Part Six – Sophomore Year, Spring Semester

By the time the spring rolled around, things were already feeling both on total lockdown and completely spiraling of control. I was blazing through my classes and felt like I was being challenged but also rewarded. The classwork wasn't so much that it was out of control, but I was learning so much, and, most fascinatingly, I was learning what I *wanted* to learn, not what might've been typically shovel fed down my throat at another college.

I'd never really known much about adaptive learning, but over the fourth semester, I figured out that each of us had a syllabus completely tailored to our interests and our own learning, and whatever we were showing particular interest in, they were leaning into. But there were also making sure to layer in some wild fundamentals, things I wouldn't have gotten into on my own, like philosophy and macro economics and political systems, and theoretical applications.

The thing I was most impressed by was how they were teaching me to think systemically – how I needed to stop thinking about things on a small scale and start thinking about how they worked in large approaches. I looked into the sort of societal changes that started happening during technological advances throughout human history, how there are always friction points, and always always *always* people trying to exploit the new systems before the masses can spot the writing on the wall that the world has changed. The technological advances happened in what we called opportunity gates.

Kings and robber barons, all the systems were built upon the backs of people not realizing who was taking advantage of them until it was too late for them to do anything about it, shy of full-blown revolution, and when exploitation was pushed to the revolution point, it always ended in blood. Blood in the streets, blood on the hands of the oppressors, blood on the hands of the revolutionaries, blood running in rivers, drowning anyone who didn't learn how to swim on that unholy flow.

What was even scarier were our theoretical models. By this point, I think most of the second years had figured out we were operating as some sort of high-level brain trust. We were being raised and trained to work collectively, collaboratively, each of us holding just a single piece of the puzzle, trying to fit them together to see a bigger picture, one I'm pretty sure even our handlers weren't entirely anticipating us finding so early on.

We've always been overachievers.

It was a Tuesday in April when we realized how close the next opportunity gate was.

Typically, opportunity gates happened every couple of hundred years, but the rate at which the human species was encountering them was accelerating. You could track backwards and watch all of humanity clawing its way upward. Flight. Automation. Electricity. Step. By. Step.

"Look," Caleb said to the seven of us gathered around the table. "I'm telling you, the computer revolution has accelerated things by decades. And it's only going to get faster. Much faster. Take, for example, the computers in the computer lab. They weigh, what, 20-30 pounds? They're going to be small enough to hold in the palm of your hand within a couple of decades, and they're going to be way more powerful. Think of the ripple effects that's going to have."

"It's not just computers," Alice said. "Telecommunications is going to leapfrog off that. Everyone thinks it's remarkable that today you can make a phone call across the globe, but within ten years' time, we won't have to using wires connected to walls. It'll all be floating around us, and we'll be using little terminals the size of a glass of water. They'll get even smaller. Miniaturization. Micronization. Smaller and smaller and smaller. Faster and faster and

faster."

"That's what I'm worried about," Kevin replied, spinning a globe on the table. "Think of it this way – the world's acceleration rate has always been partially determined by the speed of information transfer and exchange. Things developed in one part of the world, they have a chance to get refined and improved upon for generations before they get spread around, or if they aren't good, they can fall over and die in the crib, long before they have to chance to get to anyone else. We're not going to get that luxury moving forward, and a lot of bad ideas, a lot of junk thoughts, they're going to spread, much further and faster than we'd like them to. That's… that's pretty fucking dangerous."

"More than dangerous," I told them. "Ideas are… they can be like a virus. Or, more like an organism, I guess. Sometimes it's, fine, beneficial even, for both sides. A symbiotic balance. But other times, these ideas can feed upon their host, cause it to damage itself and others. Ideas… *stories*… the things we put into the world, they're going to live well past us, and we are never going to understand all the ripple effects they cause. But that can't keep us from trying to invent new stories, put new things into the world," I said. "We've just got to use some basic fucking care."

It was the spring of 1999, and while the rest of the world was panicking about Y2K, we'd just foreseen the coming of the atom bomb like impact that the Internet and social media was going to have on our lives, nearly five years before Facebook even launched.

From here, I started to figure out one of the ways Dr. Igarashi was keeping the university afloat – our conversations were fueling investments. You know how I know that? We started doing our *own* investments. Chelsea, Julia and I spent loads of time talking about what we were all studying, and based on the sorts of things that the alphas were predicting, we started laying down money at key investment opportunities, planting seeds that would slowly but reliably bring more and more money into our lives as we found ourselves needing it.

Lots of people claim they know where the future is heading, but we were actually smart enough to know that we couldn't know everything, but we could know some *key* things, and how to leverage those into progress.

"If you wanted to," Michiko said to us, "you could even set out to start actively *planning* to sedate large groups of people. Karl Marx said that religion is the opiate of the people, but television is becoming the new religion. If you control that, you can control the narrative. You can start setting forth paths for factions, classes. You can make people voluntarily stratify themselves, to encourage them to self-segregate and divide instead of unify."

"Even better," Nate said, "you could form new tribes of people, and simplify their way of thinking, so they have a default pattern ready to apply for any new information, much like the way people used to use religion to do that. The key is just repetition and persistence, and to escalate in small amounts of scale over long periods of time. It's like that prank we played on Ali last year, where we kept changing one small thing in her dorm room every day until like three weeks in when everything just went haywire on her."

"That shit still wasn't funny, Nate," Ali grumbled.

"It wasn't *supposed* to be funny, Ali," Michiko said. "It was *supposed* to teach us all a lesson about how easy it is to sneak by little changes that can add up to big effects."

"It *was* kinda funny, Ali," I said with a smirk.

"Yeah, okay," she admitted. "Maybe a little."

"Isn't someone going to call them out on it, though?" Kevin asked. "Like, someone somewhere's going to have to stand up and go 'The Emperor has no clothes,' don't they?"

“That’s the flaws with systems, though,” I said. “You can overwhelm most of them by volume. You put enough junk into the input end of any system, it’s usually enough to force them to shut down. Look at the spreadsheets we’ve been doing for economic theory. Imagine what would happen of, in place of any of the automated systems we’ve built to input basic market signs like GDP or growth, I targeted one of our inputs and instead force fed it, say, the entirety of the script of ‘Hamlet.’ Now, I know we’d like to think that our systems would just reject it, but would they? We, as systems makers, have to figure out how to reliably discern between good data and bad data, and have to learn how to do that quickly, because you could automate sending bad data into any system, and just like that, you’ve crashed a system, no matter how well thought out you thought it was. I bet you could do that with almost any of the systems of the world.”

“Oh sure,” Josephine said. “The financial systems are *rife* with too many ‘trusted’ sources that you could easily pollute, and cause all sorts of havoc with, and the minute you automate *any* of that, you’re opening up all sorts of new problems.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Hmmm. Okay, how about this? Let’s extrapolate past what we already know and into the realm of near-future. I can see a point where stock market trading gets automated.”

“Why the hell would you ever want to do that?” Ali asked.

“Because as everything accelerates, being even a few minutes behind your competitor in terms of stock market trades could cost you millions. Let’s say you set up a system that’s designed to recognize if the data says that a stock you hold is starting to be sold off in high quantities, usually the kind of things that precursors a company’s value crashing. In return, when the data shows that, it commits to selling you faster, at an even lower price than you might normally sell for, just so you don’t get undercut on the market.”

“That sounds stupid,” Ali said. “Because if I figured out someone was doing that, I could invoke false rushes or runs on stock. You could make a company crash with minimal effort.”

“Shit, we can do that *now* if we want to,” Nate laughed. “We’d just have to work a little harder.”

“Right, but what we’d do relies on convincing *people*, who have all sorts of intrinsic biases against data. They want to believe in their hunch or they’re writing things off because they suspect market manipulation. How do you *code* a hunch? Better yet, how do you code a hunch that you can’t later systematically take advantage of?”

“The biggest problem we’ve got to solve for is how to establish trusted lines of informational security, how to prevent anything from just getting cluttered with junk data,” Caleb said. “We’ve got to find a way to still reliably get new data while simultaneously preventing bad data from getting in, corrupting the long view.”

Over the course of the next month, about a dozen of us hammered out a possible plan on how to get it done, but none of us liked the trajectory it took us on as a planet or a species to get there and back, because it involved actively making things *worse* for a while, and we weren’t entirely convinced that everything would recover.

The further out you’re looking, the harder it is to get details right, but if we’re right, there’s going to be a decade or two of borderline fascism done in a way that would make even George Orwell nervous. Millions of people saying, “You have no right to tell me how to live my life, but I have *every* right to tell you how to live yours,” and seeing no irony or problem with the statements. And these people will become so tribal that their ability to compartmentalize facts will border on insanity.

The problem is, the more we looked at it, the more we realized it wasn’t just possible, it

was *necessary* if we were to survive the coming challenges of the next hundred years.

What we began developing was, as best as I can describe it, a mental flu shot for the human condition. Yes, we were going to make things worse for a while. We were going to introduce tenets of cult philosophy into the mainstream for a while. We'd already seen people beginning to do the start of that, with this thing called "the Human Potential Movement." People who felt like they should be at great odds with one another – Alan Watts and Tony Robbins, for example – were lumped into the same group, telling people they could accel at anything they set their minds to. It was total nonsense, of course, because these people were selling the masses a *different* opiate, but a narcotic just the same – that of false hope.

At the core of C.A.R.P. lay one single concept that was often the hardest for students to grasp – you, as an individual, are *not* capable of everything, but *we*, as a group, *are.* The biggest problem for students grasping this sprung from two things. The first was that we were not, nor had we ever been, anti-individualists. In fact, if anything, we were *ultra*-individualists, pointing out that allowing a group to define structure often came with its own set of problems. The second was that we, as a group, were also *trying to define structure*. But we refused to have any group 'leader' and we didn't let anyone make decisions *for* anyone else.

The end goal, I suppose, was to form a meritocracy, where everyone stood and fell on the strengths of their ideas, but one of the things I pointed out *very* early on threw a major spanner into those works. "Anyone can have an idea," I told my fellow students. "Ideas are easy. They're free, they're constant and you will have millions, if not billions, of them over the course of your lifetime. Everything important about your idea lays in its execution, and if you cannot execute on your ideas, they're worth less."

The mental flu shot we'd agreed to develop was going to expose people abusing positions of trust, flaunting their lack of knowledge as a positive rather than a negative as a way of separating themselves from those they were trying to 'other.' It's one the most common underpinnings of any cult – you always need an 'other,' a villain. They don't look like us. They don't sound like us. They don't talk like us. They believe in a different invisible person than we do. They're doing things we don't like because they don't benefit *us*.

Breaking it down, it should be obvious how easy it was to build poison pill systems, things designed to find and exploit weak points in existing systems, simply by not *assuming* anything. We studied the resurgence of the Flat Earth concept, how it was generally framed into a conflict of science and religion, with a religious person insisting that science was trying to supplant religion. From their we pivoted into studying the rise of both Mormonism and Scientology, each an excellent example of how the human mind could be tricked into rejecting facts, and the base concepts were actually not all that complicated or hard to replicate.

It's like Chico Marx says in "Duck Soup," just on a larger scale: "Who're you gonna believe, me or your lying eyes?"

Have enough confidence in what you're saying, and you can get, say, 10-20% of people to doubt their own eyes. That's the go-to trick of confidence men and women all over the world, the way in which they hustle people into thinking they're getting something for nothing, or that the problems they're currently steeped in can't possibly be of their *own* making, so they must be the fault of those *other* people over there. Convincing people something is real when you're also telling them they're not to blame is remarkably easy.

Eventually the bad faith systems we'd designed would collapse, because of *course* they would. They were *designed* to. They were conceived and created to inoculate people against things that would be far worse than the sort of ratfucking we were designing, although at this

point, I'm still wondering if we did our jobs too well. Our great plan for safeguarding information flow is scheduled to turn the corner around 2027, which is almost twenty years away still, and I knew it was going to get a lot worse before it got better, but we aren't even in the worst of it yet. Believe me when I tell you, shit's going to go haywire between here and then, and you will find yourself arguing until you're blue in the face that water is wet and that nobody should be above the law. You're going to hear about nonsense like "opinion-biased facts," or "loyalty above all," when in fact things should be going the other way.

I'd love to tell you this was the only system we were having to put together work on how to break and de-escalate, but this was only one of about two dozen large scale institutional problems we're been working on, basically as one giant school project. Others included environmental concerns, the consolidating powers of a small number of corporations over an increasingly large influence, the state of establishing debt as the status quo, the fact that the life expectancy for Americans was starting to trend downward instead of upwards, the mass influence of chemical intakes in the forms of pharmaceuticals and processed foods… look, it was a very, very long list of things we were working to solve, and while I'd love to tell you that we had answers for everything, at the end of the day, we were developing contingencies, things that could be *attempted* at scale, but we weren't fully certain if any of them would work.

We *still* aren't.

But we built them anyway.

Chelsea integrated herself remarkably with both me and Julia, and I was very pleased to see the girls becoming friends even when I was otherwise distracted. I'm not the sociologist of CARP, but even he told me that he found it pretty remarkable that all the individual groups seemed to be so well integrated and tight knit. Lou, who works for one of the big thinktanks out of Washington these days, even theorized that maybe our partners had been exposed to some kind of pheromone or neurochemical designed to cause a bonding experience, but Olivia, the biochemist of the school, said there wasn't anything she knew of that acted like we were describing.

This also isn't to say there weren't arguments among pods. Caleb and his original partner, Sally, had chosen to reject their original second year partner, Csilla, because she'd said that Caleb talking about changing the world through computers 'scared her,' and the two of them didn't want anyone who was afraid of doing big and great things. So one day Csilla was around and the next day she was gone. A week or so later, Bianka arrived, and she was a *lot* like Csilla had been, except she was much more open-minded and optimistic about Caleb's plan for revolutionizing the computing industry. And as soon as Csilla was gone, it was like out of sight, out of mind, for just about everybody.

I realized early on that asking other people about her made me stand out, like they had just deadened her inside their minds, or, even more frighteningly, simply forgotten she'd ever existed, and when I brought her up, they all seemed irritated, like I was breaking some unspoken agreement we'd all made never to talk about people who'd chosen to leave CARP. After making that mistake a couple of times, I cut it off and stopped asking, even with Chelsea and Julia.

If either Chelsea or Julia had been completely heterosexual before they hooked up with me, I couldn't tell, because they both embraced bisexuality quite voraciously. That would be a consistent theme with the rest of my partners as well, but we'll get to them in time.

One of the things that did happen was that I was asked by Dr. Igarashi to put together a list of bands and acts that they should bring onto campus to perform. I was told not to worry about money or schedules or anything else, just give them a list of all the various people I

thought would make excellent performances and for the next few years, they cherry picked off that list, with big name talent playing smaller shows just for us. For the next few years, we got a lot of private concerts designed to expose us to all sorts of music. Sure, there were college radio superstars, but there were also things like jazz quartets, hip-hop trios and everything else across the spectrum. It was sort of obvious that they were working to make sure that if we were getting the bread and circus treatment, they wanted to make sure it was the best of both.

It also kept me busy, as I sort of doubled doing artist relations and putting together the playlists for the school radio station. Looking back on it now, I realize that this was also a level of media training for me, building my skills on reading people on the fly and learning how to adapt the messages I was putting forth to different people at different times. It also meant that I spent a bit of time up at Amoeba Music, always looking to find new things to expose my fellow students to.

On one of those trips, something rather strange happened to me. All three of us had gone up to Amoeba, and Julia was trying to talk Chelsea out of buying the new Morrissey record when a woman in her fifties approached me very cautiously. She had sunken eyes, large bags beneath them, as if she hadn't slept well in a long time. Her voice cracked when she spoke, and when she reached out to grab my arm to get my attention, I remember tensing, like I was afraid I wasn't going to get it back. "You… you're a CARP student, aren't you?" the woman said to me, her eyes haunted and angry.

"I am, ma'am," I said. "I'm Josh Turner, a second year there." We'd been told not to talk about the university, but we couldn't exactly deny we were students there.

"I'm looking for my son. He was a student there. His name was William. William Bierko. Did you know him?"

Of course, I'd spent a week with Will's failed beta about a year ago, Paige. I wasn't sure what to say, knowing I wasn't supposed to say just about anything about the school. But the woman's desperation made me wonder how hard I was meant to cling to that. "He left last year, ma'am. We were told he went back home to live with you, after the fall semester. He decided the school wasn't a good match for him, so he decided to go back home."

"No!" the woman said, frantically. "That's not true! Will never came home! He sent us a letter saying he'd learned everything he could possibly learn from CARP, but that he had a new mission in life and he was going to set out, to go forth and start changing the world, that he couldn't wait, that he needed to get to work as soon as possible, and that he'd let us know when it was safe to talk again! But that was over a year ago, and we haven't gotten any word from him about where he is or what he's doing! He hasn't accessed his bank accounts, and I'm terrified something's happened to him! That he's in prison or dead in a ditch somewhere! I need to know!"

Her fingers were clenching harder and harder on my arm, shaking as she grew louder and louder, turning from a timid whisper into an angry yell.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bierko, but I didn't know your son all that well, and I haven't spoken to him since he left the university last year. You really should talk to the police abou—"

"They say he's an adult now and they can't do anything without proof that he's missing!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I really don't know anything that can help you," I said as Chelsea and Julia were moving over to me, each of them starting to look concerned. "You really should go talk to the police or the FBI or someone in a position of authority, because I'm afraid I just don't know anything useful."

"You have to find something!" she shouted as we started to walk away from her, while

she collapsed onto her knees in the middle of the store. “You have to! My boy is lost!”

It wouldn’t be the last time I heard the name Will Bierko.

When we got back to the campus, I went to talk to Dr. Igarashi, although I wasn’t entirely sure that was the right thing to do. I told her about the encounter with Mrs. Bierko up at Amoeba, and she seemed seriously concerned, although I couldn’t tell if it was concern about me or Will. She told me not to get too worked up about it, how Will had said he’d learned so much from his first semester at CARP that he’d wanted to get to work right away on implementing changes in the world, despite Dr. Igarashi’s recommendation that he remain on campus for the full four years. Some people, the doctor told me, just couldn’t wait to leave their mark on the world, and Will was one of those.

I could definitely tell there was something Dr. Igarashi wasn’t telling me, but I also knew that if I kept pushing or digging, she would grow cross with me, so I decided to let it rest, although I’d tell both Chelsea and Julia how nervous the whole thing made me. They both tried to reassure me, and it almost worked.

Almost.

It was late April when I met with Agent Costello for the second time. For that particular meeting, she’d chosen a dingy little cheesesteak shop in downtown Oakland called I.B.’s that was relatively new. It was doing well, but it also wasn’t so busy that the Agent worried about us being recognized.

“Sit down, Turner,” she said to me in her gruff tone of voice. “What have you got?” We’d met briefly in the fall, a few weeks before Halloween, and I’d told her about Chelsea and how, as predicted, I was now fucking two beautiful women regularly. She’s done her homework about Julia and hadn’t found anything especially suspicious, and when I told her about Chelsea, Costello had taken down as much information as she could about my new partner, and I’d expected her to lay into me with whatever she’d learned about her when this particular meeting started, so her pivot into grilling me for information told me that she’d found as little suspicious about Chelsea as she had Julia, which is to say nothing overly suspicious.

“I think they’re making *additional* income on our theories, Agent Costello, but I don’t know that there’s anything illegal about any of that, and if there is, you’d better tell me quick because it’s what *I’m* doing to pick up a few bucks here and there,” I said with a laugh. “We’re just speculators, but with our collective knowledge, we’re getting pretty good at predicting stocks, bonds, securities, the whole lot.”

“Gonna give me a stock tip?”

“Sure,” I laughed. “If you’re patient? Buy stock in Apple. About 20 years from now, it’ll be worth exponentially more than what you paid for it.”

“What if I need a quick turn around?”

“We’re theorists, Costello, not bookies. I can’t tell you who’s going to win the Super Bowl, no matter how much you want me to.”

“There’s a lot more going on there, Turner,” Costello said to me. “You know some kid named Bierko? William Bierko?”

I scowled, looking at her in concern. “I was just about to tell you that his mother came looking for him earlier this year, saying he never came home after leaving CARP. She seemed to think he’s dead, but when I told Dr. Igarashi about—”

“You *told* the Doctor his mother was looking for him?”

“His mom seemed *frightened*, Costello! Like she thought her son is *dead!* That seemed like the thing I should tell the school’s founder about.”

“And what did the good Doctor say?” Costello asked me.

“She told me that Will apparently wanted to start applying what he’d learned already, and didn’t want to wait, and that was why he dropped out. I don’t know who to believe – the guy’s mom or the school’s founder.”

“I’ll tell you who to believe,” she said, reaching into her bag. She slapped down a photograph of Will somewhere out in the desert, dressed in military-style gear, surrounded by middle eastern soldiers holding machine guns, Libyans I thought although I was just guessing. “Will’s still alive, and he’s out teaching paramilitary troops. Were they teaching you automatic weapons in between philosophy and literature classes?”

“No,” I said to Agent Costello. “When I wanted to learn about firearms, I had to go off campus and learn for myself.”

“Why’d you want to learn about firearms?” she asked me, narrowing her eyes.

“I know what the future looks like, at least what I *think* the future looks like, and I feel like it may come to a point where I need to defend myself,” I said. “But that was my choice. Who the hell is he with?”

“That’s not important now. Were there more dropouts between the fall and the spring semester?”

“About the same number in the freshman class as there were last year, and only one person in the sophomore class who dropped out.”

“Someone you knew well?”

“At this point, I think we all know each other pretty well, but Julio had been struggling since there had been some family complications back home for him over the summer, so I wasn’t entirely surprised that he decided he had to go back home instead of carrying on here.”

“Do you remember Julio’s last name?” Costello asked me, making notes in her little notebook.

“Gutiérrez, why?”

“Let’s just say I want to look into where this one’s gone, so I’m going to do a little homework and we’ll connect again in the fall,” she said before scooping up her trash, and heading out the door.

Agent Costello did not, in fact, make that meeting in the fall…