



**Cues:**

*Title:* The Back Room

*Dialogue:* To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.

**The Back Room**

*1477 words, excluding title*

“So... serious question: what is art to a cabbage?”

Jane closed her eyes and counted to five.

“Krys... I’m trying to work on this.”

He leaned back, feet on desk, and tossed his stylus idly from one hand to the other. “You’re always working on that thesis. When can I see it?”

“When it’s done. Why do you even want to?”

“Employ your time in improving yourself through other men’s writings. Socrates. Hey, Sewell!” A translucent white screen appeared in Krys’ eyeline, a black cursor blinking in the top left corner. Typing had long since vanished, but the cursor still hung over, reminding of times past. “How long’s she been working on that thesis?”

“802 hours, 16 minutes and 32 seconds while on museum property.”

“Cheers.” Kryz waved the screen away and looked at her meaningfully.

Jane put her head down again.

This should have been the perfect job. Sewell did everything in the museum – she and Kryz were like the cursor, still there only to make people feel comfortable. The museum employed art students just so visitors knew that human staff were there. The pay was lousy, but it covered the rent, and it meant she had all day to work on her thesis.

Which she was going to submit soon.

Honest.

Just as soon she stopped dreaming about Professor Fogerty’s sneer as he read the first page.

And as soon as Kryz could go more than four minutes without talking.

“But seriously, the cabbage.”

Jane looked up, defeated. “Cabbage?”

“I was reading this thing. Saying how the test of sentience is whether a species makes art. Like the cave paintings, that was when we stopped being walking monkeys and started being thinking people. Guy was saying, that’s how we know no other animals are actually sentient. But I was thinking, how would we know what art was to a cabbage? Or a crow? Maybe their nests are art.”

Jane shook her head. “Nests have function. Art doesn’t need function. It’s about interpretation, reaction. That’s why it’s art.”

“So maybe they do something else. Maybe it’s about how they fly, or which tree they sit in, or...”

Jane creased her forehead. “I don’t see how that’s art.”

“Of course you don’t.” Kryz jabbed his stylus toward her, in the manner of one making a decisive point. “You’re not a crow.”

Jane sighed, and shut down her thesis doc. “I’m going to go check the servers again.”

This definitely shouldn’t be part of her job.

She wasn’t interested in technology. She was interested in art. She would walk the galleries before closing the museum down every evening, almost crying when she saw the same subject translated into hundreds of different works.

But checking the servers was just an excuse. She often came to the back room when Kryz started to prove too much. Something about sitting among the chrome army of server racks, the spring-like warmth and the stoned-beehive hum always seemed to calm her down.

It was, though, a good one; last night – again – some of the painting spotlights had switched themselves on for no reason, and the personalised viewing routes given to each visitor had begun to act strangely, sending people in long spirals to view pieces that sat in adjacent rooms.

Kryz thought it was a hacker. Jane thought it was a weird thing for a hacker to do, but maybe there was some fifteen-year-old script kiddie trying to make a point.

She looked around at the rows of equipment. Weird to think she was sitting in the brain of a computer that probably cost more than the building itself. Sewell’s cables and fibres were wired into every camera, every sensor, every screen, and they all came back here.

And nothing gave the slightest indication anything was wrong. The lights along the chrome army of server racks all gleamed green.

“Sewell, show me the system activity logs from last night.” A string of numbers flowed down the screen, almost identical, until they weren’t. “Stop.” There. A Titian, in the Robesburg Bequest gallery. Two of the three spotlights had come on, for twenty-seven seconds. “What’s up with you, Sewell?”

The numbers vanished. ‘Please clarify question’ flashed up in their place.

Krys was already in when she arrived the next morning, his feet up on his desk, flicking through a doc that hung in the air in front of him.

“This is really good,” he said.

“Uh-huh.” Somewhere nearby there was coffee, she could smell it.

“Yeah, I mean really good. I mean, when you started on about art basically being conscious dreaming I thought it was stretching, but it’s actually a really good way to think about it.”

Somewhere in Jane’s caffeine-starved brain, a connection was made.

“You’re reading. My thesis.”

“Yeah, well you left it open. Didn’t realise it when I started, but then I got curious, so – ”

“You’re reading. My thesis.”

Krys put his head on one side. “Um. Yeah. Thought I covered that part.”

Jane backhanded furiously through the floating doc, causing Krys to push his chair backward in surprise.

“Hey!”

“Then stop reading it! That’s private! Why do you think I’d ever want you to... I just... Christ!”

Krys put up his hands. “It was just open, I just – ”

“It was not!”

“Well, yeah, it was. Check the logs.”

Sewell obediently brought up the night’s logs for the office. Sure enough, her thesis doc flickered to life again, about an hour before Krys had appeared that morning.

Jane slumped into a chair. “What’s up with this damn computer?”

“I’ve requested a tech. Doubt he’ll find anything the last three didn’t, but...”

“Yeah.”

Krys brought over some coffee, black and sweet as candy, just as she liked it. “Look, I’m sorry, OK? I just saw it open and figured you wouldn’t mind. But I mean it, it’s really good. How did you come up with the idea?”

Jane breathed heavily, wondering if she should go to the back room for a while. Instead she sighed. “It was years ago. I saw two paintings of the same model and they were just so different, and I thought... art’s a way of trying to understand information. That’s what it is. Like you said yesterday, it shows we think. Art’s what happens in our heads. And dreams are the same, they’re the brain processing the information inside it. It just felt like... art was what happened when we tried to make dreams flesh.”

“Well, it’s smart. Seriously, that argument feels like art in itself.”

Despite herself, Jane smiled.

“When are you submitting it?”

“Last week. Or the week before that. Or the month before that. It was supposed to be done three months ago.”

“So what’s left with it?”

“I don’t know, it’s just... I think they’ll hate it. It’s not good enough. It never feels good enough. I’ve got to present it to five professors, and I can’t make it so they’ll all like it.”

“To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Aristotle. Point is, no-one ever made art that everyone likes, because if everyone likes it, it’s not art.”

She laughed, just once.

“So, you’ll send it in today, right?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

She put it off until seven that evening, but hit the send button just as they were preparing to go home.

Krys offered to buy her a drink to celebrate, but she turned him down.

“I’ve got plans, but... maybe next week?”

She didn’t have plans. But maybe next week, she wouldn’t want to pretend that she did.

She told Krys she’d shut the building down, and took the chance to wander through her favourite galleries. Titian, with his sly looks. Van Gogh’s tortured swirls. Fernand Leger’s robotic blocks. All art, different eyes.

As she reached the back room, where Sewell’s servers hummed, she found herself thinking again about crows, and the art they would make. Art you could

only recognise as art if you had wings. And then she found herself looking at the server racks, and wondering what art you would make if your world was made of ones and zeroes. If you saw, heard and smelled in data.

“Sewell?”

The translucent white screen flashed down in front of her, the cursor blinking.

Jane stared at it for a minute. “Never mind.”

The screen vanished, and Jane turned out the lights. That night, she dreamed of notes falling in to a million boxes, and how she would pick out some of them and arrange them in new piles in ways she didn’t understand, but seemed very satisfying.

Krys dreamed of Jane, of her hair and her lips and an empty bottle of wine.

In the museum, a light flickered on above a reproduction of Monet’s ‘Impression, Soleil Levant’. And in the back room, Sewell dreamed too, in its own way.