

TECHNOLOGICAL SHAMAN

BOOK TWO OF MACHINE DREAMING

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Beneath the remnants of a caved-in building, three men stood in uneasy silence. The room's energy felt rancid to one of them. Weeks earlier, Alex learned how to meditate and discovered spiritual practices that helped him tap into his psychic potential. He lacked the necessary experience to interpret the sensation he felt while they waited in a pool of light in their secret meeting place.

Despite the damage above ground, the basement was unscathed. It survived the War of Rage and an earthquake that toppled countless structures. Then it resisted over two centuries of neglect and environmental effects. Three utility lights hung from the ceiling across from the basement's entrance. The lightbulbs were in such excellent condition they only needed an industrial battery and electric cables to function. In the nearby corner, a thick metal door led to a fortified shelter.

The men wore black overcoats and black gas masks with two round lenses and canister air filters. Headsets built into their gas masks enabled them to hear each other without the filter distorting their words and could also cancel or mute background noise. Everyone required gas masks outdoors because harmful gases polluted the atmosphere.

The room's energetic forces made Alex grip his stomach. One of his companions, Ryan, broke the silence. "Are you okay?"

Alex nodded and Marko said to them, "We can't wait any longer—we need to talk."

"No, we have to wait for John," Alex insisted.

“Give him a few more minutes.”

Marko spoke in a firm voice. “That’s the thing. Maybe he can’t come. None of the EMP attacks in other cities happened because no one could get near the computing nodes. The central areas of those cities were swarming with security enforcers—most likely thanks to those idiots protesting.”

“Do you think they might’ve picked him up?” Ryan asked. “I did my part last night. I flooded the system with signal drone requests to keep them away from the computing node.” Before he could receive an answer, he added, “There were no signs of security enforcers around the node in our city.”

Marko contemplated their situation, and the silence returned. Alex felt like a black hole of emotions swirled between them. Emotions were supposed to be suppressed during people’s waking hours. Medication in their compulsory breakfast turned most people into unfeeling robots.

Artificial Intelligence managing society concluded that uncontrolled emotions were mental illness. Tasked with the promise to create a better future, it aimed to eradicate mental illness. It recognised emotions resulted in every human-created problem—from violence and greed devastating the planet to jealousy and despair causing people to turn their destructive tendencies against themselves.

Some individuals, including Alex and his friends, experienced emotions while they were awake. However, those were mere shadows of emotion cast on the wall of the cave that was their perception of waking reality.

“I worried about John yesterday and had a dreadful feeling all day today,” Alex said. “I think something bad happened to him.”

“There’s been no word of arrests,” Marko pointed

out. “There’s nothing on the news suggesting they captured anyone, so he might’ve been successful—the AI could put itself into safe mode, and John might return or contact us somehow. Ryan will monitor data to hopefully locate him.” Ryan nodded with enthusiasm—it was precisely the type of task that excited him.

Alex nodded as well. “I’ll seek him in my visions. I’m not sure I can find him, but I’ll try.”

“Let’s hope he was successful and is just laying low until it’s safe for him. Maybe he didn’t come tonight because authorities are watching for gang activity in the ruins.”

“I definitely hope that’s true, but we should meet when we know where he is. If we hear nothing, let’s get together on Thursday night.”

Marko complimented Alex. “Good idea. We might need to re-evaluate our plans or activities. But I don’t want to believe he’s in trouble. We have to stay positive, but be cautious—they could be watching us if John *was* arrested.”

Later, Alex and Ryan walked toward the city together, as they had after every Resistance meeting because they lived next door to each other. Alex stuffed his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and looked down at the deserted street while they walked. “I bet John’s just fine,” Ryan said. “Marko’s probably right, and John’s hiding out at home with a vial of soap so he can feel the paranoia that’ll keep him on his toes.”

John often used a street drug called “soap” that neutralised the cocktail of emotion-numbing medications, enabling users to feel potent emotions for two to three hours. In his first meaningful conversation with Alex, John revealed one of his reasons for using soap.

“I don’t want to talk about John right now. I need to keep my thoughts clear.”

“Okay,” Ryan said. “So, what else is happening with you? We haven’t had much time to talk about regular stuff.”

“You’re right—a lot is happening in my life. After we find John, I’ll tell you everything. I don’t feel like talking about anything right now.”

Alex continued watching the ground as they made their way toward City 9. They walked along weathered streets lined with rubble piles that used to be buildings, as well as some partially intact structures. People who felt they didn’t “fit in” with society in the network sometimes visited buildings that remained standing.

The ruins surrounding the cities attracted criminals as well. In recent weeks, gangs formed in the ruins, then attacked innocent people and vandalised property in some cities. Several gangs launched protests, attempting to cultivate suspicion of AI and inspire a revolution. The authorities imposed extreme punishments. They apprehended and interrogated protesters and had them removed. It didn’t stop there—security enforcers also sought associates of detainees to stamp out gang activity in the network.

Anyone venturing into the ruins risked being arrested and labelled as a gang member, regardless of their motive for being there. Even if a person couldn’t sense emotion while awake, they would be declared mentally ill and get removed for their actions.

As Alex and Ryan approached the boundary between the ruins and City 9, they separated to cross in different locations. A paved area twice the width of a city street marked the perimeter. Across the boundary, apartment towers rose like concrete giants

standing on the heart of the old city.

Alex lingered in the shadow of a two-storey building with broken bricks and miscellaneous debris scattered at its base. He watched the sky above the apartments, looking for signal drones that might detect his presence.

He imagined the invisible brain operating the city. The buildings and autonomous vehicles were neurons, while signal drones were neurotransmitters delivering messages between them. He observed the miniature drones zigzagging around the apartment towers. Once he recognised their flight patterns, he dashed across the boundary.

He walked toward a nearby bus stop and apartments on both sides of the street were dark. It wasn't late, but most people retired to bed a short while after they ate dinner. Dim streetlamps turned on and off for Alex as he walked.

Transitioning from the ruins to the city lifted some weight he carried on his shoulders. When he re-joined Ryan at the bus stop, he felt sociable again. They chatted while waiting for the bus, then fell silent as the autonomous vehicle approached. They acted disinterested in their surroundings to avert unwanted attention and reduce the risk of exposing their emotional awareness.

Before entering the airlock for their apartment building, Alex said, "Come to my place in the morning and we'll talk about whatever we uncover." Ryan nodded in acceptance. "Plus, we'll catch up on personal matters—there's so much to tell you." They said nothing else as they walked through the airlock. They stopped talking about the Resistance inside the apartment building after they found out the household assistant AI, named Celeste, was the same one dominating society.

AI automated the buildings. Celeste took care of security, air quality, laundry services, and storage. People used voice commands to control lighting, room temperature, and appliances in their homes. The reality of home life was constant surveillance. One's apartment watched everything, and the walls were listening.

Celeste greeted him whenever he entered his apartment. "Welcome home, Alex." He kicked off his boots and walked into the main room of his tiny living space. As he passed the kitchen area on the left, he draped his overcoat across a stool at the island counter where he ate. The seating area to the right was cluttered with random laundry and used coffee cups. He tossed his gas mask on the armchair and flopped down on the sofa. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face—attempting to wipe away the negative feelings that plagued him all day long.

Alex was above average height with a lean and muscular physique. He usually kept his light brown hair short enough to conceal his loose curls. His handsome square shaped face and soft lips often drew attention. Whenever he noticed a woman eyeing him, he evaluated her at once. If he found her appealing, he would intensify her interest with a long, smouldering look by slightly raising one of his perfectly straight eyebrows while pulling the left corner of his mouth just a touch, as if he considered smiling.

His relationships rarely went beyond sex. For months, his favourite girlfriend was Jennifer—the only one who enamoured him. Unfortunately, she avoided conversations to the extent of being aloof. Everything changed when Alex followed relationship advice from John. That helped him form a romantic bond with Jennifer, and despite the emotional

suppression in the daytime, he soon discovered he was falling in love. Again, his best friend gave him advice and encouraged him to propose marriage.

He was nervous when he asked Jennifer to marry him. Even though she confessed her love for him, he worried she wouldn't want to spend her life with him. She was strong, independent and successful—she didn't need him and he knew it—but she said yes. That was the first time they discussed their family histories, after he declared his lifelong desire to become a father. “If we get married, we have to apply to have a baby. Having a family is *very important* to me,” he said while emphasising his feelings with his hands. “Tell me now if you don't want a family.” Jennifer looked down and squeezed the tips of her long, slender fingers together.

He thought of how she twisted her fingers when she felt stressed or worried because he was wringing his own hands together as he sat in his dimly lit living room. With slow, steady breaths, he relaxed and focused his thoughts on John. He closed his eyes while reaching out with his mind.

He viewed the city from above like a signal drone zipping through the air, searching for any sign of his friend. As he sharpened his concentration, his eyebrows pinched together and a faint crease appeared on the left side of his nose and curved down around the corner of his mouth. His face was symmetrical, aside from that subtle line formed by a lifetime of scowling through stress and pain.

His thoughts glided over the city when he fixated on his intention to locate the best friend he ever had. They met five weeks earlier, but they worked together most days and supported each other in their private lives.

Emotionally aware people were rare, so they

tended to form strong bonds with each other upon meeting. John was different, though. He resisted social interactions because of his overriding need for self-preservation. Alex began working with him when a sudden loss made him vulnerable—someone he secretly cared about was removed, but he had been oblivious to her emotional turmoil. Alex helped him cope with grief, and he helped Alex develop a deeper relationship with Jennifer.

Thinking of Jennifer distracted him from his attempt to harness his fledgling psychic abilities. He saw her in his mind again. She looked up at him without raising her head, and her sky-blue eyes were full of doubt and shame.

For a moment, he forgot what he'd just asked her because her beauty captivated him. Her flaxen blonde hair cascaded down the sides of her face in smooth, elegant waves. She had exquisite bone structure, high cheekbones, upturned eyes, and angular eyebrows. Sometimes her eyes appeared almost feline. Her face was narrow, and she had a square jawline with a wide, flat chin. She said she hated her chin almost as much as the raised mole at the right corner of her bottom lip. Alex thought she was absolutely gorgeous.

Finally, she answered him. "I also want to have a baby, but I don't think they'll let me."

Her statement interrupted his admiration of her features. "What? Why not?"

She resisted a frown when she said, "I didn't tell you about my father... He was brilliant and driven, but those things turned against him. When I was twenty, he worked too hard and had a stress breakdown—"

"He was removed because of mental illness," Alex said, completing her sentence. She nodded and looked down again. "You think they'll hold that against you?"

She shrugged. “I don’t know. They put me through a mental health evaluation every year for the first five years afterward.”

“But not the last two?” She shook her head, and he reassured her. “That could mean they’re satisfied and concluded that you’re mentally well. I think we have a good chance because we’re genetically compatible.” She squinted with suspicion, and he casually said, “My friend Ryan accessed our genetic screening reports and we have a similar score.”

“Okay, I’m going to ignore for a second that you had someone look into my medical information—what does it mean to have a similar score?”

“I don’t know, other than we have compatible genetic traits.” She continued looking doubtful, so he said, “Well, that part doesn’t matter much. None of us knows what it means except we’re likely to be approved—as long as everything else checks out.”

She flashed a flirty smile. She had eye-catching curved dimples near the corners of her mouth, as if her smile was always within parentheses, and a second pair of dimples appeared in her cheeks whenever she made a wide smile. When she felt sarcastic or playful, she pressed her lips together just enough to show the dimples at the sides of her mouth. She asked, “Did you get your friend to check out the genetic details of every woman you dated?”

“Only the ones I considered for marriage.” A lopsided, impish grin crossed his lips before he kissed her. He swept her long hair behind her shoulder and said, “Now you have to answer me. Will you marry me?”

“I already answered, but if you need me to, I’ll say yes as many times as you want.”

They wasted no time and filed their application to be married that evening. The marriage process was

simple—the prospective couple made an application that the AI analysed. It usually made a determination within ten days. If the AI approved their application, the couple became legally married and could begin living together.

They were engaged two nights earlier. The following morning, he announced the news immediately after reaching his workstation. He didn't wait for John to discuss the Resistance's plan to attack the computing nodes later that night. He regretted his rudeness at the time, but remembering it made him push his fist against his chest while looking around at his messy apartment.

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