits, I've refined them into a carefully constructed system or machine. And you are right, the machine does need to be powered by attention and effort.” I have to admit the elegant accuracy of those metaphors. “And I assume that the part about mass and gravity is meant to represent some alternative method, but I must confess, I'm failing to interpret that part. Are the atoms in that analogy still coming from other people? And how would I accumulate a vast quantity of people?... Like a crowd? …Or… An audience? Do I need a massive audience? How on earth would I do that?”

“You are on the right track, ’audience’ is a good word.” As the sun confirms that phrasing I start imagining a stage and spotlight. It's daunting, not just the stage-fright, but the insurmountable task of acquiring such an opportunity. Fame and spotlights are highly desired and valuable commodities, someone would have to be very naive to think this a feasible and attainable goal. “Don't get stuck in literal quicksand, little one, remember that a star’s atoms are within itself. Did you not already learn to use reflections of people and imaginary personas as light sources?”

“So I need to imagine an audience instead of just one or several characters at a time?” Is that what the sun means? “I kind of already do that when I post and publish, exposing myself publicly feels like getting on stage. Even if no one really sees my posts, it still affects me because I feel vulnerable to an imagined audience.”

“That is a virtual external audience, you imagine them as external, they only know things after you have posted and exposed them. You need to carry the audience inside of you.” The sun explains that in a softer tone, its voice is still like thunder, but its demeanor now feels very understanding and supportive. “Take those atoms – reflections of people and imagined characters – and absorb them. After interacting with them, don't just let them go, you must keep them alive, house them inside of you.”

“Keep them alive inside of me… How can I do that?” I wonder out loud. I think about old imaginary characters and mental reflections of people. “When I create a character, I employ them in the moment, but they fade quickly. Even now, when I try to remember old ones they are

like ghostly images, there is nothing to grab on to. I can sense the memory of them, but when I reach for it… they are gone, like a puff of mist."

"These characters of metaphorical atoms are not so different from real people made of literal atoms. If you stop interacting with a person in your life, they will quickly fade away." The sun is right, I start recalling so many people who just dissolved into the noisy background of this world. The ones who remained in the foreground are the people I interacted with consistently. "Interacting with an individual – internal or external – keeps them alive in your mind. So interact with them, talk to them, listen to them, invite them to observe your experiences, and ask them how your thoughts and memories make them feel."

"It sounds like you are basically telling me to make an effort to see things from other people's perspectives." The sun's suggestion resembles some common – almost cliche – advice about empathy. "It's a habit worth building, but isn't it better to focus on seeing things through the eyes of the people present with me in the moment. I feel like it's probably more important to focus on the perspective of whoever I'm currently interacting with."

"Empathy and awareness of the people you engage with is crucial, yes, but that is a separate thing and not mutually exclusive with what I'm talking about." The sun seems a bit impatient but not upset. "I'm not saying that you should ignore or pay less attention to those around you. I only suggest that you foster and nurture the characters within. The ones inside are an ever-present audience. They see everything– even when you are alone. They hear everything– even your inner thoughts."

"I get what you mean, but something about that feels…" I try to put into words a sensation of unease. "Something about that feels unhealthy, it sounds like it will feel a bit disturbing or similar to paranoia. Removing a sense that my innermost thoughts are private, wouldn't that cause anxiety?"

"You already relinquish privacy, it has become your tool of choice. The difference right now is that you open the door selectively. If you create an internal audience then the door becomes a window." I suppose the sun is right, exposing the shadows I find is the same, this would just be a more perpetual version of that. "Shadows and privacy are synonyms. You have already been walking this path, just using different vocabulary. If you fully embrace the light then those private shadows will have nowhere to hide, and you can also begin accumulating mass."

"So that's what mass is?" I realize we have finally come back to this analogy of mass. "I'm still unsure how this idea of mass fits in, how is this internal audience like mass?"

"I can't explain everything, some things you need to learn for yourself, little one." The sun says playfully. "But I'll leave you with this, everything, good and bad, shadows and light, imagined characters and reflections of people, they are all made of atoms. If you collect enough of them, as many as a star, they will fuse on their own. The rest of the picture will reveal itself when the time comes."

“Wait! You say that as if you will not be here with me.” I suddenly feel afraid, scared the sun will abandon me like last time. “Don't speak like you are saying goodbye, I'll come back. Now that I know this place is special, I'll just come back often.”

“Hahaha! Oh my, this place is not a location.” The sun chuckles the way someone does when children say cute and naive things. “This is a dream, dear child.”

“What?! I start scanning the environment, and as I begin to scrutinize my surroundings the tactile details of reality start to bleed through. I am in my bed… next, I'm in my room, and then comes a bombardment of awareness. My eyes are still closed, but as I reach for that dreamscape it's gone, only a memory remains.

A dream. Only a dream? Was the first time a dream too? Of course it was! That's why the sun never answered me. That's why I forgot about it at first. What if I forget again? Will I remember days later?… Or weeks later?… Or not at all?... Quick! I need to review all the details, I don't want to forget it again.

I play the whole thing over and over in my head, memorizing every detail. Eventually I tire of replaying it and I reluctantly open my eyes to start my day.

…

Days now since that dream. I'm trying to build an internal audience, but it's hard. The most difficult part is consistency.

It's easy to have a conversation with a virtual character, the simplest way is just talking to a mental reflection of someone I know well. I think we all pre-plan or play out conversations in our head, especially arguments, anticipating possible ways the interaction could go, fantasizing about alternative things we could have said, or imagining how it would have gone differently if the benefit of hindsight could be sent to our past self. I can just actively employ that same mechanism, and use it divorced from that person, not anticipating an argument or regretting missed opportunities, no plan or fantasy of externalizing it. Just do it for the sake of having the virtual conversation itself.

Repeatedly engaging the same character does strengthen them and make it easier to call them up later, but remembering to consistently engage with them, that is the problem.

I am making progress. The first stumbling block was just grappling with the whole context of what I'm doing. I'm trying to ‘follow instructions that the sun gave me in a dream’. At first, every time I remembered this I would just ruminate, question my sanity and debate if this kind of behavior is harmful to my psychological well-being. I debated whether I should do it, instead of just doing it.

I've decided that the nature of the dream doesn't matter, what matters is that this really is a new level of ‘staying in the light’. This path has been overwhelmingly good for me, I can't say I'm objectively a better person, but I'm consistently more happy and less frequently upset. Satisfaction and contentment are increasingly self-sufficient and less dependent on external factors, so I don't care if it was a hallucination, or a lucid dream, a trance communication with a spirit, or something else. Who cares if it was a delusion or the voice of the universe, this road is leading me where I want to go.

…

Associations were the answer, specifically associating characters to places. If I repeatedly engage the same character in the same frequently visited place, then the instinct to interact with them will become automatic whenever I am there.

My collection is growing now. They are all distinct, like unique skeletons who are slowly fleshed out as I give them more time and attention.

The first few figures were reflections of well-known acquaintances, but they felt disjointed and choppy. The better I knew that person in real life the more the reflected persona would be glitchy. As this correlation became obvious I first thought it was a fluke or something that would diminish with time and practice, it did not. Familiarity with the real person negatively affects the fluidity of their virtual character.

I decided to try some fictional characters from stories, they were so smooth right from the start, and they just got better with time. I started analyzing the glitches and the cause became obvious, they are ‘character course-corrections’. When I engage a reflection of someone I know the conversation starts playing out, and then there will come a moment when the virtual character says things that feel mismatched. Something feels wrong, and I realize the emulation has noticeably deviated from the real person.

I can't really explain where the reflex that identifies this glitch comes from, my best guess is that it's like appreciating art. It's quite easy to recognize a discrepancy in an image of something familiar, like noticing a mistake in a painting of a place you frequently visit, but it's much harder to paint that vista yourself. I think it's harder to mentally emulate a person than to recognize that a character has contradicted what the actual person would do.

So now I'm leaning heavily into fictional and fabricated characters. Reflections of people that I don't know intimately work well too, probably because not being familiar with the real person makes the virtual copy more like a fictional character. A lack of reference for comparison decreases glitches and allows the persona to evolve on its own.

The world feels like it's filling up with friends, it's as if the places I frequently visit have confidants standing there waiting for me. Sometimes the lens I perceive this with switches and suddenly I view it as ‘there are ghosts all around and only I can see them’. It's a bit disturbing to see it that

way, but they aren't scary and they just wait patiently until I have time for them. So even the most concerning framing of this doesn't deter me from diving in, this behavior doesn't just provide a sense of accomplishment, progress, and enlightenment, it's also so much fun.

…

My circle of friends – the virtual ones – has grown significantly, but now there is a new and concerning aspect. I'm noticing that they are not pure light, these characters have their own shadows too. The original stages of this involved exposing my shadows to the light of real people. Real people do have shadows of course, so I suppose the fact that these fleshed out personas have their own shadows as well should just indicate that they are becoming increasingly realistic, but it's still an unsettling realization.

Exposing my shadows to the light of other people didn't rely on those people being pure light, it wasn't really about the details of the Illuminating source. Moreover, we are all taught instincts to hide our failings from the world, so others rarely present those shadows overtly, but these virtual characters have no such shame or discretion.

They do not hesitate to express ideas that can be alarming or disturbing. It's not like they are suggesting or advocating anything, just providing perspectives and opinions. But I can't help wondering where this will lead. I seeded these characters with idealistic frameworks, but they are maturing into something more balanced and pragmatic.

Should I be worried? Are they introducing new shadows that could infect me and regress my progress? Or are they like fissures in my mind, venting my own shadows from hidden caverns deep below? I can't decide if they are a source of pollution or just revealing previously concealed contaminants. For now I have concerns and doubts, but not sufficient to justify altering course, only enough to increase alertness and caution.

…

I think I get it now, the fusion part, and it's nothing like what I expected. When I started collecting characters to ‘gain mass’ for gravitational fusion I didn't know what it meant, my guess was that the fight against shadows would become automatic and effortless, that is not at all what it is.

The sun said I was using a fusion reactor, I thought fusion was a metaphor to describe destroying shadows with force, ridding myself of negativity and increasing pure positive energy. I completely overlooked that it had said shadows were particles too.

At first I started to notice that characters began having moods. The personas could change attitude and demeanor depending on the environment and conditions. Time of day, season, my own state of mind, or even nearby people, these kinds of factors all seem to influence a character's mood. In retrospect this shouldn't have been a surprise, it's just another realistic

element. Real people are affected by their environment, why shouldn't these virtual people be affected too? The influence of my environment just gets passed through me into their emulation.

And then fusion slowly started, it started with water.

No, not heavy water and deuterium, this is gravitational fusion, it doesn't depend on the cheat that we rely on. Protium, the most common isotope of hydrogen, is much harder to fuse than deuterium, but not so difficult for a star. Stars fuse protium to make their own deuterium, but down here fusing protium is so difficult that we just skip that step. Deuterium is easier to fuse on its own, collecting it is a lot of work unfortunately. It's a huge pain to extract heavy water –D2O– and semi heavy water –HDO– from all the regular water, and then even more work to extract and distill the deuterium. Acquiring deuterium at its core is a process of purification, and I used to think that's what my fight against the shadows was – purification – but it turned out to be something completely different.

Characters began occasionally appearing outside of their usual locations, at first it seemed like they were just randomly surfacing. I assumed it was because they had something to say, perhaps my mind had a thought to express and it was just finding an appropriate voice to embody that idea. But then I noticed something, several personas had appeared in the same locations and there was a common thread, water. Those personas were all anchored to locations that had some form of water, and they started also appearing in other places where there was water as well.

Upon realizing this connection many more became obvious. These characters were tethering themselves to objects and concepts. Soon I was able to decide ‘I want to talk to water characters’, then all I needed to do was find some water, and they would usually be there waiting.

I tried to just picture a river or waterfall, and it kind of worked, but wasn't nearly as effective as physically looking at the real thing. There are often some preferences, some personas like running currents, and others prefer still waters. Initially I considered it a novel way to organize and access them, but this was still just a prelude to something deeper.

It happened quietly, completely under the radar of my awareness. I kept collecting characters, and they kept associating to places and stuff. My world was full of companions, everywhere I looked there was always someone to talk to. Everything had at least several personas associated with it. Whenever bored or if I needed to talk something out, I could just find something to use as an icon and call forth a friend. Then one day… I realized I was talking to a tree.

It was not a character tethered to the concept of trees, it was the tree, that specific tree! I was talking to the tree itself. That moment – the reality of what I was doing – it hit me like a truck. What is going on? How did this happen?

That initial shock took a few days to wear off. I obsessed over this, it was a concerning mutation in my behavior. Afterwards, I mostly refrained from interacting with characters, the memory of talking to a tree carried a disturbing vibe, the sense of abnormality made me take a step back to evaluate my situation. I gradually became desensitized to it, and once accustomed to this strange concept, I reapproached it with an analytical attitude. Carefully allowing myself to re-engage with individual personas and then – cautiously and methodically – talking with things.

Probing my conversations with the non-human personas did garner some insights, the non-humans were composed of combinations of traits. For example, within personified water I could identify traits from human characters that had tethered themselves to water. I realized that those original robust fleshed out characters were not atoms themselves, they were voluminous gas clouds of countless atomic characteristics. And these new characters were fusing atoms from those clouds. For instance, water was an amalgamation of water-like elements from various personas.

I had collected atoms and gathered them into dense clouds. Eventually there came to be so many in such a small space – the space of my mind – that they mingled and mixed, new densities and clusters emerged.

Sometimes metaphors and analogies are like fractals, this is one of those times. The conceptual scale of gas clouds coalescing and condensing was ideal up to this point, but clinging to that scope becomes counterproductive, zooming in now provides the appropriate language.

In talking with these new characters I quickly noticed that there was something different about them, distinct from my fabricated emulations of people. They have their own personalities, like people do, water was fluid and adaptive, stone and steel were firm and stubborn, trees noble and proud. The personalities of broad natural concepts, like elements and living things, were more dynamic. Whereas structures and machines were more specific and fixed. But there was more to it, they seemed detached. Human characters often felt like ghosts, but they still cared about the corporeal world the same way physical people do, they were still anchored to the values of a human experience, fixated on the priorities of a person's daily life. But these non-humans were not, the characters of concepts were more conceptual than people, the personas of objects were more objective than a person.

Protium, the simplest hydrogen, is composed of just a single proton. Actually, it's probably better to say that a single proton is a hydrogen. Regardless, to fuse atoms and reach elements with more protons, like two for helium or three for lithium, you need more than just protons alone. Protons are unstable together– Why? Suffice to say that two or more protons don't like being alone together. It would be easy to say ‘two positives repel’, and they do because they are both positive charges, but that's not really a full description, and a proper explanation is just too much to get into right now.

Neutrons are…well, they're neutral, so they aren't repelled by positive charges. Neutrons can get close up and form strong stable bonds with protons. Neutrons suffer from a different problem

though, they are unstable, under most conditions neutrons quickly fall apart in a process called beta-decay. Basically a neutron breaks up into a proton, an electron, and an anti-neutrino. Since neurons split up into those three things, it's fair to imagine a neutron as being ‘a proton and an electron squished together into an unstable union’, it's an extreme over simplification that will likely enrage some physicists, there are always some easily engaged people in any field, but I will risk angering them because this analogy works perfectly for my purposes.

My initial collection of characters was fleshed out, they were filled up with atoms of hydrogen. I intentionally collected protium, I only really wanted the positive protons, but later I realized that those protons had dragged negative electrons in with them. When I discovered these characters had their own negative shadows, it surprised me. I was putting together groups of positive characteristics, but of course those positive charges found a way to balance themselves with negative counterparts.

When I crossed the threshold of critical mass, then fusion began. When you fuse two protium atoms it produces one deuterium atom. Deuterium has one proton and one neutron, if I ever suggested that one of those two original hydrogen atoms gets its proton and electron squished together until it becomes a neutron, if I ever said that, then I fear I would be tarred and feathered by physicists, and rightfully so. A neutron does decay into a proton and electron, and it does contain the energy – or mass budget – for a proton and an electron, but in reality only the protons collide and the energy portion that would account for the electron essentially comes from the force of the collision.

And I'm still using wildly oversimplified descriptions, there are so many more details to include. But for now I'll just add that there is so much energy in those collisions that extra particles are thrown out as well.

Those protons were atomic elements of the personalities in my gas-cloud emulated-people. They started fusing and it created something different, the nucleuses of atoms grew larger, but they also grew in neutrality. Neutrons are unstable under most conditions, but they become stable if they bind to protons. In that first step of stellar fusion two protons fuse into a tightly bound package of one proton and one neutron– aka deuterium. As fusion continues, some deuterium keeps combining with other atoms and growing into larger atoms, but they keep losing charge as they grow. Atoms become more neutral as you go up the periodic table, at first atoms contain roughly the same number of protons and neutrons, which is already half neutral compared to the fully charged way they started. As atoms grow larger and larger they keep shedding charge, converting polarity into neutrality, and as they keep growing even that ratio tips away from polarity, away from having charge. Atoms start containing more neutrons than protons, they become more neutral than positive.

The more you fuse, the more neutral the results are, lead-208, one of the most stable atoms, has 126 neutrons but only 82 protons. And this is why the fused personas – like water or trees – felt detached, because they had lost some of their bias. I was unknowingly fusing elements from the clouds of human characters, as those individual atoms merged they shed some polarity and

biases. I had constructed emulated people, but their elements reorganized and fused to form new personas, and these new personas were not chained to the restrictive template of being human. These were less like people, I started calling them spirits instead because that's what they feel like. The water spirit grew by gathering together water-like elemental characteristics, fusing them, and spitting out the biases and attachments of the human characters.

Eventually the spirits started outnumbering the human characters, I guess it's not surprising, people are just one small village in this universe of infinite permutations. Even with all these people and cultures in the world, the diversity of humanity pales in comparison to the tree of life and the natural world, not to mention all the things we create. Machines, structures, art, everything can be a spirit if I stop to speak with it and listen to what it has to say.

And all of that polarity and bias that is squeezed out during fusion, where does it go? Well, lone neutrons undergo beta-decay, they become a polarized pair, ejecting the negative electron, and thus are left with only the opposite positive charge. If neutrality is isolated or alone, then splits into polarized charges, but when the reverse happens – when a charged and biased proton becomes neutral – then it is called beta-plus-decay, which is the opposite, and that process produces a positron– otherwise known as an anti-electron. All those protons had dragged electrons in with them, and now all this fusion was spitting out anti-electrons, then these anti-electrons meet the regular electrons and they annihilate each other, and that explosion radiates photons. So removing charge and bias emits light.

And this is where I'm kind of stuck, not stuck in progress, just finding it hard to continue this description. I have been fusing and fusing, creating spirits, gathering them and growing them larger and larger. The larger the spirits get the more I need to annihilate and eject their biased polarities. But I don't grasp what this metaphor represents now. Light is photons which are neutral, and they are born when I cancel out charges, but I thought light was already one side of a polar duality– light and shadow. Light used to be the positive side, but now it's a neutral thing born in a process of neutralization? I can't fit this together anymore.

So I confess, I spent so much time fusing you primarily for a selfish goal, because I need to ask you for an answer. You never came back in my dreams so I had to bring you into my waking world.

So… Sun spirit, how does this all fit together? How can light be a polar end of duality yet also be the neutral byproduct of polar annihilation?

“Hahaha? The snake eats its tail.” The sun's laughter shakes my bones, but now it fills me with a mild euphoria. This time I feel like I'm in on the joke, I'm not the punchline anymore. “Of course some pieces don't fit perfectly, there will always be loose threads and frayed edges. You once referred to yin and yang, the iconic yin-yang symbol is often used to represent taoism. Do you know what the very first rule of taoism is? Trying to translate it is like trying to translate multi-layered ambiguous poetry, but one way to read it could be the answer to your question– principles which can be described are not eternal principles.”

“That sounds like it's saying that objective truths don't exist.” I start digesting those words further. “If there is no objective truth then it feels like there is no point in searching for answers. What's the point of chasing understanding if it's unattainable? What's the point in anything?”

“Oh dear… Here, let's reframe that with a couple more interpretive translations. You could also read it as ‘The path that can be mapped, is not a fixed path’ or ‘The metaphor which can be spoken, is not generally applicable’. Do those help recontextualize it?” I'm starting to realize how much ambiguity there is, and yet these variations still have a clearly cohesive and unifying element. “Even your most familiar perceptions and rigid empirical science depend heavily on strict context and conditions. Water is liquid, unless it is frozen or evaporates. Helium has two protons, two neutrons, and two electrons, unless it is an isotope with less or more neutrons, or if it's an ion with less or more electrons. Something is stable, unless you change the conditions, another thing is impossible, unless you go to a different environment.”

“How is that different from…” I start wondering out loud, speaking even before all of that settles in, then my understanding eventually starts flowing like a river “...Oh! Context matters, and context changes. All rules exist in a bounded range, and outside those borders lie exceptions. The metaphors I use are no different.” The sun is silent, just flaring in the sky with warmth, so I keep going. “That should have been obvious, I already noticed that I had to adjust scale. There was a sense of disconnect when I jumped from the scale of stellar formation down to the realm of individual atoms fusing.”

“You see! The answers were already there within you.” The sun gives encouraging praise in a way reminiscent of a proud parent. “Now try again, If you bend your perspective instead of forcing the pieces to fit, do these things overlap?”

I stand there squinting at the sun, it is showering the world with photons. “Photons are neutral, they make things seen… They make things – feel – seen… but If we were bombarded with electrons or protons instead, then…” I imagine charged particles bombarding our world, they would be smashing into everything. “Everything – especially life – is an intricate balance of charges and fields. Things would react violently and destructively to charged particles. Light is gentle, it can glide through the atmosphere, reflecting and bouncing enough so that we can use it to see. And yet, even with this onslaught of photons our delicate charge based structures can hold together. Its massless neutrality makes it soft enough to light up the world without pulverizing our delicate complexity.”

“The birth of a star is a beautiful thing.” The sun flickers playfully. “Now that you have learned to shine, what will you do with this understanding?”

“I guess… shine. That was the point of all this, wasn't it?” I ponder this for a moment, reimagining the formation of a star. “...But what is the next stage? What's the analogy to describe what I should do next?”

“There are so many. You may as well ask me how many stars there are in the cosmos, hahaha!” The sun chuckles merrily. “You could draw a metaphor to any of the available options. Inflate larger and larger into a red supergiant, then shed your outer layers and become a white dwarf. Your internal pressures could lose their delicate balance and you explode in a supernova. You might implode all the way down to a black hole, or just crush all your nuclei into a dense neutron star, pulsar, or magnetar. Alternatively, you could collide with another star, or be ripped to shreds in a quasar’s accretion disc and then flung out into the cosmos in a powerful jet. Or perhaps describing your fate requires a shift in scale, or a whole new metaphor altogether, the possibilities are endless.”

“So you don't really have any answers, do you?” I say in jest. “Don't get me wrong, you've given me invaluable guidance, just not concrete answers.”

“Hahaha!” The sun bellows laughter. It is laughing so much… actually, it always laughed a lot, it's me who has changed. I feel like I'm laughing along with it now, instead of being laughed at. “If you want answers, then you should ask questions that actually have answers. Hahaha!”

“Fair enough… Hmmm…” I suppose that might be true. I try to think of a question that the sun could answer. “Okay, I walked a very long path to learn fusion. I fused larger and larger spirits, then I spent so much time and energy to fuse the sun spirit, you! And yet you are the one who sent me down this path to begin with, you told me to stay in the light, you told me to carry the audience inside of myself, to use gravity and mass for fusion. How did you visit me before I created you?” I had already started pondering this paradox, even back when I had just begun to create a sun spirit by talking to it. I intentionally fused this spirit because I wanted to talk to the sun again. “Are you just an emulation of something else? Are you a copy of some real spirit which visited me in my dream? Did I create you before this whole adventure? Are you a delusion made real or something real reborn as a delusion?”

“Hahaha! I'm a star, I'm born of natural forces, the result of a universe that conspires to fill itself with my kind.” This is starting to feel like a non-answer. “What do you call an astronomical ball of hydrogen that spontaneously bursts into flame?”

“A riddle?” I asked in frustration.

Then it answered me, it was a non-answer but it somehow satisfied my curiosity. It managed to both seem like a specific answer while also saying ‘yes to all’. I don't know how to describe the sun's laughter following its response, because I was laughing too.

Stellar Auto-Ignition… Hahaha!