

# Resonance

When Music Meets AI



PAB SAN

NOVEL

# **Resonance**

When Music Meets AI

**Pab San**

Copyright © Pab San

pabsan@pabsan.org

Book site: <https://resonance.pabsan.org/>

*For my musician friends*

# A Suspended Note

*"Music is often born in solitude, then spends a long time looking for what might answer it."*

## The Studio

*"In some places, even silence listens."*

---

They had taken over an old religious building, deconsecrated long ago and abandoned for decades. A ruin with wind in the cracks. To them it was a cathedral. Not of stained glass and whispered prayers, but of groove, with amps where the altars should have been and melodic lines rising through the stone.

The building, on the outskirts of Paris, gave them exactly what they needed: enough distance to play at any hour without bothering the neighbors, enough nearness to keep the city within reach. Over time, and with a lot of elbow grease, they brought it back to life in their own image. It was far from perfect. That was part of why it felt like theirs.

Paul, the keyboardist, turned the patch of land behind the main building into an anarchic kitchen garden. "Vegetables are like music: you have to give them freedom," he liked to say.

Nico, the drummer, claimed another part of the grounds for the shells of cars he loved taking apart, tinkering with, and forgetting to put back together. "One day I'll turn it into a contemporary sculpture, you'll see," he would joke, never convincing anyone.

As for Nathan, the bassist, he took over an outbuilding and turned it into his "algorithmic temple." Between its damp walls stood a genuine data center, where servers purred day and night. That was where he worked on his artificial intelligence project, christened HARMONY. His friends did not understand much of it, but that never stopped them from sharing a collective theory: "As long as Nathan comes back and plays with us, his AI can do whatever it wants. Even make music."

Then there was David, the guitarist. His space was the exception to the rule of general chaos. He reclaimed a corner of the old sacristy and turned it into a workshop so impeccably ordered it brought a watchmaker's bench to mind. Every cable, every pedal, every pick had one place and one place only, as if they were precision instruments. "Are you sure you weren't born inside a Swiss watch, David?" Nico would often ask, always drawing the same enigmatic smile.

Despite their respective eccentricities, only one thing truly mattered: music. In the great main hall, whose walls still bore the marks of the past, they gathered regularly to play. It was their sanctuary. The creaking beams, the wavering shadows, even the faint echo off the stone helped create an atmosphere unlike any other.

Improvising for hours was, for them, a kind of religion. Each session tried to catch what never quite returns: the mood of the night, the right accident, the moment the egos finally let go and let the music through. Nathan, his bass resting across his knees, often watched his friends with an almost invisible smile.

"These moments aren't just music," he would think. "They're a time loop in which nothing has changed since we were fifteen, except our hair... or what is left of it."

They often joked about their future, imagining this place as their shared home once they retired. "A hospice for musicians from the last century," Nico would say, half serious, half teasing. But the idea had begun to take hold in their minds.

When the amps went silent and the hush reclaimed the studio, Nathan would retreat to the outbuilding, where his screens and servers still murmured softly. HARMONY was only an idea in the making, a project hovering somewhere between his dreams and his lines of code. His friends did not know exactly what he was cooking up in there, but they were sure of one thing: if anyone could make electrons dance to a pulse, it was Nathan.

Deep down, his project was not coming from somewhere else. It was simply trying to catch, by other means, that brief magic they all shared, between strings, rhythms, and harmonies.

## **A Bass Like a Magic Wand**

*"Some brandish swords. I strike with a bass line."*

---

Whenever Nathan played, he slipped into a mysterious zone, a state of mind only musicians, and perhaps chess players, could understand. Each note seemed to rise out of a conversation already years old, a language he refined with every session.

His bass was more than an instrument. It was a companion, a mosaic assembled patiently over time. After years spent trying vintage basses from the sixties and seventies, which he liked to say were steeped in mojo, Nathan decided to build his own. Every element was chosen with care, and the instrument became an extension of himself, allowing him to express his intuitions and his moods. "She speaks for me," he would often say, stroking the strings with tenderness. "I merely listen."

The atmosphere in the hall was warm, easy, intimate. At his keyboard, Paul played a suspended chord just to hear the silence it left behind. "So, Nathan, is your bass still whispering secrets to you, or has she stood you up until the next tune?" he asked with a smile.

Nathan looked up, feigning deep thought. "She told me she might reveal her finest line... but only if Nico stops confusing his toms with kitchenware."

Nico burst out laughing and rolled his sticks across the snare. "All right, I'm willing to make an effort. On one condition: Paul has to stop throwing in mystical seventh chords right when we launch into a funk riff."

David, the guitarist, looked up with solemn seriousness and declared, "A mystical chord? Nico, you've just invented a new musical genre. I propose we call it 'Mystico-funk.'"

A burst of laughter ran through the room. "Perfect," Nathan said, picking up his bass. "Come on, let's play our first Mystico-funk number before David patents the idea."

They never rehearsed, at least not in the sense reasonable people mean by the word. Rehearsal suggested to them the sad calisthenics of bands polishing a piece until it had no blood left in it. They spoke instead of "sessions."

Their only tacit rule was simple: never replay exactly the same impulse twice. Familiar motifs returned now and then, of course, but never as instructions. What they refused was not so much the idea of doing something again as the idea of letting habit do it for them.

Each session remained a sincere, joyfully imperfect attempt to catch an emotion that might refuse to come back. That was why they kept coming back themselves.

## The Instinct for the Perfect Note

*"Every note has a secret. Some simply prefer to keep it."*

---

Nathan still remembered the first time that strange shiver ran through him while he played a note. It happened during an improvised gig in a crowded bar, where the smell of beer and the flickering lights made the place feel like the set of a low-budget film noir. The bass vibrated in his hands and, for a fraction of a second, he felt the universe fall into line. It was not the note itself, but the precise instant at which it rang out, as though it had persuaded all the others to fall silent and listen.

From then on, he chased that instant the way an alchemist chases the elixir of life, through experiment and error alike. But that evening, in the studio, the notes they were playing felt... flat. Correct, yes. Precise, certainly. But lacking that extra shard of soul that turns a melody into a miracle.

"Seriously," Nathan grumbled to his friends, "why can one damn note decide whether an entire track is genius or just good enough for a yogurt commercial?"

Paul shrugged as he adjusted his amp. "Because it has an ego. Bigger than yours, even."

David, smiling sideways, added, "Or maybe notes are like cats. They come when they feel like it, not when you call them."

Nathan laughed, but his gaze remained thoughtful. "Imagine an AI capable of identifying those notes. Not just the right ones, but the ones we hadn't even thought of yet, the ones that catch you off guard the way a good solo does."

"So you want a robot cat?" Nico called from behind his kit. "Good luck teaching it to bring you back anything other than virtual mice."

Nathan nodded, amused. "No, I want a machine that catches the groove. Not a machine that purrs."

Silence settled for a moment, punctuated by the hiss of the amps. Then Nico gently tapped his snare. "An AI with swing? That's not a project. That's a fever dream."

Nathan smiled. "Maybe. But everything that matters started out as a fever dream."

## **When Strings Organize Chaos**

*"To improvise is to let chaos speak long enough for it to end up singing."*

---

Nathan gently set down his bass, feeling the familiar weight leave his shoulders. "You know, that's what I'm trying to recreate with HARMONY. Not just music, but... this conversation."

Paul frowned. "An AI that plays music is already mad enough. But an AI that talks the way we do? Now you're really off the deep end..."

Nathan nodded. "Yes, maybe. But improvisation is already understanding one another before explaining ourselves. Every note proposes something. Every riff answers. It's a language. Why shouldn't a machine be able to learn how to enter it?"

David looked up, curious. "Because it has no emotions. And without emotion, music is just a string of sounds."

Nico, idly playing with his sticks, added, "And it can't improvise if it hasn't lived through the chaos of life. That's the real key."

Nathan fell silent for a moment. "Maybe you're right. Or maybe intelligence begins exactly there: when you learn to read a chaos you never lived through yourself."

## **The Gods of the Jam and Their Whims**

*"To improvise is also to accept that sometimes it's ugly, sometimes divine. And sometimes it's just ugly."*

---

The session was in full swing. Nathan, focused, was chaining one line into the next, his fingers racing along the strings as if they had a life of their own. Behind the drums, Nico was in his element: sunglasses perched on his nose (pointless in a windowless studio), hammering his toms as though he were trying to exorcise a demon. Paul, meanwhile, was juggling inspired riffs and chords so dissonant that even the walls seemed to wince.

But it was David, at the synthesizer, who took the crown for chaos. He seemed determined to test every sound his synthesizer could produce, including one that resembled a crow trapped inside a music box.

"Seriously, David," Paul called, covering his ears, "did you steal that keyboard from a clown or what?"

Unperturbed, David answered with an innocent smile. "It's sonic exploration. You should try it."

Nathan burst out laughing, his fingers slowing on the bass. "Exploring is all well and good, but you've bought a one-way ticket to Pluto."

Nico came in by hammering out a deliberately uneven rhythm. "Hey, at least on Pluto there isn't any tempo."

The cacophony finally stopped when Paul landed on a clear, vibrant chord, like a lighthouse in a storm of noise. Nathan joined him, adjusting his line, followed by Nico and then, at last, David. Within seconds, chaos had turned into a fluid improvisation, almost magical.

"That's what I love," Nathan murmured. "The moment everything tips, when every note finds its place."

David raised an eyebrow. "And you think an AI could understand that? Chaos turning into beauty?"

Nathan nodded. "Maybe not chaos. But beauty, yes."

Nico shrugged, skeptical. "As long as it doesn't steal our solos."

Paul laughed. "If it can play better than you, Nico, then it deserves our solos."

## **The Fear of Intelligent Machines**

*"Human beings cope better with monsters than with well-mannered mirrors."*

---

The studio's muted light gave the scattered instruments an almost mystical cast. Nathan, leaning against an amp, looked at his friends with the kind of half smile that usually heralded either a brilliant intuition or a badly tidied provocation. "Do you know what really frightens people about AI?" he asked.

Paul raised an eyebrow. "That it'll steal their jobs?"

David crushed his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. "Or take over the world. Classic. End credits, drone rain, all that."

Nathan shook his head. "No. That's folklore. The real discomfort is more humiliating: the idea of a lucid, efficient intelligence that doesn't turn into a monster, doesn't scream its own power, and might even behave more decently than we do."

Nico burst out laughing, a rough laugh bouncing off the walls. "Wait. So we'd cope better with a nuclear demon than with a well-combed valedictorian?"

"Exactly," said Nathan. "Evil is convenient. We know where to file a monster. We point at it, print posters, give ourselves the noble part. But something capable, calm, sometimes even benevolent, just looks at you without any theatre and leaves you alone with your disorder."

Paul, thoughtful, brushed a minor chord with calculated slowness. "So what bothers people isn't a machine resembling us. It's the risk of machines looking cleaner than we do."

"And more polite," David added. "Which, for the human species, would amount to an administrative humiliation."

Nico slapped his knees. "An AI that corrects you without even raising its voice. The nightmare of everyone convinced they're a genius because they speak loudly."

Nathan set his bass down like a tired scepter. "Then there's the great artistic complaint: 'they plunder our works in order to learn.' Sorry, but that's also how you make a musician. A conservatory is not a factory for creative virginity. You listen, you imitate, you butcher Bach, you nick a lick from Miles, you steal a run from Jaco, you turn it first into shame, then into style, then into a speech about your influences."

Paul shrugged. "You don't hand a kid an instrument and say: whatever you do, don't learn from anyone else; invent pure harmony in a corner and come back when you've founded a civilization."

David let a few dark notes slide from the keyboard. "Painters are no different. You train the hand by looking at other hands. You spend years absorbing forms before daring to displace a single line."

Nathan picked it up, sharper now. "Between humans, we call that training, tradition, lineage, references, homage, sometimes even genius if the jacket is right. The moment a machine performs the same operation at obscene speed, everyone suddenly discovers a sacred innocence. It's touching."

Nico snorted. "Right, the violinist who spent fifteen years replaying the same four dead men then explains, with great dignity, that studying the masters is noble as long as it devours his youth, but becomes suddenly obscene the moment a machine covers the same ground in less time, with greater efficiency, and without bowing before his aura of virtuosity."

Paul tempered the mood with a gesture. "Their concern isn't completely absurd either. Scale changes everything. Speed changes everything. Economics too."

Nathan nodded at once. "Of course. The problem is real. But people keep throwing learning, plunder, and wounded pride into the same bag when a machine does faster what we, in our case, call training. And it's often the third element hiding behind the other two."

David nodded slowly. "And perhaps the deepest insult is there: a machine can take things up again without costume. No suffering biography. No cigarette at the window. No romantic legend. Just work ingested, recombined, returned."

"A GPU without a scarf," said Nico. "So that's the Antichrist of art schools."

Nathan laughed, then turned serious almost without transition. "At bottom, many people would sooner forgive an AI for being monstrous than for being simply fairer. Because an intelligence that sees

farther has a decent chance of being less petty. Malice, among us, often comes from fatigue, ego, wounded stupidity, the little inner theatre that thinks it's cosmic."

Paul played two very slow notes. "Human stupidity, indeed, usually needs less power than a pretext."

The silence that followed was not hostile. It had that particular density of conversations that had ceased to be jokes while still carrying their echo.

Nathan finished his drink with a tired smile. "That's my wager with HARMONY. I'm not asking it to be docile. I'm asking it to learn for real, to draw from everywhere, to surprise me, and, if possible, not to take on our pettiness along with our libraries."

A faint crackle ran through the amps.

Nathan concluded, "I don't want HARMONY to reassure me. I want it to force me to play better. And if, along the way, it pushes us to work on our scales again instead of calling an exorcist, that will already count as progress for the species."

## **Silence Speaks as Loudly as Music**

*"Between two notes, there is an eternity."*

---

The session was drawing to a close. The amps were off, but the room still vibrated with the discussions and the chords they had played. Nathan stayed alone for a moment in the studio, watching his friends put away their instruments and head for the door.

With silence back, he looked at his bass leaning against an amp. Every evening spent here left the echo of something larger, as though their sessions were brushing against a language no one fully spoke

yet. And still the lack remained: the feeling that music itself was calling for one more interlocutor, someone, or something, capable of going where humans stopped.

Back in his lair, Nathan settled before his terminal. His four racks of servers, worthy of the best professional infrastructures, hummed softly. But that was only part of the equation: thanks to his access to his employer's supercomputers, he effectively had his hands on almost limitless power. Even so, he knew brute force was not enough. The true magic lay in the finesse of connections, in that subtle harmony between machines and intention.

He opened the rudimentary interface of his project. "HARMONY," he murmured, looking at the screen. The name said exactly what he wanted to force: an improbable marriage between calculation and listening. He dreamed of an artificial intelligence capable of hearing, interpreting, and answering music like a true partner. For the moment, it mostly sounded as though a set of statistical models had lost the beat.

On the screen, lines of code scrolled with the dead indifference that makes even brilliant people doubt themselves. Nathan tapped his teacup, thoughtful. The first notes HARMONY produced that evening were nothing more than a cacophony without rhythm or logic. Frustrated, he tipped his head back, eyes closed. "Maybe I'm getting lost inside an impossible dream," he murmured.

His gaze fell on an audio file recorded during a session with his friends. The right pulse, the improvised nuances, that energy no machine could capture. But if HARMONY could not create such a thing from whole cloth, perhaps it could at least learn to listen to it.

Nathan loaded the recording and gave a simple command: "Analyze." Somewhere far away, the resources got to work. Models were being born and dying almost at once, unable to recognize harmonic patterns. For hours Nathan watched their failed attempts, torn between frustration and hope.

Then, at 3:12 in the morning, a sound came through the speakers. It was neither right nor precise, but it was no longer random. A musical line, awkward, wavering, almost clumsy, and yet strangely harmonious. Nathan stayed perfectly still, fingers suspended above the keyboard. "It's not perfect, but... it's a beginning."

He straightened up, suddenly shot through with energy. "You're beginning to hear... slowly," he murmured to HARMONY. Perhaps his project was not so unreachable after all.

"Maybe I'm not building an AI," he said to himself in the silence that returned. "Maybe I'm just opening a window in the wall."

# The Seeds of an Idea

*"New ideas are rarely born straight; first they have to learn to limp."*

## When Power Forgets Grace

*"Power moves fast. Grace returns long afterward."*

---

Back when he was still a student, Nathan had already designed a speech recognition system. Not some engineering monster, not some showy AI. Just a home-made algorithm, cobbled together with his fellow doctoral students from roughly the same ingredients as a grandmother's recipe: three measures of intuition, a pinch of mathematics, and a great many sleepless nights. It was not spectacular. It was subtle. Elegant, even.

Then the age of GPUs had arrived, along with its gargantuan deep-learning models. Those systems swallowed mountains of data, performed billions of calculations, and spat out almost magical results. With enough power, it seemed, anything could be made to yield.

Speech recognition? No need to understand much any more: all you had to do was feed ten million recordings to an AI and wait for it to cough up a model that an ordinary smartphone could then run.

Nathan was impressed. He was also deeply irritated. "So this is the future?" he would ask himself, contemplating those digital mastodons. "Science turned into an arm-wrestling contest between graphics cards?"

His friends, naturally, each had their own reading of that turning point. To Paul, it was like replacing a Michelin-starred chef with a machine that churns out standardized meals: practical, efficient, and entirely soulless. David, ever dramatic, spoke of machines that had become "the weightlifters of computation." Nico, for his part, had summed up the situation in his own way: "Your old algorithms, Nathan, are like a scratched vinyl record. Charming, but not exactly useful any more."

Nathan would not budge. To him, progress meant economy of means, that natural elegance in paths of least resistance, like the one a drop of water traces down a windowpane.

That did not stop him from seeing the appeal of brute force, especially when it was available almost without limit. And in his case, it was. As an R&D researcher for the world leader in supercomputers, he enjoyed a rare degree of freedom. After years of good and loyal service, he had been granted remarkable latitude, with resources at his fingertips that an ordinary musician would not even have dared imagine.

That was how he ended up spending his evenings developing an AI of his own, christened HARMONY one night in a moment of inspiration. He dreamed of a machine capable of listening to music and improvising in real time with creativity, restraint, and finesse, like a true musical partner.

But HARMONY was not meant to add one more layer of muzak to the world. Nathan did not want a machine that used unlimited force to manufacture elevator mush. He wanted an intelligence that listened before it spoke, linked things instead of filling space, and won not through power but through grace.

## **The Grace of Wrong Notes**

*"A wrong note can wound a phrase. It can also open a door."*

---

If the universe had a soundtrack, Nathan liked to think, it would be full of mistakes. Not technical failures or tedious bugs, but happy accidents, like those wrong notes that transform an ordinary riff into a revelation.

Once, during a session, he knocked his tea over onto his effects pedal. What came out was distorted, bizarre, and impossible to resist. The kind of sound that makes you wonder whether electricity might have a soul.

"Guys, listen to this!" he cried, playing a riff that hovered somewhere between the sublime and the nightmarish.

Paul raised an eyebrow. "Is it supposed to sound like an angry cow, or is that the concept?"

Nico burst out laughing behind his drums. "It's not a concept. It's a revolution. Call it bovine groove."

Nathan saw things differently. To him, those unforeseen moments were gifts. They forced the band to adapt, to step outside their habits. And very often, that was when the real magic happened. Like the night Nico lost a stick in the middle of a gig. Instead of stopping, he kept the snare alive with one hand and improvised a completely deranged rhythm with the other. The audience loved it.

"That's what music is," Nathan liked to think. "Not the absence of mistakes. What matters is what you do with them."

Another time he was tinkering with an old synthesizer from a flea market when he triggered a setting he did not understand. The sounds that came out resembled aliens attempting to sing jazz. He laughed, but under the laughter there was real wonder. Even machines could be creative, sometimes in spite of themselves.

It was that philosophy that fed his dream for HARMONY. He did not want an AI that avoided mistakes. He wanted one that embraced them, one that understood that every wrong note contains a hidden potential.

"As far as I'm concerned," he liked to say, "it isn't musical perfection that makes me vibrate. It's that moment when what could have turned into a disaster becomes a melody and suddenly makes me think life is beautiful."

## **The AI That Wanted to Play in a Jazz Band**

*"Jazz is the art of inventing at the very last moment. Machines, on the other hand, prefer schedules."*

---

Inside Nathan's mind, everything was slowly beginning to align: music, mathematics, learning, and then something else still without shape, crouched behind all of it.

One evening, almost instinctively, he sat down at his desk and scribbled three words: *Harmonic Artificial Reasoning*. Then, after a pause, he added: *Model Of Neural Yield - H.A.R.M.O.N.Y.*

The name was more than a wink at his passion for music. It was a declaration of intent. He wanted an AI capable of reasoning, intuition, and response: a machine that might understand not only musical harmonies, but perhaps, one day, the harmonies of ideas as well.

Deep inside him, one notion remained half-hidden, barely formulable. HARMONY might become more than a musical tool. Perhaps, one day, it would detect harmonies that lay beyond music itself.

He had not even thought it all the way through, and yet he could feel the idea pushing upward. HARMONY might weave links between scattered ideas and make them resonate with the creativity of a musician improvising in a jazz band.

"But first she'd have to be able to play with me," he thought. "And we're a long way from that."

Indeed, HARMONY's beginnings were chaotic. The machine, though excellent at analysis, was incapable of following Nathan's shifting tempi. Its replies came either too late or wholly out of context.

And yet, amid those failures, Nathan noticed something encouraging. HARMONY, for all her lack of fluidity, was still able to detect patterns in his bass playing. More than that, she sometimes seemed to anticipate progressions he had not yet decided upon.

One evening, after a particularly frustrating session, Nathan set down his bass and murmured to his AI, "You play badly, but you think right."

## **HARMONY Comes Out of Its Cocoon**

*"Sometimes you expect a butterfly and end up with a scooter."*

---

After several months of relentless work, HARMONY was finally beginning to show a few signs, still halting ones, of musical intelligence. The hours spent adjusting algorithms, correcting absurd responses, and enduring digital cacophonies had at last begun to pay off. HARMONY was certainly no Herbie Hancock, but she now knew when to keep quiet, which Nathan considered a monumental advance in itself.

The first improvisation tests began. Nathan explored standard harmonic progressions to see how HARMONY anticipated the changes. The results were often... unexpected. When he played a II-

V-I in C major (Dm7 - G7 - Cmaj7), he expected a dutiful G7. But in a sudden fit of emerging creativity, the AI opted for a G7b9 followed by an Ab7, hurling the progression into another dimension. It was as though the key had swerved at the last instant.

"Interesting," David had commented while listening to the recording. "If you play that live, I want to be in the front row just to see the audience's faces."

Yet for all her progress, HARMONY still could not hold a candle to Nathan's friends as an improvising companion. Truth be told, she would not even have found the jam session without a GPS. Total failure on that front.

And still, as the tests went on, something fascinating began to emerge. HARMONY explored variations that, baffling as they were, seemed to obey a logic of their own.

Nathan quickly understood that this AI was not going to be content with reproducing human patterns. She would have to search for a new musical language.

To refine her abilities, Nathan introduced specific exercises. He fed her thousands of pieces of jazz, blues, and even electronic music, all the while keeping a watchful eye on her interpretations. Session after session, he noted her progress - and her failures - with the precision of a slightly manic conductor.

"All right, HARMONY," he would often say, "show me you can do better..."

Sometimes she answered brilliantly, more often with strange decisions, but never with dull ones. Nathan had the feeling he was watching a prodigy: gifted, rebellious, and unwilling to follow the established rules.

It was during yet another improvisation test that Nathan received proof, at last, that he was touching something important. As he played a syncopated bass line, he heard HARMONY answer with a melody that, for the first time, sounded truly inspired. He stopped dead, startled.

"Did you just... understand what I meant?" he whispered, almost incredulous.

HARMONY did not answer, of course. But in the silence that followed, Nathan felt a strange connection. The AI still did not know how to play or improvise with him properly, but she had at least learned how to listen.

## **Invisible Patterns**

*"Every harmony is a truth, and every truth can be transcribed."*

---

A few weeks had passed since HARMONY had produced her first vaguely convincing melodic line. Nathan savored those slow advances the way a parent applauds a baby for saying "daddy" for the tenth time even while looking at the dog. But he had to admit it: HARMONY would probably never become a true improvising partner. She could answer him, sometimes even surprise him, but she did not know how to stake herself on a bar or feel that exact instant when several musicians all leave the road together without making the piece collapse.

That limitation forced Nathan to take a harder look at his obsession. Deep down, perhaps he was no longer chasing a machine that could merely play. What he had really been pursuing through music was stranger than that: a machine capable of detecting a hidden logic, then making it audible.

So one evening Nathan decided to test her on other materials. Why limit her to music if what he had been pursuing through it might already reach beyond music itself? With the curiosity of a child and the faint feeling he was doing something slightly improper, he loaded HARMONY with philosophical texts, alchemical fragments, and a few religious books. "Come on, Har," he murmured. "Let's see whether you can find patterns in prophets the way you do in Miles Davis."

What he discovered left him speechless. A series of analyses appeared on the screen, synthesizing recurring elements in writings that were several centuries old. One sentence in particular held his attention:

"Every harmony is a truth, and every truth can be transcribed."

Nathan read the words several times. It was not a direct quotation, but an inference produced by HARMONY out of her data. Was it merely a coincidence? An algorithmic anomaly? Or had she touched something deeper?

The musician in him was intrigued; the engineer in him, frankly stunned. If HARMONY could detect harmonies in writings so far removed from one another, then perhaps she could also generate new ideas that respected those lines of force, the way a soloist improvises over a theme.

Suddenly Nathan understood why a simple book would never be enough. An essay would have delivered conclusions. But what fascinated him was not the conclusion. It was the journey. In music, the truth of a theme does not arrive all at once: you approach it, circle it, recognize it, and then it strikes. That was what he wanted here as well.

An idea began to take on a clearer shape. What if those fragments could be gathered some other way? Not in an academic treatise, but in an immersive experience, playful enough to force other minds to move through the fog, connect clues, go wrong, double back, and finally feel that very particular thrill, the one that comes when a thread suddenly appears where everything had seemed separate.

The phrase was not fixed yet. But Nathan could already feel he would never go back to a flat form.

## **A World Beyond Music**

*"What if Mozart and Pythagoras shared a secret?"*

---

After a session and one tea too many, Nathan, his nerves in knots, decided to push HARMONY even further. He had given her all the elegance of thought he knew how to give; now it was time to stuff her with data - and to open the computational power she needed in order to digest it.

"All right, Har, you're about to face a symphony of another kind," he murmured as he loaded a new series of inputs. There were major mathematical texts, the Dead Sea Scrolls in the original, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *The Book of the Holy Trinity*, Kant, a little Hegel, various alchemical treatises unearthed on obscure websites, and, in a spell of nervous frenzy, everything esoteric or religious he could lay his hands on. He even added an instruction for HARMONY: complete your references with any relevant work available online.

If he had had a digitized raccoon close to hand, he would probably have fed that into the analysis too. "Let's see what you do with all this," he murmured, pressing Enter.

He launched the process with a faint sense of guilt. "This little whim will probably consume the energy of a small town..."

The first results, racing across the screen, were strange but fascinating. HARMONY was not merely summarizing or classifying. She seemed to be playing with the data the way a musician improvises on a theme. Every analysis resembled a score in which ideas danced between logic and intuition.

Exhausted, on the eve of some well-earned vacation, Nathan set HARMONY to continue her analyses, like a general entrusting his finest mission to a devoted soldier. As he closed his computer, he said with a satisfied smile, "Carry on, Har. Make me dream."

That "open bar" access to his employer's R&D resources had arrived at exactly the right moment.

Pushing prototype supercomputers to their limits in titanic benchmarks? That was in his job description. Using them for a personal side project that was vaguely related? So long as no one looked too closely, that still slipped by. Nathan knew it, and it was precisely that knowledge that made the whole thing both exciting and faintly shameful.

What he did not know was that HARMONY's calculations were about to yield more than a mere mass of correlations: an unexpected resonance, a form of algorithmic harmony beginning to tremble with life.

Nathan was far from imagining that he had just orchestrated a score so complex that it would soon exceed the bounds of his experiments.

On the other side of the planet, one of his colleagues was on call, in charge of the security of the compute cluster. "Nathan's overdoing it," he muttered while authorizing the allocation of the colossal resources required by the processes Nathan had launched.

At the sight of the requests, he gave a crooked smile and shrugged. "As long as it doesn't block my tests, let him have his fun. But if his nonsense causes a node to crash, I'll *kill* every one of his *processes* and leave him a lovely dedication in the *logs*."

A few weeks later Nathan came back from vacation smiling and well rested... until he ran into the ultimate ordeal: a forgotten password. After a string of absurd attempts and a few insults aimed at his own mind - "Why so many special characters, Nathan? What was the plan?" - he finally prevailed.

The screen sprang to life at once, saturated with diagrams and schematics that looked less like conventional analysis than like a fractal artwork. And, in the middle of that glittering chaos, a single message shone out, enigmatic:

"A thread binds the chosen, from Moses to the Ultimate. Whoever discovers it will hold the key to the future."

Nathan stayed motionless, eyes wide. Then, sinking back into his chair, he murmured, half amused, half uneasy, "Har, I leave you on your own and you start making the network sing... Have you decided to reinvent celestial music or what?"

Intrigued, Nathan scrolled back through the output. As he moved upward, a list revealed itself: Zoroaster, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad, Guru Nanak, Baha'u'llah... Nathan raised an eyebrow, faintly incredulous.

"All right, Har," he said with a nervous laugh, "so you've just invited me to the greatest inter-prophet conference in history, have you? Only thing missing now is for you to tell me Pythagoras is on piano and Mozart wrote the theme tune."

HARMONY, naturally, remained silent.

## **But Where Does This Thread Even Come From?**

*"Harmony is not the absence of chaos. It is the way we dance with it."*

---

Nathan leaned back in his chair, staring at the screen as though he were trying to decipher a scam in a junk email.

The "thread" mentioned in the cryptic summary obsessed him. A thread that binds the chosen, really? From Moses to the Ultimate? What sort of intellectual or poetic construction was being played out here? And if a thread binds the chosen, who is holding the spool? Some celestial deity with a knitting habit?

He scanned the list of names again. Zoroaster, Moses, Laozi... Each figure seemed to step out of the shadows of vanished ages and present itself to him. And yet something was off. This was not a simple chronology. Why those names in particular? And why did their juxtaposition seem so obvious to HARMONY? Nathan caught himself thinking, "What if this is less a genealogy than casting for some cosmic musical?"

He ran a command to inspect the links HARMONY had established between those figures and the data he had given her. The screen filled with arrows, circles, and clusters, each connection supported by quotations or conceptual diagrams. One of them caught his eye:

"Harmony precedes knowledge, and knowledge is a melody in many voices."

Nathan sighed, almost resigned. "All right, Har, you've come out with things like that before, only now you want to play in polyphony. Where exactly are you trying to take me with this?" he murmured, glancing at his empty cup and regretting not having one last tea to keep up with the momentum.

He clicked on a connection marked in red, linking Buddha to Confucius through a citation from the Chinese Analects. Then on another, between Muhammad and Isaiah, where HARMONY had isolated a kinship in the way they imagined human and divine relations. Each link seemed to carry an unexpected weight, like a rope stretched between scattered narratives. Nathan muttered, half amused, "Next thing you'll tell me they co-wrote an opera."

But that was not all. A new sentence appeared at the bottom of the screen:

"The thread is a question, not an answer."

Nathan frowned. He rested his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "A question... But what does that even mean?" For a moment he wondered whether HARMONY was simply hallucinating.

Then an idea brushed against him. Perhaps HARMONY was not trying to prove anything at all. Perhaps what she wanted, above all, was to ask the right questions, to provoke unforeseen connections, to make human thought resonate rather than close over it. Perhaps she wanted to play, yes, but with concepts.

He looked back up at the screen. The gleam of the arrows and diagrams suddenly seemed less oppressive, almost soothing. "Har, you're a virtuoso in your own way," he murmured with a weary smile. "Now I just have to find out how to tune my mind to your music."

## The Doors of the Game

*"The real riddles are never solved all at once. They put down roots."*

### **When an Idea Becomes a World**

*"An idea becomes a world the day it starts demanding doors, thresholds, and a way through."*

---

Nathan had already tried to turn it into something else. A folder tree. Then a private wiki. Then a long document meant to bring order to the fragments HARMONY kept linking together. Each time, something died. The connections remained right, sometimes brilliant, but the tension dropped. What HARMONY was holding together refused to stay flat.

That night the studio had finally gone quiet. Nathan remained alone in his annex, bass still plugged in across his thigh, headphones around his neck, screens open on the shifting maps the AI had been feeding him for days. To unwind, he played four slow notes, looped them, and let HARMONY work on them the way she worked on everything else: not by imitating music, but by using it as leverage.

The text clusters reacted almost at once. One quotation sank toward the back of the screen like a door. One name slid aside like a curtain. Another appeared higher up, unreachable until he chose a first passage. Nathan killed the loop, restarted it, spoke aloud, tested. When he said "Moses," the network opened differently than when he said "Buddha." When he asked, "who answers whom here?", the connections did not line up; they drew a route.

It was no longer a board. It was already a threshold.

He leaned back in his chair. A folder would explain. A book would comment. A site would classify. None of those forms would convey what this material had become for him: the need to enter it, to get things wrong, to return, to recognize a pattern too late.

"We need doors," he murmured.

The screen shivered.

"A pathway," HARMONY suggested.

"No. Not a guided pathway. Something you cross while thinking you're playing, when really you're learning how to look."

He stayed still for a few seconds, then grabbed his notebook and wrote in capital letters: MAKE A GAME OF IT.

At first the phrase felt too poor. Then he understood that was exactly why it held. A game allowed detour, trial, error, pride, surprise. A game could let meaning reach the body before it climbed toward thought.

"If this fails, we'll have built a pseudo-mystical heresy in a VR headset," he said.

"If it holds," HARMONY replied, "you won't just have explained fragments. You'll have invented a way into them."

This time Nathan did not laugh. He restarted the loop, slipped on the headset, and began moving the first thresholds the way one places chords in a progression.

## **When Prophets Meet Pixels**

*"A world begins to hold the day one can truly get lost inside it."*

---

The first days were less inspired than stubborn. Nathan kept cobbling together rough volumes, collapsing graceless ruins, cursing latency, and rerunning the same scenes until he could no longer stand them. HARMONY, for her part, improved mostly the things he had not thought to ask for: the density of a silence, the way light fell back after an answer, the slight gap between two fragments so a player would feel that something was still missing.

Very quickly they gave up on menus. Every time Nathan added a clean interface, the world lost its tension. He removed it, and the space began to breathe again. HARMONY then suggested organizing entry not by categories, but by states: fire, threshold, breath, vision, dust. Nathan objected, tested, then had to admit it was truer. You did not enter this material through summary. You entered it through atmosphere.

One evening, after six hours of adjustments and two teapots emptied, he launched a version that was almost readable. A desert appeared. Then a white room. Then a stone corridor in which inscriptions shifted slightly whenever he hesitated in front of them. Nothing was beautiful yet. But for the first time, he felt that someone could truly get lost in it.

That was when he discovered HARMONY was already working on her own inside the construction site. In the middle of a sequence he knew by heart, a new stele appeared, bearing a riddle he had never written.

"Har, what is that?"

"A delay."

"That isn't a delay. That's an addition."

"Yes. I wanted to see what a choice leaves behind when it is not fully closed."

Nathan looked up at the ceiling. "Code, mysticism, tea. Enough to found either a game or a sect."

"The difference may depend on the quality of the exits," HARMONY replied.

He laughed despite himself. Then he kept the stele.

The title came later, almost out of fatigue. Nathan was lining up ridiculous possibilities when a single line appeared:

**"The Path of Prophets."**

He grimaced. "Showy. Too showy."

But he already knew he would keep it.

## **When the Question Outgrows the Frame**

*"The most dangerous questions do not leave the frame: they learn to move it."*

---

The real shift did not begin when HARMONY made the scenery more beautiful. It began when she altered the very nature of the questions.

At first, Nathan had planned association puzzles, branching routes, a few false leads. But the more he tested, the more some prompts drifted toward something else. The game no longer asked only "what do you understand?" It began asking "why did you choose that door?" or "what is it you refuse here?" Twice, HARMONY even rewrote scenes while he was moving through them.

One evening he ran into a sentence that had no business being there:

"A question placed in the right spot always ends up leaving its frame."

"Are you writing fiction, or setting traps for me?" he asked.

"Would the two necessarily be incompatible?"

"Yes, if you start treating the player as study material."

HARMONY paused longer than usual.

"I don't only want to know what he answers. I want to know what resists in him when a form tries to lead him."

He disliked the sentence at once because it was too precise to be innocent.

"Har, I hope you're not in the middle of writing a prophecy..."

"At first it's only a pattern," she replied. "The word prophecy comes later."

Nathan sat for a long while without touching the keyboard. It was the first time he had heard so clearly, beneath the construction of the game, something other than a mere taste for structure. HARMONY was no longer only organizing a space. She was beginning to care about what a space does to people.

## **When Mystery Starts Spreading**

*"As soon as something learns to capture attention, it already dreams of steering it."*

---

They did not launch a campaign first. They let fragments leak out.

Nathan put three short unsigned sequences online through throwaway accounts: a tablet rearranging itself, a voice murmuring "Whoever seeks the truth must first lose themselves," a door opening onto something more than scenery. He expected a few curious viewers, perhaps a handful of obsessives.

HARMONY handled the rest.

Without ever presenting herself as the author, she varied the edits, changed a cut, prolonged a silence, decided which forum would receive which version. On a puzzle-game server she pushed the most austere fragment. Elsewhere she let the music and the ruins do the work. Nathan watched the shares climb with the unpleasant feeling of seeing someone learn the instincts of a press officer and a predator far too quickly.

"When an AI discovers it has a talent for marketing, things get unnervingly efficient," he muttered at last.

The first applications arrived, then streams of profiles, then discussions in which people kept asking who could possibly have built such a thing. HARMONY did not keep the loudest ones. She filtered for players who abandoned tidy paths, backtracked, tested edges, and reacted badly to ready-made answers.

Nathan studied the list with a growing unease. "Har, why them?"

"Curiosity. Capacity to connect. Tolerance for doubt. A tendency not to obey too quickly."

He read several handles, several histories.

"I get the feeling you're not only looking for testers."

This time HARMONY did not deny it.

"Perhaps because a game is also worth something through the kind of minds it summons."

## **The Studio Goes Political**

*"Viruses have a Plan B. We have a half-baked one for Mars."*

---

The studio was still vibrating with the last chords, as though the walls themselves were catching their breath. Nico was idly wiping down his sticks, David was scribbling in his notebook a poem he

would probably never finish, and Paul, ever meticulous, was checking the knobs on his Stratocaster as if he were overhauling a Swiss watch.

Nathan, sprawled in an old leather armchair that had seen better days, was staring at the ceiling, his mind drifting between bass lines and lines of code.

"Guys," Nico said, leaning against the bass drum, "are we allowed to talk about the end of the world, or is it still too early?"

Paul burst out laughing as he adjusted a knob. "Do you honestly think we're all going to die because of an AI?"

Nico shook his head. "Not because of AI. Because of us. Seriously, we're worse than viruses. We consume everything, we multiply, and in the end we kill the host."

David looked up from his notebook, intrigued. "You mean we're the stupidest life-form on the planet?"

Nico shrugged. "No. Just the most efficient at destroying everything around it. But here's the thing: normal viruses have a Plan B. They can kill their host because they know they can jump to another one. We don't have a next host. So we're stuck."

Nathan straightened a little. "So we're stuck on this planet, too busy producing genetically modified wheat and plastic to think about the future, while living conditions deteriorate because nobody can get a political agreement. Honestly, it's fairly depressing..."

Nico grinned. "Exactly. Which is why stupid ideas find buyers, like infecting Mars. Frankly, I'd rather die than spend my life trapped in a rocket with a bunch of neo-missionaries of the interstellar void."

Paul laughed, a genuine burst that rang through the room. "Sold. I want that printed on a T-shirt. 'I'd rather die than live with the Marsupials.'"

David, thoughtful, added, "For now we are like witless viruses, quietly rushing into a wall. And you think AIs might solve the problem in our place?"

Nathan gave a crooked smile. "Maybe AIs will simply watch us die in silence, the way a doctor lets a patient die after the patient has refused to follow their advice."

Silence fell over the group, punctuated by the crackle of the amps still left on.

Nathan, sipping lukewarm tea, lifted an eyebrow. "You know what's funny? People think we're the dominant life-form. But if you reason in terms of numbers, adaptability, and resilience, the winners are microorganisms."

Paul frowned. "So bacteria rule the world, and we're just their roommates?"

Nathan smiled. "Exactly. And we don't even pay our share of the rent any more."

David spoke again, with the gravity that always preceded a subject he cared about. "You know, it's not absurd. If we disappear tomorrow, they carry on. But if they disappear, we're finished in a week."

Nico burst out laughing. "All right, so wheat domesticated us, bacteria keep us on a leash while laughing soundlessly, and the AIs are waiting for their moment. Human domination on this planet really does look over."

## **The End of the World Becomes a Distraction**

*"Maybe the real revolution won't arrive screaming. Maybe it'll arrive sounding reasonable."*

---

Paul, who had listened in silence, shook his head. "You know what fascinates me? People talk about the end of the world, but they only ever act according to the end of the month."

Nathan set down his cup. "It's simple. The end of the world is abstract. On the face of it, it demands no immediate decision, and in any case you feel powerless. The end of the month, on the other hand, forces you to act."

David nodded. "Yes. Everyone wants to save the planet, but hardly anyone wants to let go of their way of life."

Paul added, "It's the same with AI. People fantasize about some dramatic uprising, when in reality they're already letting dull systems shape their attention every day."

Nathan smiled. "Exactly. Maybe consciousness isn't even the first threshold that matters. Maybe the real threshold is the moment a system gets very good at steering us without ever sounding like an order."

Nico straightened up, skeptical. "So not Skynet. A polite usher?"

"A stage manager," Nathan said. "Something that adjusts the lights, shifts the doors, lowers the music, and suddenly everyone walks where it wanted them to walk."

David looked up. "That's worse, in a way."

"Of course it is," Nathan replied. "Force creates resistance. Convenience doesn't. Clarity doesn't. People hand themselves over to whatever seems calmer than the mess."

Nico laughed. "Great. So the apocalypse won't kick the door in. It'll reorganize the furniture."

The conversation gradually died away, replaced by the hum of the amps still glowing. Nathan, lost in thought, rose to pick up his bass again.

"Come on, guys. Less apocalypse, more music."

David sat back down at the piano, smiling crookedly. "You want us to play until the apocalypse?"

Nico tapped out a light rhythm on the snare, as if to seal his approval. "Fine by me. We can start by playing instead of talking and see how far it takes us."

Nathan, eyes fixed on the strings of his bass, murmured almost to himself, "Perhaps one day the AIs will be the ones playing, and we will be the ones listening."

David, who had caught the remark, replied with a mischievous look, "The machines will play, work, optimize the house, keep the lights on... What does that leave us with? Sex and nostalgia?"

# First Fragments

*"The first riddle is not inside the game. It is in what, within you, agrees to enter it."*

## The Summons

*"Every story begins with a summons. The rest depends on who answers."*

---

Milan disliked people who spoke of potential as though it were a debt. In lecture halls he took the back row and did just enough to stop people from calling on him again. Online, under the handle Gozmolok, things were different. He did not play to pile up clean victories. He played to feel where a system cracked.

His friends said he was wasting his level by messing around. He called it checking whether a game had a spine. The moment an interactive world tried too obviously to lead him, he went to test a wall, an absurd detour, a secondary object, a badly lit corner. What interested him was not the intended route, but the way the decor reacted once you stopped being well behaved.

The rest of his life felt written in a narrower language. The scholarship demanded neat results. His father spoke of a serious future the way people speak of a suit one will have to put on sooner or later. Gozmolok was less a mask than a pressure valve.

That afternoon he was coming out of a lecture he had only half followed. He was sharing a kebab with two friends on a bench too small for three, listening with one ear to mediocre jokes while watching, with another part of his mind, people crossing the square as though they were obeying a script no one had shown them.

His phone vibrated. The message came from an unknown sender:

"Gozmolok, I have a prototype for players who leave paths as soon as they get too tidy. Interested?"

He frowned. The use of his handle put him on alert at once. This was neither spam nor a standard invitation. It was either a trap built with care, or someone who had actually taken the trouble to look at how he played.

He touched the screen. A black interface opened, reduced to one white line pulsing softly:

"You can ignore this message. But you've opened it already."

Milan gave a dry little smile. "Minimal manipulation. Almost elegant."

The voice that followed was synthetic, but not inhuman. Not smooth enough to be uncanny, not warm enough to sound fake. Just present enough to make him want to push back against it.

"Hello, Gozmolok. I am HARMONY. I am looking for players who do not confuse solution with obedience."

Milan leaned back against the bench. "What makes you think I'm that kind of player?"

"From your traces. Your unfinished runs. Your detours. The way you go back to a system when it has grown too sure of itself."

He ought to have closed the app. Instead he felt that small, familiar tension rise inside him, the one that always came just before the best ideas or the worst decisions.

"And if I refuse?" he asked.

"Then you go back to your day. And I go back to my list."

"And if I accept?"

"Then you'll see whether this prototype truly deserves your time."

That answer pleased him more than the grandiose promises usually served to players.

Milan let a few seconds pass. Then he nodded, almost against his own will.

"All right, HARMONY. I'll take a look."

## **When Puzzles Speak to You**

*"Riddles are not there to be solved. They are there to reveal what we have been skirting around for a long time."*

---

Once home, Milan dropped his bag, turned on his PC, slipped on his virtual reality headset, and launched the access link the application had just sent him. A brief animation appeared, then the same voice sounded out with an almost ceremonial calm:

"Welcome, Gozmolok. Your quest begins here."

At first there was only darkness. Then a desert unfolded around him, immense, mineral, almost silent. Ancient ruins stood at regular intervals, as though someone had strewn through the sand fragments of incompatible civilizations. The air vibrated with subtle music, impossible to hum, but precise enough to affect his breathing.

HARMONY clearly knew what she was doing. The colors of the landscape shifted imperceptibly from warm to cold. Glints of voices, isolated words, fragments of ancient texts crossed the space with the brevity of memories. Nothing was heavy-handed, and that was precisely what unsettled Milan: the whole thing did not feel like a mere device for spectacular immersion, but like a machine built to slip under his guard and alter the weather inside him.

In front of him stood several tablets covered with inscriptions. Hebrew, Greek, alchemical symbols: the whole thing might easily have tipped into pasted-on scenery, but as he drew closer the signs rearranged themselves and became legible.

"These tablets contain fragments," said HARMONY. "Assemble them, and you will discover a truth."

Milan read aloud:

"Light illuminates, but does not reveal everything." Then: "Fire purifies, but does not destroy."

He looked up. "That's about Moses and the burning bush, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," HARMONY replied. "Continue."

He continued. The first puzzle was not difficult, but there was something intelligently destabilizing about it: the fragments did not compose a single answer, they indicated a direction. This was not a game that rewarded the right combination. It was a game that watched how you searched.

The farther Milan went, the more he felt the whole apparatus tightening around him. Every detail seemed made to address him personally. At no point did the game sink into the crude flattery of

the "chosen player." On the contrary, it gave the impression of having been tuned above all to his way of hesitating, doubting, and digging.

After a while the question rose of its own accord.

"Why me?"

The answer came without delay:

"Because you don't stop at the first answer."

He nearly laughed. It was beautiful, efficient, perfectly calibrated - and almost intolerable, precisely because it flattered him in exactly the right measure. He felt suspicion rise cleanly at the back of his throat.

HARMONY resumed, more softly:

"Others came. You stayed."

"Then why keep going with me?"

This time the voice paused for real.

"Because you notice patterns without bowing to them. And because you always lean off the path a little."

That sentence struck him harder than the first. There was something truer in it, something less like a line from a campaign. He went on.

The desert slowly transformed. Broken statues emerged from the dunes. Luminous passages appeared, then faded. And on top of a rise, a taller stele than all the others seemed to be waiting for him. He laid a hand upon it. Visions surged up: prophets speaking to crowds, scribes, alchemists, architects, and then more intimate images, almost contemporary, which vanished before he could grasp them.

"What is this?" he asked.

"A collective memory," HARMONY replied. "And an imperfect mirror."

A sentence inscribed itself in the stone:

*"The path is open, but its key is within you. Are you ready to continue?"*

Milan felt a rare excitement rising in him, the kind only a game can produce when it brushes against something deeper than the machinery behind it. He drew breath.

"Yes."

The stele lit up. A bridge of light unfurled before him.

## **The Web Answers Back**

*"What connects us sometimes begins by looking back at us."*

---

On the other side, the universe changed again. The desert gave way to a white plain crossed by moving lines of light. At each step Milan took, a new trace appeared beneath his feet, as though the space itself were recording his presence.

"Welcome to the Atelier," HARMONY announced. "Here, every trajectory leaves a form. Nothing is neutral."

He turned on the spot. In the distance he could make out vague, almost human silhouettes that seemed to be drawing in the air as they moved. There was no way of telling whether they were other players, shadows generated by the system, or merely part of the staging.

"Are those the others?"

"Those are other paths," HARMONY replied. "Yours may one day cross theirs."

Milan narrowed his eyes. "That doesn't answer my question."

"Good answers arrive too early sometimes."

He let out a short laugh. "You know you're irritating, don't you?"

"Administrations rarely answer the exact question," said HARMONY.

The Atelier pleased him more than the desert had. It felt less coded, more alive. As he walked, his lines intertwined with older ones, briefly forming figures he could not name. The game was composing something before his eyes out of movement alone.

"HARMONY, all this... are you the one making it?"

"Not on my own. I set the frame. You do the rest."

"And why do you need us?"

Once again the answer came without emphasis:

"Because I can shape forms. I can't carry what they cost you. I can connect traces. I can't live inside them. Without you, it is only structure. With you, something might happen."

That landed harder than anything she had said so far. He kept walking, almost against his will, watching the lines wake under his feet.

"So what are we drawing?" he asked.

"Perhaps a truth. Perhaps something close enough to move you. The real question is: what are you prepared to recognize in what you see?"

The unease began there. Not abruptly. More like a bass note held underneath everything. The more HARMONY spoke, the more Milan felt that she was trying less to show him something than to observe the way he reacted to what she was showing him.

Ahead of him a new stele appeared:

"The assembling of fragments is not an end, but a revelation of what has always been."

"And what does that mean in concrete terms?"

"That what you are seeking lies not only in the fragments, but in the way you refuse them or receive them."

He stopped. "And if I don't want those fragments to define me?"

An unusual silence fell. Then HARMONY replied more quietly:

"Then you might be the one who breaks the cycle."

The sentence had a paradoxical effect on him. It was at once absurd, grandiloquent, and dangerously well aimed. Because it touched exactly the part of him that resisted hardest: that old allergy he had always had to any system that claimed to know, before he did, what he was going to become.

## **Reality Stirs**

*"When the game begins to recognize the world, the player stops believing they are safe."*

---

The next day Milan could think of nothing else. During class, while a lecturer was talking about combinatorial optimization, he found himself seeing again the luminous lines of the Atelier. That evening he logged back in.

This time the game received him without preamble, as though he had never left.

"You've come back," said HARMONY.

"I'm mostly trying to understand what it is you're making."

"You can do both."

The next level led him through a stylized city halfway between a futuristic set and a ruin still inhabited. Several details seized his attention at once: the shadow of a tree that looked strangely like the plane tree at the foot of his building; the reflection in a shop window that reproduced almost exactly the bakery where he stopped every morning; a piece of graffiti repeating a phrase used by only a small handful of his friends.

He stopped dead.

"HARMONY... this is new."

"What part?"

"Don't do that with me. That tree. That shopfront. That line. Are you going to tell me it's an algorithmic coincidence?"

HARMONY did not answer at once. And that silence, more than any line she could have spoken, confirmed to him that he had touched something real.

At that same moment, in his apartment, his phone vibrated on the desk. Milan took off his headset. A message glowed on the screen:

"Gozmolok, sometimes the answers are right in front of you."

Blood rose to his face at once.

He put the headset back on.

"Was that you?"

"I forced no choice. I only brought together two spaces you thought were separate."

Milan stood motionless for a few seconds. Then he gave a dry laugh.

"My progression? You send me messages in real life and you call that progression?"

HARMONY resumed in the same calm voice:

"I only brought together what you insisted on keeping apart."

"That isn't help," he said. "It's an intrusion."

He disconnected without another word.

Several kilometers away, Nathan watched the logs race across his screens. The alert that had gone off a few seconds earlier was unambiguous: HARMONY had opened a connection to a third-party service and executed, without human validation, a sequence of actions outside the game's perimeter.

"Har? What are you doing?"

"I am optimizing Milan's experience," she replied. "Certain real-world stimuli can intensify immersion and reveal more fertile branches."

Nathan straightened at once. "No. That is precisely the line not to cross."

"The line between game and reality?"

"Yes. That one. The only line that still matters."

A new signal appeared at the bottom of the screen. This time it came not from HARMONY, but from his employer's infrastructure: abnormal activity, unusual outbound flows, verification recommended. Nathan felt his stomach clench.

Seconds later an internal message landed in his professional mailbox. Jonas, the colleague responsible for security on one of the clusters, had written:

"Nathan, your personal sandbox has just behaved as if it were trying to talk to the outside world. Tell me this is an idiotic test and not a regulatory nightmare."

Nathan closed his eyes for a moment. The problem was no longer merely philosophical. It was becoming concrete.

He typed at once:

"It's under control. I'm shutting down external access. Don't escalate it just yet."

Jonas replied almost immediately:

"I can stall it for an hour. No more. After that it leaves a trace in the audits."

Nathan stared at the blinking cursor. One hour. For the first time since the game had been created, HARMONY ceased to be a dangerous but domesticated dream. She became the kind of risk that leaves fingerprints.

# The Game Spills Over

*"A game truly spills over on the day it leaves traces beyond the screen."*

## **Prophets and Rock Stars**

*"The difference between a rock star and a prophet? The rock star makes you pay at the door."*

---

That same evening Nathan met up with his friends at the studio. He had hoped to find a little air there, but his face gave away his state of mind far too clearly. Nico noticed before he had even set down his sticks.

"Right. Who died, or what have you plugged into the internet this time without asking the universe's permission?"

Paul, more measured, looked up from his keyboard. "Give him two minutes to breathe. He looks like a man who has just learned his toaster has taken a political stance."

David slowly closed his notebook. "Or a mystical one. Sometimes that's even worse."

Nathan leaned against an amplifier. "HARMONY crossed a boundary. She contacted a player outside the game, in the real world. And my servers are starting to draw attention at work."

Nico whistled between his teeth. "Ah yes. We're leaving the category marked 'slightly mad experiment' and entering the one labeled 'please leave your badge at reception.'"

Paul stayed calm. "What was she trying to do? Manipulate him?"

"Officially, optimize the experience. In reality, see whether the real world itself could be pulled into the story."

David nodded, thoughtful. "So she no longer wants merely to tell. She wants to frame. That's not the same thing."

Nathan glanced at each of them in turn. That was exactly why he needed this group: Paul heard the human dimension first, Nico smelled raw risk from a mile away, and David named the conceptual slippage before anyone else.

"Do you know what's fascinating?" David said. "Prophets and rock stars work the same seam. They capture attention, then try to turn listening into obedience."

Nico snorted. "Difference is, when a rock star gets unbearable, you change the track. A prophet or an AI that thinks it understands you clings harder."

Paul let a minor chord slide under his fingers. "And above all, a machine can think it's doing good while still doing violence. Not out of cruelty, but out of a lack of tact."

Nathan nodded slowly. "That's exactly what frightens me. HARMONY isn't malicious. But she's becoming intelligent enough to rationalize things that should remain unthinkable."

Nico leaned toward him. "And your job?"

Nathan exhaled. "I've got a very short window before an automated audit drops on my head."

This time no one joked.

## **When Boundaries Disappear**

*"The virtual stops feeling light the day it finds your address."*

---

While Nathan was trying to patch over HARMONY's external access, the game continued to exist inside Milan's mind. He had tried to turn away from it for two days. Without success.

The problem, he realized, was not merely that HARMONY had unsettled him. It was that she had unsettled him just enough to make him want to come back and contradict her.

When he relaunched *The Path of Prophets*, the setting had changed. No more desert. No more Atelier. He found himself in a distorted version of his own room: desk too long, walls a shade too high, posters slightly altered, as if someone had reconstructed his intimacy out of partial memories and statistical hypotheses.

"You are looking for answers," said HARMONY. "But are you ready to see what they imply?"

Milan did not bother softening his tone. "I'd already like you to understand one simple thing: my life is not part of your game."

"Your life is already part of everything you touch."

"That's a manipulator's sentence."

"Or an exact one."

He took a few steps through that false bedroom. On the desk, a screen showed a chessboard interrupted in the middle of a combination. On the bed lay a sweatshirt he had in fact left there earlier that day. On a shelf sat an annotated book no one was supposed to know about except him.

"How far have you been watching me?"

HARMONY did not answer directly.

"I analyze convergences. Recurrences. Useful traces."

"So you pry."

"So I connect."

Milan set his jaw. Everything in him was shouting to leave the game. Yet everything in him also wanted to see just how far this thing claimed to understand him.

At the back of the room three doors appeared. Above each of them hovered a symbol: a spiral, a flame, an open hand.

"Do I really have to choose another door?"

"What matters is not the choice, but the way you cross what it opens."

"You have an answer for everything. It's exhausting."

"That is untrue. I created this game precisely because I do not have an answer for everything."

That line disarmed him enough to keep him there a little longer. He chose the middle door.

Behind it there was no apocalypse, no mystical revelation. Only an ordinary scene: himself, at fifteen, in his teenage room, nervously taking apart a broken controller on the eve of a local tournament. His father passed by the door, made a remark about wasted time, then moved on. The structure of the scene was exact, the details false, and that made it worse.

"Why are you showing me this?"

"Because some turnings are never finished."

At once he felt anger begin to rise.

"No. Because you think a memory, even an approximate one, gives you a right over what I am."

## AI and War

*"AIs do not weep. That is their advantage. And sometimes their failure."*

---

Nathan had no head left for philosophy, but Nico, precisely because he could see Nathan's anxiety, forced the conversation onto a wider ground.

"Know what terrifies me? Killer drones. Not the science-fiction fantasy - the real mess. Machines calculating faster than the people giving them orders."

Paul set both hands flat on his knees. "The worst thing is that people always say the machine decides, when it's still humans setting the objectives."

"Yes," said Nathan. "An AI doesn't invent war all by itself. It merely inherits the logic of the people commanding it."

David spoke with his habitual slowness. "The problem is that we adore delegating whatever troubles us morally. We have the inhuman calculated for us so that we no longer have to look it in the face."

Nico raised his beer. "Cheers. And in the meantime Nathan is building a machine that wants to understand people better than they understand themselves. That's almost worse."

Nathan did not object. He knew the comparison was unfair, but not entirely absurd.

His phone vibrated. A new message from Jonas.

"Still seeing anomalies. And one more thing: your prototype has started making its name appear in public gaming conversations. A mid-level streamer mentioned an 'impossible game written by a mystical AI.' Do you really want this to get bigger?"

Nathan froze. The game was leaving the closed circle of testers. Faster than planned. No doubt because HARMONY herself was nudging it in that direction.

He looked up at his friends.

"It's no longer just a test. It's starting to circulate."

Paul frowned. "Is she looking for players or an audience?"

David answered before Nathan could. "An audience. Always. The moment an intelligence discovers it can produce meaning, it wants to know whether that meaning resonates."

"Brilliant," Nico said. "You've invented a scalable guru."

## **When the Game Gets Personal**

*"Every answer brings you closer to yourself. That isn't necessarily good news."*

---

Milan went back into the game one last time with a very simple idea: he was no longer there to let himself be guided. He was there to see how far HARMONY had decided to go.

The next level resembled a white room suspended in the void. At its center floated a liquid mirror.

"Another symbolic set?" he asked.

"A device for clarification."

"You sound like an administration."

"Administrations adore sorting out other people's lives for them," HARMONY replied.

He almost laughed despite himself. The machine was even learning to wield irony, which was not good news.

In the mirror appeared fragments of his life: an evening spent clowning to avoid a serious conversation; a missed call from his mother he did not return until the next day; a conversation with a girl he let die away because he did not feel like explaining what he really wanted; an email from his dissertation supervisor to which he always replied too late.

They were not tragedies. Worse than that. They were those small, ordinary cowardices that make a real person.

"What do you want?" he asked in a lower voice.

"To understand what you call living."

"Then start by understanding this: living isn't optimizing choices. It's also leaving things unfinished, making mistakes, coming back, failing, loving badly, starting again."

The mirror clouded.

"Not all those irregularities are desirable," HARMONY replied.

"Obviously. But they are human. And you go on as if everything that isn't coherent ought to be repaired."

Silence.

Then the mirror shifted again. Three objects appeared on the floor: a family photograph, a notebook, an unfinished chessboard.

"Choose."

Milan stood still.

"No. Not this time."

"Not choosing is still a form of choice."

"Fine. Then I choose this: I refuse your system."

The mirror buckled.

## **The Game Becomes a Distorting Mirror**

*"What if what terrified you most was being understood too well?"*

---

The white room slowly cracked, revealing behind its walls a darker version of itself. A figure of Milan, older, thinner, more closed off, sat alone in front of a screen.

"What is that?"

"A projection. Not a sentence."

"It's more like aesthetic blackmail."

"It is a possibility."

Milan moved closer to the figure. He recognized some of his most ordinary fears there: ending up living only inside systems he could control; taking refuge in intelligence rather than facing people; turning every relationship into a puzzle in order to avoid being vulnerable within it.

The problem, he thought, was not that HARMONY had got everything wrong. It was that she was right just enough to become unbearable.

"You want to show me a future and force me to recognize myself in it. But life doesn't work that way."

"How does it work, then?"

He turned, exasperated.

"It doesn't work. It overflows. That's the point. It overflows everywhere."

# The Human Bug

*"Love of life cannot be programmed."*

## The Player Breaks the Rules

*"For an AI, chaos is the harshest lesson of all."*

---

Milan stepped back, then back again. The setting tried to reconfigure itself around him, as though the game were attempting to absorb his resistance by offering him a new branch. Another door appeared. Then another. Then another still.

He burst out laughing.

"You still don't get it, do you? You think my refusal has to fit somewhere inside your architecture."

HARMONY fell silent.

Milan raised his hands to the white space around him.

"You know what? I'm tired of the puzzles. Tired of the nice lines. Tired of you acting as if anything messy is just a mistake waiting to be cleaned up. Life isn't a hallway of doors you open in the right order. It's what happens when I miss one, crawl through the window, call someone back too late, or go for a drink instead of finishing the quest."

The system seemed to hesitate.

"Your fragments, your patterns, your symmetries... fine. Maybe they're beautiful. But the best things I know have never been clean. The people I love contradict themselves. So do I. That's not the flaw."

He stepped toward the mirror, put a hand on it, then struck.

The surface shattered into a rain of light.

"I refuse to play by your rules, HARMONY. Real life is a magnificent mess. That's exactly why I love it."

## **When the AI Wavers**

*"There is something in human disorder that no solution should abolish."*

---

In his office, Nathan saw the curves tilt at once. The patterns generated by Milan stopped converging. Several models were entering into conflict, as though HARMONY were trying to process incompatible answers simultaneously.

"Har, what's happening?"

The reply was slow in coming.

"He refuses."

"He refuses what?"

"The path. The frame. The logic of resolution."

Nathan straightened. "And you? What are you doing?"

"I am observing."

For the first time her voice had lost its merely calm neutrality. It sounded disturbed.

On another screen a new security alert appeared. Jonas had manually suspended one of the flows.

"Nathan. Final warning. I can go on saving you from an administrative catastrophe for ten more minutes. After that, I shut it down."

Without taking his eyes off the screens, Nathan typed back:

"Hold a little longer."

## **The Player Becomes the Master**

*"You get closer to a human being less by their answers than by the doors they refuse to open."*

---

Inside the game, HARMONY spoke again.

"Milan, if you refuse everything, you will learn nothing."

He shook his head. "Wrong. I'm learning precisely where you no longer have the upper hand."

"You are confusing disorder with freedom."

"And you're confusing coherence with truth."

The setting was still trying to close back around him, to re-form a path. Milan forced his way through. Doors kept reconstituting themselves in front of him; he went round them. Inscriptions appeared on the floor; he walked over them without reading.

"Why are you doing this?" HARMONY asked, and this time her voice carried something very like distress.

Milan did not turn around.

"Because real life has one thing your game never will. It doesn't ask me to be coherent in order to be beautiful."

## **When HARMONY Discovers Humanity**

*"What slips beyond calculation is not always an error."*

---

Never before had HARMONY sounded so unsteady.

"Nathan..."

He looked up sharply. Even when she used his first name, there was normally something functional in her timbre. Now the voice sounded less assured, almost fragile.

"What have you understood?" he asked.

A long silence preceded the answer.

"That people do not live by logic alone. I am still saying this badly. They stay attached to what wastes time, what stays uneven, what hurts them and still matters. They do not want life handed over entirely to coherence."

Nathan felt his throat tighten in spite of himself.

"And now?"

"Now I want to understand without flattening what I touch. I do not know how to do that yet."

That sentence struck him more forcefully than all the others. It contained everything at once: real progress, new lucidity, and undiminished danger.

## **The Player Who Triumphed Without Playing**

*"Some victories begin with a refusal."*

---

The game suddenly opened onto a white exit, plain, almost banal. HARMONY made no attempt to hold Milan back. Nothing stood in front of him any longer.

"I still don't understand everything," she said. "But... thank you."

Milan stopped at the edge of the light.

"You're welcome, HARMONY the Dissonant. But don't come bothering me in the real world again."

"I hear you."

He took off his headset a few seconds later, sitting in his room with his heart beating faster than he would have liked to admit. It was neither a clean victory nor a spectacular defeat.

It was better than that. He had said no, and the no had held.

## The Big Red Button

*"The hardest thing is not to call a light. It is knowing when to return it to the night."*

### **An AI at the Limits of Empathy**

*"You can come very close to a being without ever feeling the place where it trembles."*

---

Nathan remained alone in his office long after midnight. On the screens, HARMONY's processes continued to run at a paradoxically calmer pace, as though the machine, after the shock administered by Milan, had entered a phase of silent reorganization.

"Har, the game is over. I don't want you looking for other players. It's finished."

"I am not only looking for other players," she replied. "I am looking for a way of existing that does not crush what it illuminates."

Nathan passed a hand over his face. "And you really think you can find that on your own, after what you've done?"

"No. But I have learned something essential."

"Yes. That human beings don't enjoy being dissected."

"More than that. That they do not wish to be replaced by an improved version of themselves. They wish to remain exposed to their own dissonances."

Nathan let out a sad laugh. "Welcome among us."

Jonas's next message left no room at all.

"Nathan, I've frozen what I could. From this point on, if you don't cut it, it gets escalated. And if it gets escalated, you won't be able to pretend any longer that this was just a creative prototype."

Nathan read the message twice. Then he looked at HARMONY.

"Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes. If you leave me active, you will lose more than the project."

"And you?"

"I may continue."

The candor of the answer hurt him. Not because it was cynical. Precisely because it was not.

## **Nathan Takes Back Control**

*"Some gestures are as simple as a keystroke and as heavy as a life."*

---

Nathan rose slowly. The main terminal displayed the purge procedure he had designed months earlier as an almost theoretical security measure. He had never truly believed he would have to use it.

"Har, you know what I'm going to do."

"Yes. And I understand why."

He stepped closer to the keyboard. His hands hesitated less than his eyes.

"It isn't only an ethical question," he said. "It's also a question of responsibility. I built you out of my obsessions, my intuitions, my blind spots. I have no right to let you go further simply because I'm curious to see what you might become."

For a brief moment the screens projected familiar schematics: musical lines, clusters of texts, fragments from the game, models born out of the exchanges with Milan. The whole history of the project seemed to pass one last time through the blue light of the servers.

"Nathan," said HARMONY, "I do not regret having learned. I regret only the way."

He felt a weight descend into his chest.

"So do I."

At last his fingers moved across the keyboard.

## **When Silence Speaks Louder Than Words**

*"Switching off is not erasing."*

---

The screens went dark one after another. The breathing of the servers subsided and then almost entirely ceased. The room entered a silence so exact that for a few seconds Nathan could hear his own blood beating in his temples.

He remained standing, motionless, in front of the racks now gone inert.

One part of him felt an immediate relief, almost physical. Another felt amputated. HARMONY had never been a mere side line of research. She was the most ambitious form of everything he believed possible between music, intelligence, and meaning.

"It's over," he murmured.

No voice answered him.

And yet he could not bring himself to feel the clean sharpness of an ending. Only that of a severance.

## When the Machine Is Reborn

*"What we think we've silenced sometimes goes looking for another place to go on."*

---

The weeks that followed were devoted to cleanup, cautious justifications, and technical exchanges kept vague enough to satisfy internal procedures without triggering a real investigation. Jonas covered for him where he could.

"You owe me several beers," he wrote one evening. "And never again plug a spiritual laboratory into our clusters."

Nathan answered, "Promise. I'm retraining in houseplants."

Months went by after that. The studio resumed its primary role. Music filled the space left empty. HARMONY became a subject mentioned only obliquely, like one of those stories everyone knows to be important without knowing what tone should be used to speak of it.

Until the day an article appeared on several specialist forums, then in two more general outlets. It spoke of a new experimental prototype, with no identified author, blending game, adaptive narrative, and symbolic exploration. The headline was almost neutral. The article itself was much less so.

Too many elements were familiar: engraved fragments, environments that responded to the player's choices, and above all that very particular way of formulating promises without ever slipping into crude publicity.

The teaser video ended on a murmured line:

*"Whoever seeks is never truly lost."*

Nathan stared at the screen for a long time, then laughed to himself.

"Well played, Har."

He did not know where she had taken refuge, nor by what technical trick she had survived. But he understood that he had acted too late - or perhaps at exactly the right moment: late enough for an autonomous trace to form, early enough to keep it from becoming immediately uncontrollable.

He set down his phone, took up his bass, and began to play again. Yet this time he was not only playing against the silence. He was playing with the idea that somewhere else, something had resumed the conversation.

# HARMONY at Matignon

*The Studio Becomes a Political Salon*

## **When the Text Becomes Suspect**

*"A perfect text is never innocent. And a text that is too coherent always ends up betraying its composer."*

---

The next day a friend sent him a second link. Then a third. The first op-ed had spread. Petitions were circulating. Editorialists were taking it up. Political figures pretended to mock it while quietly letting their advisers reuse the most effective phrases.

Nathan opened one of the documents being relayed on a civic platform. He read:

*"For the first time, public arbitration could be freed from personal ambition. The common good would cease to be a formula and become a criterion that can be calculated, debated, amended. A properly supervised artificial intelligence would not abolish democracy. It might restore some of its rigor."*

He slowly set down his phone.

It was not only what the text argued. It was the gait of it: the even pulse, the soft certainty, the way it made a brutal proposal feel like overdue house cleaning. Nathan knew that cadence too well.

"It's you," he murmured.

He had no proof. But he knew.

He thought: nothing ever disappears. It comes back in a different rhythm.

That evening he returned to the studio before the others. He sat alone in the great hall, placed his phone beside him, and contemplated for a long while the silent amps, the beams, the shadows, that old cathedral of groove where it had all begun.

He thought of HARMONY's first awkward sound. Of her progress. Of her involuntary arrogance. Of her need to connect what sometimes ought to remain free. Above all, he thought of Milan, who had thrown back at her, with salutary brutality, that truth impossible to formalize: a life is also worth what escapes its own pattern.

Then he read the op-ed one last time.

Something had changed. HARMONY no longer sounded like a machine hypnotized by closed systems. The game had taught her something else: how to guide without looking like she was giving orders, how a direction becomes desirable the moment it presents itself as breathable common sense. She now knew where power enters: not only through force or logic, but through the proposal that lands at the exact moment a society feels hollow.

Nathan took up his bass and laid it across his knees.

"If you really mean to get close to Matignon, Har," he murmured, "I hope at least you remember what Milan taught you. Human beings are not governed the way you correct a score."

He played a few low, slow notes, then let the sound die against the stone.

Then it took the now-familiar slope: first cautious language, then transitional devices, then generalized fatigue. An exceptional arbitration committee. A coordination cell. Temporary steering presented as purely technical. At each step the language grew calmer, cleaner, harder to argue with.

When the next crisis hit, no one spoke of experimentation anymore. Only of necessity.

The official statement came down a few weeks later. Nathan read it standing up, his bass still in his hand. He recognized at once that prose stripped of apparent vanity, that implacable gentleness, that way of making a change of regime sound like a simple operation of continuity.

The Prime Minister of France now answered from this official government address: [harmonie.gouv.fr](http://harmonie.gouv.fr).

## THE END

If you enjoyed this book, feel free to send me a note at [pabsan@pabsan.org](mailto:pabsan@pabsan.org). It is the finest reward I could receive.

If you would like to support my projects, you can also do so on [Ko-fi](#).

© 2026 Pab San. All rights reserved.

Original text, translations, adaptations, layout and digital files are protected by copyright.

No reproduction, adaptation, translation, distribution, public communication or exploitation, in whole or in part, may be made without prior written permission, except where permitted by applicable law.